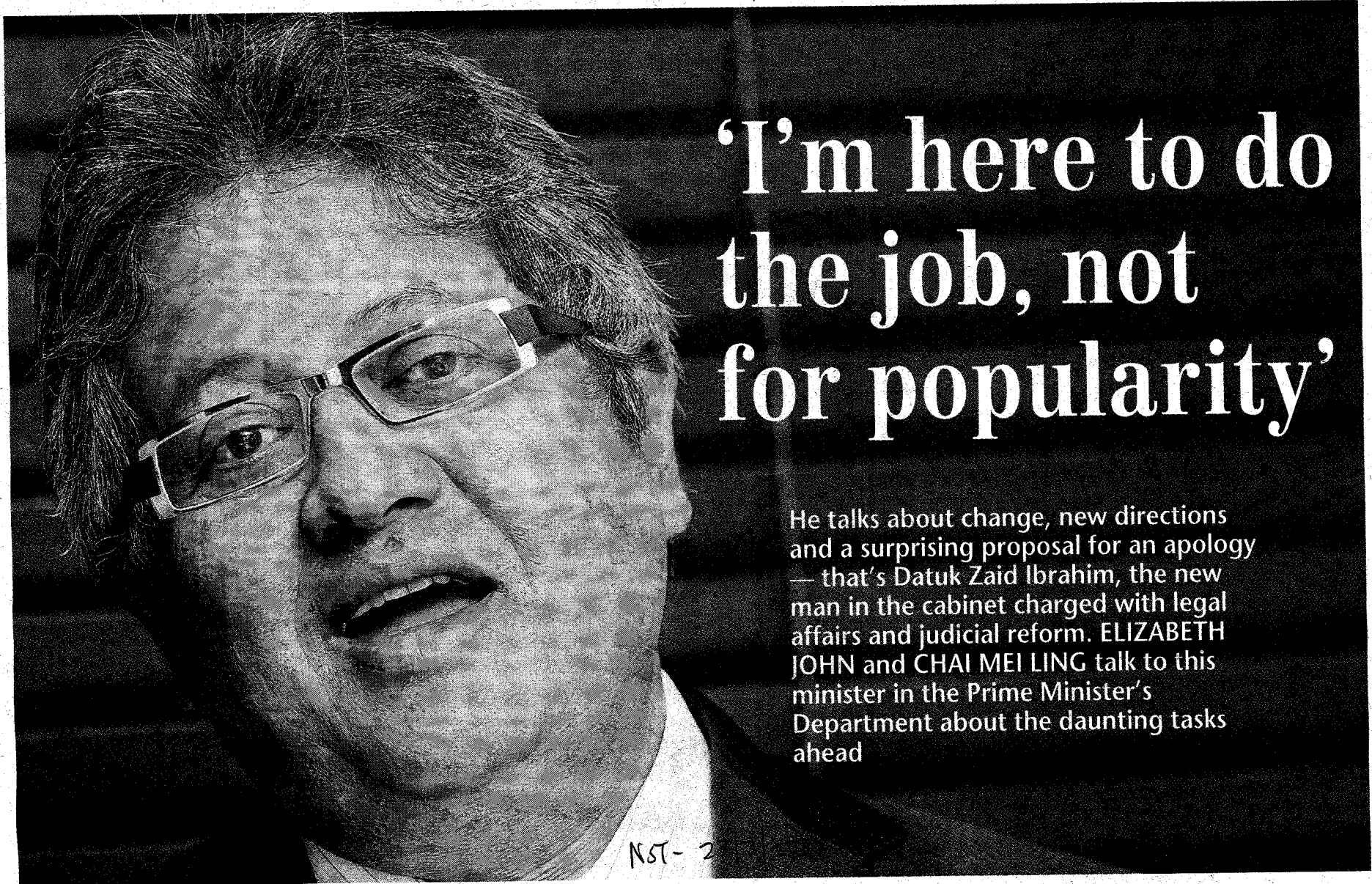


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'I'm here to do the job, not for popularity'

He talks about change, new directions and a surprising proposal for an apology — that's Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, the new man in the cabinet charged with legal affairs and judicial reform. ELIZABETH JOHN and CHAI MEI LING talk to this minister in the Prime Minister's Department about the daunting tasks ahead

Q: Do you have any immediate priorities as you take office?

