

DATO' SRI DR. LIM KENG YAIK



Dato' Sri Dr. Lim Keng Yaik brought a wind of change to the communications industry since being appointed Minister of Energy, Water and Communications in 2004. Known for his wit, humour and no-nonsense style, he has overseen national developments in two key Ministries since 1986.

In 2007, Dato' Sri Dr. Lim announced that he would retire after the next General Election. On the eve of his expected departure from the national scene, we speak to him about his major achievements and challenges that marked his period of services with a special focus on his contributions to the communications industry.

Dato' Sri, can you go back in time and talk briefly on personal back ground and your foray into politics, especially at the start of your political career and momentous events that you hold dear.

I have been active in politics for 40 years now. As many people know, I come from Perak. I am old boy of St. Michael's Institution. Later I did my medical studies in Queen's University, Belfast, United Kingdom.

I have so many memories that it's hard to pick a few momentous

events. I entered politics in 1968 and became a senator in December 1971 and a minister in January 1972. In May 1973, I left MCA and joined Gerakan in Dec 1973 and became president of the party in 1980.

On your political career, when did you become a member of the Cabinet, i.e. your first appointment to a ministry and your feelings on holding a federal position?

This is a quiz question that many will get wrong. The younger generation probably only remember me as being the Minister of Primary Industries and now Energy, Water and Communications but I was first appointed Minister of Special Functions in January 1972 in the cabinet of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein when I was still in MCA. I took time off and served as Exco member in Perak from 1978 until 1986.

I then became Minister of Primary Industries in 1986. Of course, that was a very hectic and challenging time. Back then, Malaysian industries like palm oil were facing many hurdles.

We had to overcome strong lobbies by the soy bean industry. They were determined to overtake the palm oil industry and they launched many campaigns that could have derailed the palm oil industry.

But thank God, we managed to overcome all the difficulties.

Malaysian palm oil became very well known and we were number one in the world for producing palm oil. Palm oil was and still is one of Malaysia's biggest money earner and job creator.

The timber industry was the same. People thought we were destroying our forests and there were anti-tropical timber campaigns in Europe. We worked hard and formed the Malaysian Timber Council. That helped us gain recognition because we showed that we were managing our resources properly.

The main changes were the transformation of commodities exports to value-added products; rubber to rubber products, especially rubber dipped products; palm oil to refined products, oleo chemicals and biofuels; timber to timber products, furniture; and cocoa to cocoa products and chocolates.

When did you become Minister of Energy, Water & Communications and what were your feelings at the time of taking up this portfolio after having been in charge of primary industries? What is the difference between the previous ministry and the current one?

I became Minister for Energy, Water and Communications in 2004. I had mixed feelings of course. I loved taking on the challenges in my old ministry but at the same time, I realised that my new job is equally challenging.

Yet again, I have been given what you can call, a hot ministry seat. This area, you all are very familiar with. The Malaysian communications industry and also worldwide is an industry where there are always rapid changes.

Of course, this was a very different industry compared to the Primary Industries Ministry. There we had to build markets for Malaysian products like oil palm and timber.

The Malaysian communications industry on the other hand had to address the challenge of rapidly changing technologies amidst the global trend of digital convergence. The broadband age was looming and the country was in danger of being eclipsed by other countries if it hesitated.

If Malaysia did not keep up with the changes, we would be left behind by our competitors. So I took it that we had to keep Malaysia in the forefront of communications and information growth.

What were your impressions of the state of the industry, especially of communications services and the communications industry overall after taking charge?

I thought the communications industry had done well. We have world-class communications companies and the infrastructure was also good in most places.

But there were areas that needed improving. We had not achieved full coverage at all. When I took over, I remember telling the companies that even in Cyberjaya, there were areas without coverage.

It was the same with broadband. Yes, we had broadband and Internet coverage but many people were complaining about poor services and speeds.

Also, our content industry too was just beginning to take root. Like all emerging industries, there was a need to nurture and grow that part of the ICT industry. Content was going to be a vital driver of the broadband and convergent future and I could see that it would help spur adoption.

What steps did you take to address the issues facing the industry?

I focussed on the areas that were important and urgent and I made it clear that excuses would not be accepted. Everywhere I went, I told industry players to buck up. Don't give me words like 'best effort.' I told the service providers if you charge people for 1 Mbps speeds, then make sure you



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give them what you promise. No more excuses!

