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## Bridging the gap for the future

IT is a simple gesture, yet it promises to bring a deeper understanding of national policies and concerns among university students. A dialogue, such as the one held between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and undergraduates yesterday, will bridge the communication gap between them and national leaders.

Frequent dialogues, perhaps on a quarterly basis, with these leaders in an open environment will allow students to articulate their views, questions and grievances. The exchange of thoughts between these elders and the young, who hold the strings in defining the future, will foster a sense of belonging and instil a sense of patriotism in the latter. We do not think this is a departure from the Government's stand that there should be no politics in universities. Rather, it is the Government's way of paving the path for greater openness and exchange of ideas in understanding national and global concerns. It is a form of constructive engagement with national leaders.

Notably, it is in response to past pleas for greater space in the campus - which is best summed up in the line from German poet Friedrich Schiller's drama, Don Carlos, "Sire, grant us freedom for thoughts". Will it, as alleged by some, plant political ferment in campus? Hardly. Only those who confuse and commingle the meaning of political activism with civil freedom will think the dialogues constitute a political plank by the Government to cultivate support. In reality, it bridges the gap between today's policy-makers and tomorrow's policy-makers.

The dialogues will enable them to appreciate, understand and even criticise the aspirations of the Government. National spirit should not only be ordained from the top or the highest level of hierarchy but it should also flow from the bottom. In this case, students are both seen and heard. This will dispel the misperception that our campus populace are allegedly shackled all the way into the capillaries of their daily existence by a restrictive system.

But there is a greater significance. By all reckoning, the dialogues may well cure the young of their political cynicism and distrust of the system - a trend which is not merely confined to Malaysia in the aftermath of economic crisis or political hiccups but is also seen in developed countries. It will give another perspective to campus rebels who, out of boredom or a longing to participate in national life, are attracted by the fervour of anti-government sentiments. It will balance up their views. But they will not benefit from the discourse if they come with pre-conceived and prejudiced views. Nor will they gain if they abnegate their responsibility to pursue knowledge for few moments of misguided passion.

It is important to reach out to the young. Within the Government, there should be an Ombudsman for the young - who plays the role of advocate for them and has the task of sensitising public opinions to their aspirations. Their susceptibility to political agitation by anti-government elements here or outside shows a longing for their queries to be answered, their doubts clarified and their views heard. Unquelled, it will lead to restiveness which may be exploited by irresponsible elements. Such a longing should be seen as a social dynamic, not necessarily a political dynamic which leads to turmoil, in a country which is confident of charting its own destiny without a piggyback from foreign powers.

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