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## Uniformity in curing ills

THE current hyped-up concern over "social ills" is nothing less than the issue deserves. But the public's imagination is getting caught in the grip of something akin to a mania. This over-reaction to the overwhelming discovery of a burgeoning problem is not unexpected. It is, however, only feeble compensation for the complacency and smug ignorance with which these festering ills had been treated in the past. Now, nearly everyone has had something to say on the subject. But this mood of belated knowingness, of seeing villains in every street-corner and sensing evil in the air, is not the right frame of mind to be in for the required answers and solutions.

The formation of a Cabinet Committee and the meeting of the Barisan Nasional leadership over the issue are an indication of the size of the challenge and the resources which must be mobilised to meet it. The Prime Minister has called for sanity in our appreciation of the issues at stake and uniformity in our approaches and strategies. The blame-mongering that has greeted these issues will only attack the symptoms - the outward misbehaviour, anti-social outcomes, vices and crimes - instead of the causes, and get nowhere. Significantly, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has appealed for what is most needed, and often most lacking, in getting a sharp focus of the problems - understanding.

Some of the more astute social commentators have pointed out that the social ills are inter-related. Moreover, this country is not unique in this respect. Others are also having problems as their societies and generations change. Juvenile crime, for instance, has been a hot topic in many Western countries. An increasing number of crimes are being committed by those under 21, and more and more young people are starting out their lives of crime before they reach 18. These countries are responding by, firstly, reforming the criminal justice system to give these youths shorter shrift. But getting tough on crime is an end in itself, rather than a means to reduce juvenile crime or the underlying causes of it.

Those roots, almost everyone agrees, go back well before the first crime is ever contemplated. Homes, and parents, have been correctly, but too narrowly, blamed for the country's ills and woes. Undisciplined, loveless and dysfunctional homes are another problem, however, and cannot be the only way to address the social issues of youth. Schools, an area that has been insufficiently looked into in the current public debate, can worsen the problems of a bad domestic upbringing. Much more importantly, however, teachers and classroom education can also help solve these problems. In many cases, schools can, and should, fill in the gaps left by negligent parents and broken-down homes. They can be of much help to disadvantaged youngsters, providing surrogate parenthood in everything from advice and counselling to supplementary meals. Several education experts have already pointed to how poorly prepared Malaysian schools are for this function.

In his briefing, Dr Mahathir spoke of the contradictions in the long list of remedies and prescriptions that has been offered so far. These contradictions arise through individual biases and prejudices. But the way out of the social decay does not lie in submitting to anyone's idea of what is wrong with society. It lies in fortifying and preparing our young people to tell the difference between wrong and right and make the right decisions accordingly.

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