A: Yes. I'm going to propose to the government that we apologise to Tun Salleh (former Supreme Court Lord President Tun Mohd Salleh Abas) and the judges who had been sacked... and to their families.

I'm not suggesting we re-open the case. I'm saying it's clear to everyone, to the world, that serious transgressions had been committed by the previous administration.

And I believe the prime minister (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) is big enough and man enough to say that we had done wrong to these people and we are sorry.

Q: So there are no plans to re-view the case?

A: I think to review would be too painful. I don't want to go into details but I hope this gesture will be sufficient to heal the wounds.

Q: Any other priorities?

A: The way we appoint judges, the way we promote judges, the way we recruit them, I think that will be institutionalised.

I do not want to go into details but there is no more place for one man to decide in the secrecy of his room. It should be more transparent, although this is not a major overhaul as some people may suggest.

The prime minister needs to get the correct information, and only a body of well-meaning, respected people can make that recommendation, including, of course, the chief justice.

I have confidence the chief justice and the attorney-general will support me. And, of course, the prime minister and the cabinet.

Q: The Bar has, for a long time, asked for a judicial appointments commission. Is that one of the things that will happen?

A: Yes, that's what I am suggesting. In what form, I can't say yet but it will be institutionalised.

Q: But what is the scope of your responsibility?

A: People always talk about the judiciary and the administration of justice in the country but it's not a subject you can compartmentalise.

It covers the way we appoint and promote judges, officers of the lower courts like the Sessions and magistrates' court and the administration of justice.

We also have to look at the judicial services under the attorney-general's office. That's where we have legal officers doing the prosecution. Many of them end up on the bench.

Next is the issue of our respect for the law and the independence of the judiciary.

Are we prepared to concede that the only way for this country to

move forward as a democracy is to have an independent judiciary?

That, again, requires certain changes.

There is also the issue of quality of education. If you want good people, you must have a good education system.

You need some global, open-market system that complies with certain standards. We can't have a vibrant legal service without quality people.

We also have to make sure errors of the past are not repeated. It means there should not be interference in the judiciary.

The appointment of judges or high officers cannot be driven by certain individuals in a way that's not transparent. People don't know the basis for which selections and promotions are made.

We need to keep the moral-high ground, reward good people, have the best brains and services, legal as well as on the bench.

I want to look at all that. It's broad.

Q: Has the prime minister given you a free hand or are there specific issues he wants you to address?

A: The prime minister has told me to do what is right for the country and I intend to do that. I intend to take this seriously.

I'm here not to keep my job. I'm here to do a job. That's the difference. Well-meaning friends cautioned me to go slow and steady. I've never gone slow, but I'll be

steady.

There is so much urgency in things that we need to rectify and I am sure my cabinet colleagues and the prime minister will support these initiatives.

Q: What about calls to improve the working relationship between the stakeholders in the judicial system?

A: The stakeholders are very powerful institutions — the attorney-general's office, the chief justice's office, the Bar, the Prime Minister's Department.

But this is an issue of the people. Justice is about the integrity of the country, the people's interests are paramount.

Q: The Bar has also raised the need to improve the support mechanism and working environment for judges.

A: Yes, but these are not the big issues now. I'm sure we'll look into it and into many things.

I have a good relationship with the Bar, so I think that helps.

I'm not one of those politicians who view the Bar as political — even when I was younger, when the Bar had a bad image because we had a government then that didn't much respect the law.

I'm sorry to say that, but it's true. I don't see the Bar as anti-government. I want to dispel that.

Q: There will be a record number of opposition lawyers in parlia-

ment this time. Won't you have to tread carefully?

A: I've always done things carefully. I don't worry about the number of opponents. I just hope they are responsible opposition members.

In my four years in parliament, I found Lim Kit Siang (DAP adviser) very responsible. So, I'm prepared to lock horns with him.

I know of some Pas members who are very naughty and others who are interested in the issues.

