

# Nuggets of wisdom from Hussein

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I AM completing a pictorial biography of three generations of political leadership in one of Malaysia's most illustrious families.

What is instructive for Malaysian politics today in studying the legacy of Tun Hussein Onn, Datuk Onn Ja'afar and Datuk Ja'afar Mohamed is the public virtue they embodied and the values, principles and personal sacrifices for public service that they represented.

I have always felt a grave injustice has been done to our third Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn.

In writing on past prime ministers, many commentators and journalists gloss over from Tun Abdul Razak Hussein to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, overlooking Hussein, the profound ethical values of leadership he stood for and his contributions to nation-building.

I was surprised when I went through the newspapers cuttings on him to find a man who was outspoken, called a spade a spade, and fearlessly and publicly chastised those who did wrong, whether in the Government, in Opposition or in his own political party.

That, somehow, did not fit into the picture of him being the quiet, cautious prime minister.

Many of the principles Hussein stood for and the warnings he gave in the 1970s sound prophetic for the way Malaysian politics and governance evolved after him.

And they remain relevant today.

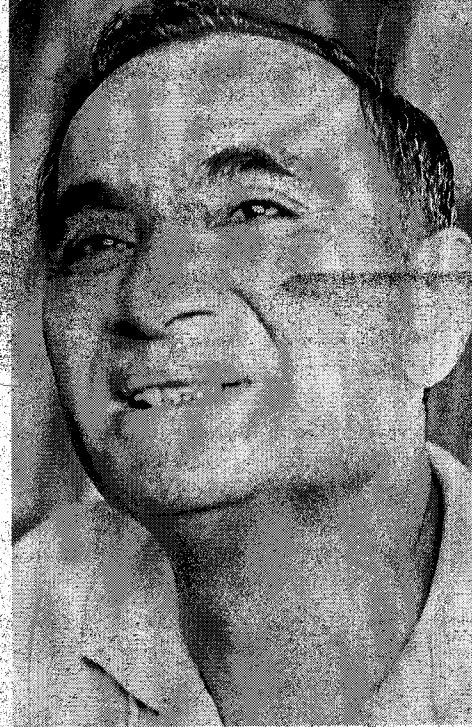
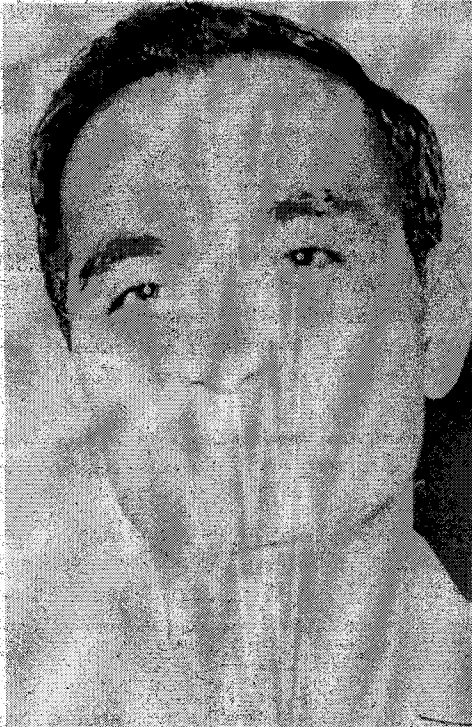
He rang the alarm bells over 30 years ago, in the interviews he gave, the speeches he made, the telling-offs to civil servants, Umno politicians and Opposition members about corruption, abuse of power and political opportunism.

What came across was not just a confirmation of his reputation as a man of principles and values, but a man with the strength of his convictions and a leader so acutely aware of the corruption of power and the grave responsibility of leadership and public office.

That this Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, more than any other past prime minister, comes closest in terms of personality and ethical values to Hussein has not gone without notice.

Because too many of us are lured by style over substance, and toughness over deliberation and consultation, political leadership more grounded in moral foundations is too quickly dismissed as weak when they can be, and are, transformational.

In the end, good leadership should be gauged by results — whether the promise of social and political change is delivered and the standards set are adhered to.



