

Getting to the heart of leadership

HE recalled rejecting the offer to be Tun Abdul Razak's parliamentary secretary when the latter was the deputy prime minister in 1964.

"It was halfway through my first parliament session when Razak requested me to join his office.

"My answer to him was, 'Thank you so much, but I don't think I am ready,'" Tan Sri Michael Chen says, adding that it was evident that Razak was disappointed by his reply.

"He gave me a long lecture, saying that young people like me only cared about making money for myself and not about the government, or the country."

The matter was left at that, but Razak was not one to give up.

A week later, Chen was offered the position again.

This time, he could not say no.

"I couldn't reject the deputy prime minister twice," Chen says, explaining that his camaraderie and close friendship with the nation's second prime minister started from that point.

"Razak and I had a close working relationship. I guess it was chemistry.

"I was the only Chinese in his office and he always took me along whenever he travelled."

Chen, who was tasked to help correct the perception that Razak was not friendly to the Chinese, suggested he visit at least one Chinese new village a week to get close to the community.

"We were also cracking our heads on how to improve the interaction between the races, so Razak organised a big Hari Raya open house at his residence where all the races could attend and celebrate together.

"When he became prime minister, he was already well-liked and respected.

"His heart was 100 per cent for the people; he was interested in their problems and really cared for them.

"It was not the publicity which made him popular, but his hard work and heart," Chen says, adding that Razak loved the country so much that he kept working even when he knew he had cancer.

Razak was losing weight and spots on the skin on his hands had begun to show, which caused Chen to worry.

"I advised him there had to be something wrong with his blood when I saw his condition. But his reply was, 'I'm okay'.

"His gums started to bleed. I knew he was not well, but I did not suspect it was cancer.

"I asked him why he did not take a break.

OBSERVE: Tan Sri Michael Chen, former parliamentary secretary to Tun Abdul Razak, had the experience of working with Malaysia's 'Father of Development' and watching his son, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, grow up on the sidelines, writes Eunice Au

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"His reply was that he did not want the government to spend that kind of money."

Coming from a poor background, Razak was a prudent man and his upbringing helped him to understand what the people and country

needed.

Transformation, the main theme of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's leadership echoes Razak's approach to governance.

"Razak transformed the lives of many farmers and villagers.

"He helped them to become landowners through the Felda scheme.

"He also transformed the education field, making it accessible.

"From only one or two secondary schools in each state and primary

schools too few and far in between the Razak Report pushed for one primary school in every village and a secondary school in every district."

Chen says Razak and his son Najib, had a lot of similarities.

"Najib was very pleasant and his father was a bit concerned about bringing him up with bodyguards and servants. So, he sent him away to a public school.

"There was once when Najib was home on his semester break, he opened the car door for his mother.

"Razak looked at me and said, 'There's some improvement'."

Chen did not expect Najib to follow in his father's footsteps but he admitted the way Najib approached people was similar to his father — with sincerity and diplomacy.

"His (Najib's) flair to get close to the people is like his father's."

Razak was the first Asean leader to establish diplomatic relations with China and when Najib visited China the first time as education minister, he invited Chen to join him.

"He asked me to show him the places where his father went.

"I took him to the Great Wall of China and the Forbidden City.

"The second time Najib went there as deputy prime minister, he asked me to introduce him to the people his father had met when he visited the country," Chen says, adding that he was happy to be invited to the palace to witness Najib's oath-taking ceremony as the prime minister.

Chen believes Najib has a tougher era to govern.

"It is a different generation now. Therefore, Najib's approach has to be different."

He explains that people in Razak's time were not as expressive as the generation today and were more willing to listen.

"The voters' mentalities and expectations have also changed.

"Najib is hardworking. But one man is not enough, no matter how capable you are.

"He needs a team of people who can win, who can do the job — a strong government like in his father's time.

"It is difficult to get a team of people who are dedicated to the job.

"However, I believe given time, Najib can build a strong government."

Chen still meets Najib quite often during family occasions, especially on Jan 14 every year — the anniversary of Razak's death — a date ingrained in his memory.