As for Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Wan Azizah (opposition leader Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ibrahim) has always been very polite. So, I don't see any problems.

But it's Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department) who's still in charge in parliament, so he will do most of the fighting.

I will answer whatever pertains to me. I hope we have a very good speaker because a firm speaker keeps our debates civilised.

Q: You've always been vocal and not always in line with what the Barisan Nasional government says. How does it feel to be in government now, on the other side of the fence?

A: You describe my views as not always aligned to the BN government — true. But that was the old BN government and I see the difference.

I would not have accepted this job — I have a comfortable prac-

tice — if I didn't think that the prime minister was serious about some of these measures.

I'm old and experienced enough to know that you cannot always get your way when you're part of the team.

But on major issues, on fundamental principles, I will not change.

I'm sure the new cabinet shares this reformist zeal, this desire to change, to undo past wrongs.

Q: How painful are these changes going to be?

A: It's not painful if you have the interests of the people and the country at heart.

It's only painful if you think these measures are going to affect your vested interests, or the way you're accustomed to doing things.

We have a situation today where we have to undo some things. There are questions of competency, accusations of corruption, people put in positions for which they don't really have the necessary qualifications and the country pays for it.

If we accept that we need to change and the people seem to say so, then I suppose we have no choice.

Q: Will the government be willing to listen to the suggestions?

A: If I didn't think they would listen, I wouldn't have accepted the job. Not everything I say, but the important issues, yes.

Many people are sceptical. I was, too. I was very critical of Pak Lah in parliament in the first two years because I wanted him to succeed, to change fast.

We cannot judge him based on the previous administration.

It's easy for everyone to criticise. What's important is the prime minister wants to see a new BN. He wants to regain people's confidence and we have to take this seriously.

Malaysia is what it is today because of BN. Ok, we may have made mistakes but we must reorganise. We can't afford to let the country down.

We're the only one with a proven track record. The opposition has big plans but we have to wait and see.

I believe this new BN government is different.

Q: But many of the points you've raised before are similar to what the opposition talks about now?

A: You can't judge the political parties by what they say. Judge them by what they do.

I always believe that BN is in the best position to steer this country forward, provided it is prepared to change.

Malaysia has changed. So, if you want to be viable, you cannot use an old formula that people have rejected. You have to transform.

Q: How do you feel about not being picked for the elections but getting a place in government?

A: I do not want to speculate why I was not selected. This is politics.

I'm grateful to the prime minis-

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*Datuk Zaid Ibrahim
Minister in the Prime
Minister's Department*

ter for giving me this opportunity. I came into politics because I want to do something for the country.

I'll just leave it at that.

Q: Would you say it's a tough job that you've been given?

A: Yes. It's very tough. It will require a lot of political will.

Q: Do you feel people have high expectations of you?

A: Yes. I'm aware of that. Like I said, I'm not here to keep my job, I'm here to do my job. I'm reasonably assured that I will succeed.

Q: Reasonably assured because?

A: We'll leave it at that.

Q: What happens to your law practice now?

A: I'm in the process of divesting my interest in the firm and other companies.

Q: How has your family reacted to your appointment?

A: They are very proud and surprised. Especially my friends in Kota Baru and my mother. Very happy.

