

# Abdulnabi Al Sho'ala

**H**is Excellency the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs is a man of the people.

In his own words, he is determined, optimistic and prudent - all qualities which have contributed to his success in business and the public arena. It is, however, his compassion and empathy with the working man, that have set him apart and most endeared him to the people he serves.

A very public figure, he is a genial positive presence at functions to promote and encourage young people. He is completely committed to enabling and empowering people today to take up the challenges presented in the rapidly evolving labour market. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs works together with educational and training institutions at all levels to constantly improve and gear facilities and programs to be relevant and of a standard comparable with the best internationally.

A city boy from very humble beginnings, the young Abdulnabi's own education was not glamorous or easy. As a child, he interspersed schoolwork, not with play, but with more work - collecting stamps off discarded envelopes around the commercial area of Bab Al Bahrain, roasting nuts for sale, and even working as an office boy for the late Yousuf K Al Moayyed.

His first real job earned him the princely sum of 450 Rupees per month (the equivalent of about BD45). Contrary to all the advice of friends, he turned down the opportunity to train as a teacher to stay in the construction industry. No holidays, no permanence, no job security and hard work in a 24-hour-a-day job. His only incentive was the challenge this presented and what he saw as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Over the next three years, in addition to the rich and diverse experiences, he earned enough money to



pursue higher education. He travelled to India, where he enrolled in St Xavier's College in Bombay (now Mumbai), where he studied economics and politics. Once again at odds with his budget, he had to take on extra work to keep body and soul together. So he taught Arabic, undertook translations, and wrote features and pieces for newspapers. It is a tribute to his resourcefulness and determination that he was able to work in a society that typically exports labour.

It was a very busy period - full of public involvement and responsibility. He was President of the Bahrain Students' Association in India and the Arab Students Union. This involved meeting many important people,

including the then Prime Minister, the late Indira Gandhi. At the time he did not have any political ambitions. His subject choice and activities were geared at personal interest and not with any particular career in mind. This remains characteristic of his thinking about education, which he values highly as an end in itself - a lifelong experience and discipline that develops logic and thinking abilities and provides a base of knowledge.

On his return to Bahrain he got a job within two weeks - working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After less than a year, he left to start up his own business in a field where he felt most competent - communications. Called quite simply Gulf Public

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Relations, the company began inconspicuously in a one-roomed office with a signboard bigger than the door proclaiming everything he undertook, including advertising, public relations, publishing, market research and marketing. It didn't mention the fact that he also cleaned the office and made the tea.

The company flourished and grew under his dedicated care. And inevitably, it became necessary to separate the various divisions: the advertising division joined forces with a number of leading agencies to eventually form Gulf Advertising; the public relations division became a joint venture with Hill and Knowlton to become Gulf Hill and Knowlton, and the Publishing interest later became TeleGulf, a joint venture with the telecommunications giant, Bell Canada. These already extensive interests were later broadened by the formation of Gulf Markets International in 1982, to undertake trading.

During the same year, under a slogan for renewal, "New blood", he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce with the highest number of votes ever. This came as a surprise to many, especially those who had advised him against standing. He was after all the youngest ever person to be standing and did not have the benefit of an established business family name. Clearly his determination, translated into research, phone calls, visits and mail shots, had paid off!

He was subsequently re-elected twice. During his time at the Chamber, he served as Chairman of the Public Relations Committee, on the Executive Committee and was also responsible for the formation of the Bahrain Asian Trading Committee, which serves to integrate Asian traders into the Bahrain commercial community, and finally as the Second Vice President.

In 1993 he was appointed to the first Shura Council, a position he retained till his appointment as the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in 1995. During this period he served on as many as 35 committees at any given time. In his ministerial capacity, he officiates at countless functions, seminars and events. This broad portfolio requires a huge commitment of time and energy.



Fortunately, his work ethic, one which was developed at an early age, is such that hard work is not something he avoids. He works, quite simply until the work is done and enjoys the challenge of doing something well. His approach is modern and energetic. He is happy to marry the best of all the cultures to make the economy and labour market in Bahrain successful and vibrant.

Since his appointment, the Minister of Labour has been an active proponent of Bahrainisation. Often confused with affirmative action which is rooted in political and emotional idealism, the structured Bahrainisation program has as its basis logic and practicalities. It is certainly not about entitlement. Bahrain's growing economy has many requirements and just as many opportunities. Coupled with this there is a burgeoning population. The main challenge lies in helping people to meet the demands of the market by equipping them with the right skills and education. Where this is correctly implemented, it will address not only the labour needs of the country and counter unemployment, but also empower the people economically with local purchasing power, which is vital to the sustained growth of the economy.

Many people today, especially those in developing countries are particularly aware of the incipient dangers in the great globalisation movement. Resistance to change is a natural human response, so is fear of the unknown. Bahrain shares this concern at ministerial level. However, as in everything else, the

Minister is positive and optimistic.

History shows that Bahrain is able to cope with change. In the early 30s, when the thriving pearl industry was all but destroyed by the introduction of the cultured pearl, the economy bounced back with the discovery of oil and the establishment of the oil and refining industry. However, realising that dependence on a single economic source would be foolhardy, the state long ago introduced its program of diversification to broaden the country's economic base. This resulted in the establishment of the primary aluminium industry and its downstream activities, a thriving petrochemical industry, the expansion of ship building and repair services, and a number of small to medium scale industries. Another principal diversification measure was the decision to develop and maintain Bahrain as a centre for international financial activity.

These pro-active policies, together with the country's small size, give it the flexibility to adapt easily in response to the demands of the ever-changing global scenario.

Apart from this, he is committed to taking care of the human and social concerns arising from globalisation. During June 2000 the Minister attended a special session of the United Nations in Geneva specifically to discuss ways to redress imbalances and social problems that may arise from globalisation.

It is this empathy and energy which are translated into the policies that will transform the Bahraini labour market to compete successfully in the global economy. ■