

# Proud milestone for Malaysian icons

**F**OUR Malaysian icons are having glorious landmark birthdays now. Five if you count this newspaper.

At 165, the *New Straits Times* is the oldest newspaper still in circulation in Malaysia. But never too old or dinky to share these illustrious milestones with Maybank (which is 50), Proton (25), the Penang Bridge (25), and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (85).

Dr Mahathir, the country's fourth prime minister, celebrated his latest birthday on Saturday and as always, doesn't look his age. His resplendent and remarkable background as medical doctor, politician, leader and statesman makes him an institution; a living legend.

Though his "official birthday", as registered by his father, was Dec 20 1925, July 10 has always been Dr Mahathir's real birthday. The man is even older than the Fifa World Cup (which is only 80) — and certainly no less popular. And, judging by his post-retirement presence, he is strong and influential as ever.

Dr Mahathir's legacy, Proton, is passing a threshold, in the midst of programmes commemorating its silver jubilee — which is charmingly significant and alluringly profound for the father-and-son affinity between the carmaker and the elder statesman.

Every grown-up Malaysian knows about Proton. He or she would have had at least an experience with a Proton car, either as a driver or passenger. And everyone at any given moment knows at least another Proton owner, whether a neighbour, a cousin or friend's friend.

And many Malaysians still remember 1985, the year the first Proton Saga rolled out, and how proud an occasion it was. The image of Dr Mahathir, the prime minister then, driving across the Penang Bridge in a red Proton Saga on Aug 3 and giving a thumbs-up (presumably for the momentous inauguration of both car and bridge) will be forever etched in our memory.



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Proton has produced more than three million cars to date, some for the international export market. It was significant, therefore, that at the Proton gala dinner on Friday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak paid tribute to Dr Mahathir, saying that without the strong political commitment and undying spirit of Dr Mahathir, Proton would not have existed nor managed to thrive.

Like Proton, the Penang Bridge was born out of a strong political commitment plus the stark economic and social realities of the day. It was officially opened in September 1985, and therefore shares the definitive silver jubilee with Proton.

Today, the usefulness of the bridge, spanning 13.5km across the Butterworth Strait from Prai on the mainland to Pantai Jerejak on the island, despite its stuttering start, is incalculable. It has served millions.

The idea was mooted as a pledge by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra and the Alliance government before the watershed 1969 election, but it remained in the freezer for many years afterwards — firstly, because the whole idea was opposed by Alliance's political adversaries as a waste of money, with some predicting that it would be doomed to become a white elephant.

Now, 25 years on, the Penang Bridge has not only well served its purpose as an important link and access, it is also fast exceeding its capacity. A drive across it today is more often than not a bumper-to-bumper experience.

And, most ironically, the same quarters who had opposed the bridge at its inception are now calling for the speedy construction of a second Penang bridge.

On now to Maybank, whose growth



Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali crossing Penang Bridge in a Proton Saga during the launch of Malaysia's national car and the bridge in 1985.

has been outstanding and omnipresence most remarkable in its 50 years of existence.

We still remember how the early years of Independence and banking in the country meant only the Chartered Bank, Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Mercantile Bank or Hong Kong Shanghai Bank — all foreign-owned. Today, Maybank has established itself even in the far reaches of the country.

It is Malaysia's largest financial services group, with total assets exceeding RM330 billion. The group has an extensive global network of 1,750 offices in 14 countries, including China, Britain, the United States and Uzbekistan.

The Maybank Group now has over 39,000 employees, serving more than 16 million customers worldwide, with 9.5 million customers in

Malaysia alone. Maybank consistently ranks among Malaysia's most valuable brands. It was also ranked first among Malaysian banks by Brand Finance in its Global 500 survey, and 118th among the top 1,000 banks in the world by *The Banker* magazine.

As for this newspaper, it certainly has come a long way since its first issue, printed on the morning of July 15, 1845 on a hand press at a godown in No. 7, Commercial Square (later known as Raffles Place), Singapore.

It was an eight-page folio-sized paper, published every Tuesday with a circulation of fewer than 200 copies selling at 10 cents each. In December that year, the Straits Times Press launched an *Overland Journal* for despatch overseas.

The *New Straits Times*, as this

paper came to be known after its separation from the *Straits Times* nearly 40 years ago, has gone through numerous changes in its corporate structure, business strategies and editorial policies over the years. As with all conventional newspapers around the world, the challenges seem to build up very rapidly every year, brought about by constant shifts in communication technology and reading habits.

Yes, these and many other critical demands, in our case closer to home, have to be met regularly. Many people are predicting the death of newspapers in the world; that the end is coming soon.

But for now, let's just wish "Happy Birthday" to the five of us. And early greetings to Prime Minister Najib, who will be celebrating his 57th birthday in 10 days' time.