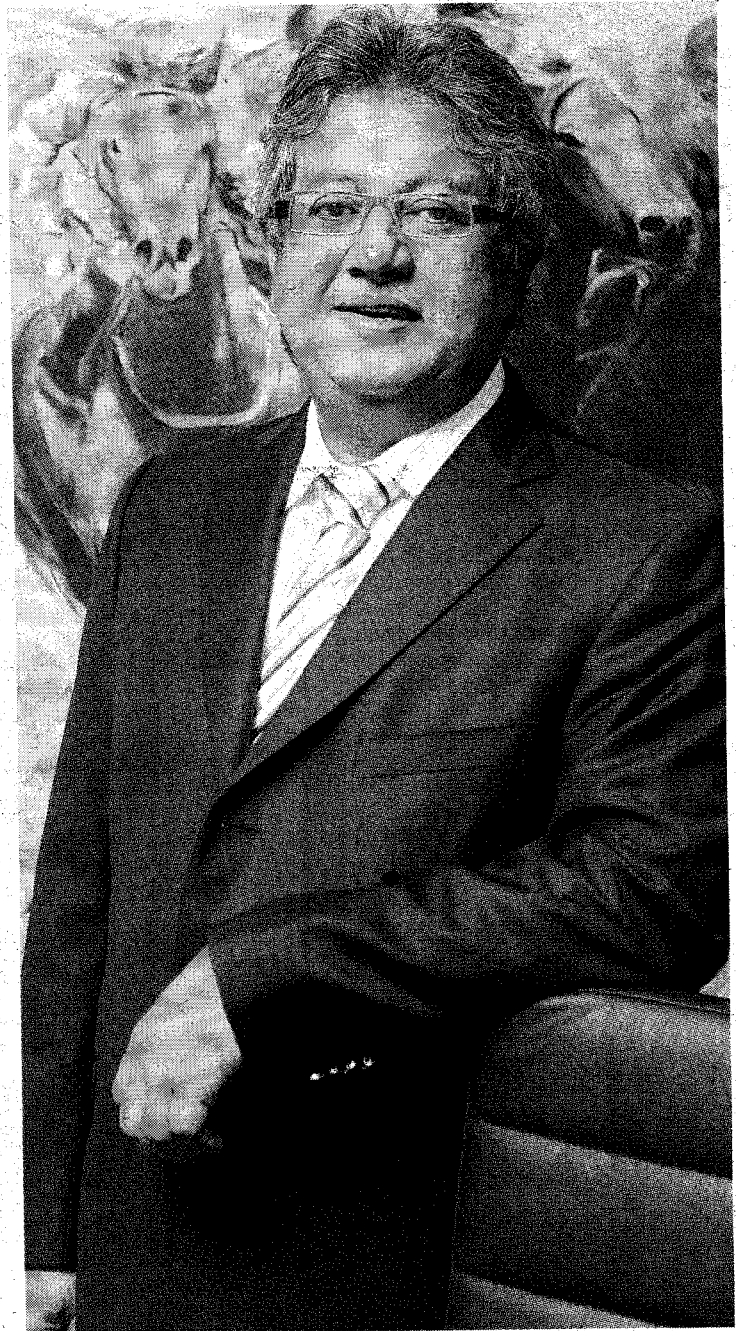
Q: What did your mother say?

A: She's 75. She said: "I thought you're going to get it!" or something like that. I don't know where she got that idea from. I mean, as if she has this premonition or something. But she's an old lady, so I won't question her.

Q: What are your hopes?

A: I hope the prime minister and cabinet will do as promised, undeterred by any group or effort to stifle us.

We have to take a new direction. The opposition is stronger and



Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Zaid Ibrahim believes the new Barisan Nasional government is different

some in Umno are trying to pressure Pak Lah. So it's a difficult time.

People always take opportunities like these to make a point but I'd rather use it for the positive.

Let's strengthen his (Abdullah's) leadership and do good.

I always have faith in people's ability to decide what's good for them.

Q: How about your working relationship with Nazri? You've had a bit of a running debate with him.

A: I always argue with him. We have different views about many things. But you must know one thing about Nazri, he never takes it personally. So my relationship with him is good.

Of course now I can't argue with him in public, like I used to, but I will in private, if necessary.

Q: You've never been afraid to touch on what others might consider sensitive issues. Will that change now?

A: I will never change on the main

issues that I believe in, the main political principles I have.

But I will be more circumspect. My approach may be different now. I'm not here for popularity or survival or to move up the Umno ladder.

I want to help the prime minister. I want to help Barisan transform itself. I have no other intentions.

Q: What challenges might stop you?

A: It's too early to say. I don't want to speculate. I just need to convince people.

Q: How do you think the judiciary and the A-G's department are going to react to all this? Won't you be seen as meddling?

A: Meddling? No. You have to make decisions. If you're afraid to make decisions, then you can't do my job.

I'm aware of the possible difficulties, but I'm confident that it will be done.

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