Tun Hussein Onn, the country's third Prime Minister, was an outspoken leader who embodied the values, principles and personal sacrifice that came with the public service he represented. Pictures above (from left) show him during his vintage years in the '70s, '80s and 1990.

As the corrosive public cynicism towards Malaysian politics and politicians that has pervaded national life for over two decades continues unabated, it would be constructive for us all to take a conscientious pause to think through what it means and what it takes for a political leader who defines, defends and promotes values to succeed in leading, shaping and translating into reality our imagination for a better nation and a better world.

It has to be a national project with champions at every level of government and society.

Some lessons from the philosophy and wisdom of Hussein on political leadership, public virtue and public office which escaped public attention in the 1970s might be instructive for all of us today.

It is never too late to take lessons, champion those values and put them into practice.

#### • On the Press:

"... if you muzzle the Press, kill the Press, the country will go to the dogs. And the work of the Government will become 10 times more difficult. I am saying this because I know (the futility) of campaigns against corruption, for example, without the support of the Press and the people. I believe that unless the Press keeps a watch, we politicians will forget ourselves."

*Far Eastern Economic Review*, Jan 26, 1979

#### • On allegations of communists in Umno:

"What leader has no enemies? If there are no issues, some people will find them. To keep this issue alive, they find communists under my bed, under my chair, under my table, everywhere. They hope we do find communists so that they can stampede us into a panic. I made it very clear, I am not going on a witch-hunt. It is so easy to make wild allegations. Now if they can identify who these communists are ... the law will take its course. This communist bogey is merely political."

*Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb 2, 1979

#### • On selecting leaders in elections to the Umno supreme council:

"In evaluating a leader, particularly a politician, what is important is not what he does, but what he hides."

Opening the Youth and Wanita Assembly, *New Straits Times*, June 20, 1975

#### • On leadership:

"... if a leader seeks to maintain his position through making popular decisions, national interests can be jeopardised. In leading a multi-racial society, the principle behind every decision must be the promotion of the national interests, and not the fulfilment of the needs of just one group."

Opening the Umno general assembly, *New Straits Times*, July 3, 1976

In the first lengthy interview he gave to the *New Straits Times* on the eve of his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister in August 1973, Malaysians were given an insight into the strength of Hussein's convictions:

#### • On becoming Deputy Prime Minister:

"What, after all, is high office? It only means greater responsibilities. So why lose your head? I'm a minister today. I may be a nobody tomorrow. When you go up, you must come down; you must accept that. That's life."

#### • On integrity and responsibility:

"I would rather be politically unpopular than fail in my duty. What is one's political future compared to one's responsibility? It's better if they curse me now than urinate on my grave later. (*Biar diumpat keji sekarang daripada dikencingkan kubur kemudian.*)"

#### • On being short-sighted and opportunistic:

"Many of the miseries of life are due to our sacrificing the future for the present, the happiness of years to come for the satisfaction of the moment."

#### • On public office and ambition:

"If I'm trusted, asked to serve, if the country wants me, I won't refuse at whatever cost to me. But to scramble for office at whatever cost, no."

#### • On being slow and cautious:

"How can you be anything but cautious when an error of judgment may cause misery to thousands?"

#### • On public trust:

"What are we here for? People don't give us power to satisfy our personal wants. They expect you to help. This trust you must discharge. You're not there to make excuses but to help them out."

#### • On public acclaim:

"You must never be your own judge; otherwise you can never be wrong."

#### • On public office:

"There is no nobler thing than to serve your country. What higher ambition can a man have?"

#### • On the vagaries of politics:

"If you're down, you must not be downhearted. But if you're up, you must not lose your head. With too much publicity, you cannot be humble, you can come to a stage where you feel you can't be wrong. What I do is important. But me, I'm not important."

An inscription from his military academy days in Dehra Dun, India, which he hung on a pillar facing his table in the Prime Minister's office:

"The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and everytime; the safety, comfort and welfare of the men under your command come next; your own safety, comfort and welfare come last, always and everytime."