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No punch-pulling in fight against corruption

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THE recent "Consensus Against Corruption" conference has generated a great deal of public interest in, and created a high degree of awareness of, the debilitating effects of corruption on our lives.

The initiative has not come a minute too soon given the growing concerns about a phenomenon that is becoming a threat to our national integrity.

The 16-point resolution is both comprehensive and practical and, provided the Government has the necessary political will, there is no reason why we should not achieve greater success now compared to the two previous campaigns against corruption mounted by the Tun Hussein Onn administration and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's at the beginning of his term as Prime Minister.

Having said that, it is important to realise that corruption has to be fought on all fronts, involving the Government and all Malaysians as coalition partners. That the Government is determined to curb corrupt practices across the national spectrum can no longer be doubted.

This and other conferences have shown that there is no shortage of public support for the measures to be incorporated in the proposed Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill 1997.

However, there is real concern and disappointment that the Government has seen fit to introduce a provision to punish a person who falsely accuses another person of corruption. That there is a need to protect the innocent is not an issue here as there is already adequate provision under our existing laws for this.

There is a place for such a law, but it surely has no place in an Act that depends for its success on the whole-hearted co-operation of all sections of the community. To insist on introducing this provision is to fly in the face of reason and common sense. The Government must not be perceived to be pulling its punches in the war against corruption just when the whole nation is on full alert.

It is difficult to understand the preoccupation of some with the need for a person to produce evidence when making a report against another for corruption.

This smacks of vested interests given the fact that we do not ever hear even a tiny whimper when a citizen is incarcerated for long periods without the benefit of a trial.

To argue national security as a justification for such detention is to forget that corruption has a much greater impact on the fate of a nation and a greater potential for permanent damage than the mere act, sometimes, of expressing dissenting views.

By its very nature, corruption is not transparent and bringing culprits to justice is never straight forward. Therefore, to place undue emphasis on evidence at the outset of a reporting process is to penalise the public and comfort the corrupt.

Clearly, recognising the fact that it is next to impossible to arrest a giver and a taker in the act, it is reasonable to base our suspicions on circumstantial evidence, tell-tale signs that suggest living beyond a person's known income.

The ACA should welcome every scrap of information from any source and verify quickly whether there is any empirical evidence to warrant a closer look.

It has been suggested that income and asset disclosures to an

independent body should be made mandatory for all politicians holding public office and senior civil servants. This requirement should be supplemented by routine and random investigation of persons in these categories so as to ensure that they remain clean and untainted and are seen to be such. A politician or a public servant must be above suspicion.

What has been happening on the anti-graft front in the last few months cannot but reverse the long-held general perception that the Government was not serious about fighting corruption and all the efforts that have gone into making the ACA more effective have not gone unnoticed in the larger world outside.

Our country's prestige and well-being will depend on our capacity to develop and strengthen our national integrity system embodying, among others, the twin pillars of transparency and accountability.