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Quick fixes won't solve problems of our children

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EVERYONE knows you do not build character in three months or even a year. And yet the Ministry of Youth and Sports proposes to spend a monstrous RM500 million a year on a National Social Service for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia school leavers.

The Government has admitted that the millions it has spent on its dadah rehabilitation programme, which uses a military approach, has failed. The relapse rate is more than 75 per cent.

And yet Umno Youth is planning to launch a Briged Putra using the military approach to reform youths with disciplinary problems. Moreover, isn't it dangerous for a political party to have a para-military arm made up of under-achieving youths with disciplinary problems?

A demagogue can easily turn them into a ready-for-hire mob for his own political ends.

In the latest proposal, the Minister of Rural Development announced that the Biro Tatanegara would draw up a social training curriculum for students waiting for their SPM results. Is this a separate scheme from the proposed National Social Service?

The Minister of National Unity and Social Development says her Ministry is co-ordinating all the proposals from Federal and State agencies and political parties to deal with social ills and a national action plan will be ready by June.

So why are Umno Youth and Umno Wanita launching their Briged Putra and Briged Putri on April 4?

Why this rush to spend money on quick solutions that deal with the symptoms rather than the causes of the problem?

Can someone please enlighten us as to who is really in charge? Are teachers, pupils, parents being consulted on these instant solutions to solve serious long-term problems?

They are the ones who will be directly affected, don't their opinions matter? Why is the Minister of Education silent as others make a grab for the students under his charge?

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, told the Barisan Nasional leaders to be rational and not act hastily. But is anyone listening? Or is it too late because announcements have been made and faces have to be saved? At whose expense? The youth of our country?

Why doesn't someone in authority suggest that all that money to be spent on these new hare-brained schemes go to existing programmes for youths? Building character is an on-going process that starts from young. Forcing an 18-year-old delinquent through three months of military drilling is not going to turn him into a model citizen. He needs someone to listen to his problems, not a drill sergeant barking at his shaved head under the blistering sun.

But getting a nine-year-old to join the Boy Scouts movement in his school will go some way towards moulding him to be a responsible citizen.

Instead of spending RM500 million a year on a National Social Service, why not allocate that money to beef up the existing uniformed bodies in schools?

What happened to the plan to make it compulsory for all students to belong to a uniformed body? It has several elements of these new schemes being proposed: drills and marches, social service, outdoor and group activities. It builds team spirit, inculcates proper values, and promotes

friendship across racial lines. It is a preventive, long-term approach that builds character, it's within the school framework, uses the existing infrastructure, and it is time-tested.

The uniformed body was an important part of our school life in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, we seldom see schoolchildren in the Girl Guide/Boy Scout or Red Crescent uniform on weekends as they go about their public activities as we did: helping at the various sports meets; National Day celebrations, the Sultan's birthday celebrations, selling poppy flowers and flags for fund-raising events; read to the blind, spending time at the spastic home and old folk's home. We all felt good about ourselves at the end of the day as we joined up to eat ice-kacang and rojak at our favourite stalls.

Instead of spending millions of ringgit on new schemes, spend that money to build on what we already have.

Our teachers are now so overworked and underpaid. Use the new money to train and hire trainers and facilitators to help run the uniformed bodies in our schools and to organise activities so that the schoolchildren of today can learn that helping those who need our time, attention and skills can be fun too.

It is through such actions that character is built and values are learnt.

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