



Don't let politics get in the way

THE perennial debate about the benefits of development versus the importance of preservation isn't new and will continue to be something that we need to tackle head on. For it to be a healthy debate though, one needs to strip out the politics from it. Malaysia is at the cusp of a new era of development, where a few mega projects, if executed well, could have long-lasting benefits from a myriad of perspectives.

Take the case of the Klang Valley My Rapid Transit (MRT). If done well, the 1.2 million *rakyat* who live along the proposed MRT line will be able to get to work faster, spend more time with their families and enjoy a better quality of life compared to being stuck in traffic. There are also economic benefits. Based on infrastructure projects of this type and magnitude, the construction multiplier impact will be in the region of 2.5 times which translates

to RM213bil flowing into the economy over a 10-year period until 2020, according to MRT Corp, the project's overseer.

This is based on the impact of money going into the economy from the construction of the MRT lines, the stations and the rolling stock. Property development in areas close to the MRT lines will be catalysed, with an expected total of RM15bil in new projects coming onstream in the next 10 years.

No doubt, there will be concerns of personal property and heritage buildings being jeopardised in the name of development and some of these may be genuine concerns that need to be handled in the most fair and efficacious manner.

But what we shouldn't entertain is the opportunistic behaviour of some who wish to politicise the issues and detract from the healthy discussion and negotiation that needs to take place to determine if development should prevail in some circumstances in lieu of preservation and the fair

compensation that should be paid where necessary.

It is the same story with Petroliam Nasional Bhd's (Petronas) US\$20bil (RM60bil) integrated refinery and petrochemical complex in southern Johor, known as Refinery and Petrochemicals Integrated Development (Rapid). The planned crude oil refining capacity of Rapid is larger than the combined capacities of Petronas' refineries in Malacca and Kerteh and is aimed at capturing opportunities that Malaysia, as an oil producing nation, seems to have lost out to Singapore, which without any oil, has a much larger business in this area.

Recall also that the same was stated in a 2009 speech by Tengku Razleigh Hamzah in a conference organised by Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute entitled "What Next For Malaysia after the Global Financial Crisis."

To quote from his speech, Razleigh said: "Oil and gas have served us well, but we have still not

tapped our strategic strength in this sector despite our unmatched natural and strategic advantages ... We could do much better. Consider that despite having no oil resources, Singapore is among the top three global players in trading, refining and manufacture of oil and gas equipment. We need greatly improved capabilities to finance and trade oil and gas. Given our very special geographic and strategic advantages, we should build the first spot and futures exchange for oil and gas in an OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference)."

Back to Petronas' Rapid: it would be located in Johor to leverage on the numerous advantages the location would offer, namely its large land acreage, strategic location near major international shipping lanes, deepwater port facilities and close to demand centres that will facilitate potential collaboration with global partners in logistics and product distribution. The natural spin-offs in related industries will stimulate the

growth of local and regional entrepreneurs and creation of more business and job opportunities.

When assessing the long-term economic benefits of these two projects, there is little doubt we must proceed with them. Yes, we must try and minimise the impact on those who will be directly affected and compensate them fairly, maybe even generously. But we cannot let a small group of people and politics ahead of the general elections derail what is good for the nation as a whole. The Government must stand firm on this and not backpedal.

● News editor Risen Jayaseelan is aware of the massive transformation that has taken place on Jurong island in Singapore, which among other things, moved out the many villagers from the few scattered islands which were eventually joined together through land reclamation works, for it to become a world leading crude oil refining and petrochemical hub.