

Recalling the best PM we never had

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If he had lived, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's principled leadership might have shaped Malaysia very differently.

LAST month, Malaysians were left with a sour taste in our mouths when we learned former scandal-tainted prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had asked the Cabinet for land and a house said to be valued at RM100mil.

He did so because the Members of Parliament (Remuneration) Act 1980 states that "A person who ceases to hold the office of Prime Minister, or a person who had previously held the office of Prime Minister before the date of the coming into force of this Act, shall be entitled to such allowances and privileges at such rates and on such terms and conditions as may be determined by the Cabinet from time to time".

Najib has since decided to decline any such "gift" after all because he realised and understood that the people were facing tough times and the nation's priority should be the people. That's rich coming from the man who got upset in 2014 over the lack of appreciation from Malaysians when the price of kangkung (water spinach) dropped.

But never mind about that. To me, what's more important is how it led to Tawfik Ismail being asked to comment on the issue.

Tawfik was asked because he is the eldest son of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman who older Malaysians will remember as deputy prime minister in the early 1970s. But in 1973, when he was acting prime minister while prime minister Tun Abdul Razak was overseas, he tragically died, aged 57, from a massive heart attack. Technically, though, he too was a person who had previously held the office of prime minister.

Unfortunately, history hasn't been very kind to Dr Ismail. As Tawfik wryly noted in his comment: "When my father died, he died as the acting prime minister in a house he owned, but my mother had to surrender the government car and received nothing from the Tun Razak government except for a pension my father was entitled to.

"Several government properties were named after my father but some were taken away during Dr

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So aunty, so what?

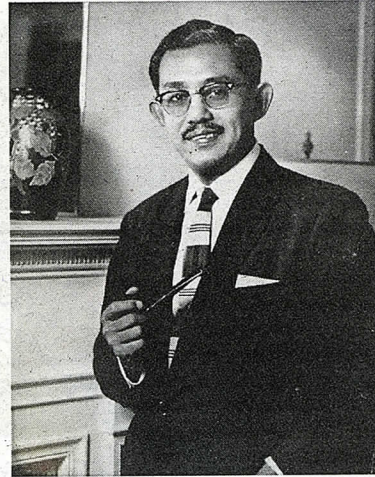
Mahathir's premiership, like the Tun Ismail Atomic Research Centre, and a memorial budgeted for and supposedly to be implemented by the National Archives has not taken off and many Malaysians, as a result, have largely forgotten Tun Dr Ismail and the ideals he fought and lived for."

How true. Ask a Malaysian below 40 years old who Dr Ismail was and chances are the response would be "TTDI, ah?" referring to the well-established housing estate bordering Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya called Taman Tun Dr Ismail.

If the provision in the Members of Parliament (Remuneration) Act was intended to be a way for the nation to show its gratitude to its top leader, then as Tawfik put it: "What can subsequent governments since Tun Razak's PM-ship point to that was given to my family, even as a token, of the nation's gratitude?"

In my last column, I paid tribute to Malays who courageously fight for a multiracial, liberal and secular Malaysia and articulate the concerns, frustrations and disappointment of non-Malays who find themselves on the sidelines and unable to voice out for fear of repercussions ("True defenders of multiracial Malaysia, *The Star*, Nov 17; online at bit.ly/star_true).

I named Tawfik as one of them because he has, by word and deed, consistently upheld his father's vision of a liberal and progressive nation that treats all its citizens, regardless of race and religion, fairly, with no tolerance for extremism,



A man for all races: Dr Ismail 'believed fully in the oneness of Malaysia, and worked on that belief. He did not care whom he had to fight. He was absolutely neutral.' — Filepic/The Star

corruption and bigotry.

Today, I feel compelled to expand a little, as space permits, on Dr Ismail's sterling leadership and ideals. I must credit historian Datuk Dr Ooi Kee Beng's excellent biography, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (2007), as my primary source that allowed me and many others to discover this towering man and his contributions to our nation.

Dr Ismail gave up his medical practice to enter politics and, during his two decades in government, left his mark in the many Cabinet portfolios he held: Lands, Mines and Communication, Natural Resources, Commerce and Industry, Foreign Affairs, Internal Security, Justice, Home Affairs and deputy prime minister.

Because of his poor health — he suffered from a congenital heart condition and recurrent throat cancer — he retired from the Cabinet in 1967 but remained a backbencher.

He was forced to return to government after the May 13, 1969, race riots and was a member of the National Operations Council (NOC) formed after a state of emergency was declared and Parliament suspended.

As Home Affairs Minister at the time, Dr Ismail has been credited as the man who saved Malaysia after May 13, thanks to his reputation for fairness and belief in the rule of law.

According to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, quoted in *The Reluctant Politician*, Dr Ismail was a major factor in increasing public confidence in the government at that time because "The Chinese did not have much confidence in Razak (Abdul Razak Hussein — later Tun — who chaired the NOC), but they did in Ismail. Razak was always associated with Malay and rural affairs, et cetera. Ismail was a principled man — and was seen that way by the different races. He was the Rock of Gibraltar. Once he decided on something you could be sure that he had gone through the relevant details and studied them. What is confidence unless it is based on the people's belief in the leader?"

Dr Ismail was indeed known for his non-racial approach to political issues. According to Abdullah Ali, one of Malaysia's pioneer diplomats who served as high commissioner to the United Kingdom, Dr Ismail "believed fully in the oneness of Malaysia, and worked on that belief. He did not care whom he had to fight. He was absolutely neutral."

So if he had lived and had become prime minister, it is likely he would have handled the New Economic Policy's preferential treatment for Malays very differently.

He believed there should be a 20-year limit on the policy and, as an avid golfer, he likened the special position of Malays as a handicap that would set them up for a fair competition with better players.

"Therefore, like a golfer, it should not be the aim of the Malays to perpetuate this handicap but to strive to improve their game and thereby reducing, and finally removing, their handicap completely."

He also disliked the term "bumiputra" — coining the word was, to him, the "biggest mistake the Malays made" because it "tended to convey an entirely different meaning to what was intended for the Special

Positions of the Malays", leading non-Malays to suspect Malays wanted to "classify themselves as first class citizens while they were relegated to second class".

Dr Ismail left behind an impeccable reputation that billionaire businessman Robert Kuok's brother Philip, who was a close friend, described thus: "He was like that all his life, clean as a whistle. Lived within his means. He was a man who led a very correct life, a man of the highest integrity. Money, favours, political hypocrisy or deceit, all those were anathema to him."

It is also tempting to think that if he had been healthy and able to serve as PM for, say, 20 years, he would have created a lean, efficient and more multiracial civil service, and never allowed a political culture based on cronyism and nepotism.

As former Lord President of the Federal Court Tun Dr Haji Salleh Abas mused in the book's foreword: "Had he not died prematurely, Malaysia would have been different and the rule of law would not have suffered any reversal and would have continued to safeguard the freedom and liberty of all citizens, as indeed it is meant to do."

In concluding his comment, Tawfik says his father asked for no reward nor recognition for the work he willingly gave his life for, for the nation he loved. Therefore, he would not burden the nation with any guilt or regret at not giving material wealth as a reward.

Instead, all he asks is for Dr Ismail's "vision and ideals for the nation as recorded in his Hansard speeches and his policy pronouncements be enshrined and imparted as education at schools and universities so we can be a better nation".

It's been 48 years since his passing but now more than ever, when our political arena seems to lack a moral compass and be ruled by personal gain, what Dr Ismail stood and fought for has never been so relevant to this nation.

The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.