You also demanded the mobile operators extend their coverage to cover most of the country, with deadlines like Time 1 and Time 2. How well those were achieved and how satisfied are you with the result and if not, what more needs to be done?

Yes, I told the telcos the same thing. Bring coverage to the whole country or I will act. I gave them deadlines like Time 1 and Time 2. I am not fully satisfied but I am proud to say that coverage and services have improved tremendously. But there is more to do yet as we don't have full nationwide coverage yet.

Dato' Sri, you spearheaded the development of the MyICMS 886 national strategy which outlines the key areas and services that will propel Malaysia into the forefront of the Digital and Convergent Age.

An excerpt of a poem recited by the CEO of DiGi, Morten Lundal, during the signing of the definitive agreement between DiGi and Time dotCom in January 2008

*We have a news conference with so much news.
So to make it a bit different, I will use a poem to share my views.*

*First I will acknowledge we have our Minister here today.
And the Minister will be in focus for what I first would like to say.*

*We have a Minister who maybe didn't know so much about communications when he came.
But he has been taking some bold initiatives and added to his fame.*

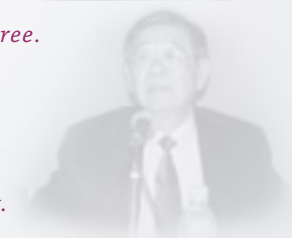
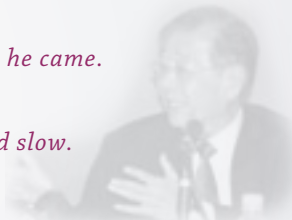
*The Minister had some strong intuition about what's right and wrong, fast and slow.
He did make some very important calls, helping the industry to grow.*

*I can mention infrastructure sharing, prepaid registration and MNP.
Or his loud call for increased coverage and improved quality from the big three.*

*It hasn't been absolutely always been easy to deal with it all.
But seeing it in perspective now, he did make the right call.*

*And today he is witnessing one more positive thing.
Which even better services and more broadband to Malaysians can bring.*

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It is the blueprint of ICT development for the country. What made you decide we needed a national strategy?

We needed a direction so that everyone knows what our priorities are. One of the things that I did a lot when trying to get to know the industry was travel. I was very interested in seeing what other nations were doing. I saw that other countries had their own blueprints and so we decided to work out our priorities and targets.

The MyICMS 886 is a very ambitious strategy. What are your expectations? Are they lofty or achievable?

We have to be ambitious if we want to do well as an ICT nation. But the goals were carefully thought out and achievable if everyone works on them. Companies must be bold and willing to take risks. Communications and information industries are not for the faint-hearted. If organisations are fearful of new technologies, they will be left behind. That is why we gave out licences to new companies. We hope

that they being new will be willing to take risks and work harder.

I think we can make it. Furthermore the goals are no less or more than that set by other nations that are equally determined to do well.

The key to success for the MyICMS 886 strategy is the speedy development of nationwide broadband infrastructure which is my main target at all times.

As for broadband coverage, what are the principal drivers for the future? Can the 50% target be met?

We better meet the 50% target and even exceed it! There are so many drivers that will help us meet our objective. Wireless technologies like WiMAX and 3G technologies will do their part. We are also putting a lot of expectation on fibre optics. The project to bring fibre into homes has been awarded.

Now everyone just have to work on it. I will not tolerate companies that sit on their licences and do not roll out services. As I have said before, I won't hesitate to take licences back.

How would you rate the support you have received as Minister from major players in the industry?

Once they got to know my style, they have been very cooperative. I think they understand that if I push or scold, it is because I want the industry to progress. When the industry does well, it means the major players do well too. So we are on the same side.

What do you plan to do once you are retired? Will you remain active in politics and will you hold any position that can create an impact on our society?

One thing for sure, I would like to spend more time with my family especially after having devoted more than half of my life time in the public office.

As the Chairman of Wawasan Open University Council, I would also like to dedicate my time in ensuring this open university offers flexible, affordable and accessible distance learning program to all deserving Malaysians regardless of their status or background.

Beyond that, of course I will always be available for advice and consultation. 