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Solid growth with smart partnership

SMART, as a word, has many connotations; the most widely known and widely used is in the sartorial sense, that is to be well-groomed. In these days of high tech, it has assumed another meaning as in smart-cards that can perform many tasks and therefore are deemed to be intelligent plastics. The word also has a third denotation: clever, ingenious and quick to take advantage of.

It is perhaps in the latter sense, slightly refined, that the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, used the word in the concept of "Smart Partnership" which was the theme of his opening speech at the Langkawi International Dialogue on Monday. Elaborating his concept, Dr Mahathir said the idea of smart partnership was to maximise and balance the benefits for both and all, even if the contribution to the partnership might not be equal from the parties that have forged the partnership.

As the Prime Minister rightly phrased it, the smart partnership had served Malaysia well. First we had the political alliance of various parties in the Alliance which brought together in coalition the people of the three main races in the then Malaya. This was the foundation of an enduring partnership between the peoples of Malaysia within the umbrella of the National Front. This partnership contributed to the country's political stability and ultimately was the basis for the economic growth that had been buoyant over the last nine years; ten years if the expansion for this year is included.

True, there are other political partnerships in coalition governments elsewhere but they are not as equitable as smart partnerships which has the important feature of providing maximum and balanced benefits. For these partnerships are formed by unequal partners. As a result, the bigger or larger partner dominates and makes the decision, resulting in inequitable distribution of benefits which in turn creates discontent and even dissent among the smaller parties. This should explain why coalition governments often do not complete their tenure in office. We only have to look at India where coalition partnerships of political parties flounder months after they are formed.

As Dr Mahathir said, the conflict between nations of today is due to forced partnership between them. This is not smart partnership. The big powers carve out large slices of the cake of power, responsibility or benefit for themselves and deny the smaller nations a fair share.

Unfair partnership is manifest in the World Trade Organisation which regards low labour costs as unacceptable. This in turn negates the competitive edge of low production costs of the poor or developing countries in the international market. Whither then a smart partnership among the nations of the world?

Another example of poor partnership is the relation between workers' unions and employers. Granted that trade unions in the West have achieved much success in gaining benefits for workers. But these gains are eroded by high taxes and higher contributions to social welfare schemes such as pension plans and medical care. Then there is always ever nagging anxiety of being laid-off whenever companies and industrial sectors encounter low sales or low profits.

In Malaysia the National Front comprises 14 political parties. The defection of a few of the smaller parties would not bring down the Government. The defectors will lose the benefits that come with being

partners in the ruling coalition. Clearly then the Barisan is a smart partnership.

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