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One for all ... all for one

CALL it transformasi. Malaysians have been presented with a direct opportunity to put participatory democracy into practice through the Second National Economic Consultative Council. The challenge is simple - use it or lose it.

Obviously, there is nothing like meaningful expression to make the rakyat feel a part of the process of change. That it comes at a crucial stage of the nation's march to developed status is indicative of the fresh emphasis placed on the views of the people.

The council should find the means to turn this into a dynamic exercise that engages all thinking Malaysians. Long-standing concerns, practical suggestions and constructive views are there for the recording, but these have to be gathered in an orderly and inclusive manner.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said he wants a policy that is aggressive and strategic, one which involves a paradigm shift. Being entrusted to come up with "futuristic and relevant" ideas to help the nation achieve developed status, the council itself should avoid passivity by inviting public views only through memoranda. This could dampen enthusiasm almost immediately, as not everyone has the capacity to shape opinion into a formal document.

The seven working committees under the council could instead formulate a basic questionnaire or comment form that is specific to goals in each area of work. Feedback can thus be made relevant to the topic at hand and would be easier to compile and evaluate for policy-making purposes.

Civil society groups, the media and an electronic website with e-mail facility should be utilised to extend the survey nationwide. This period would also be useful in explaining issues, educating the public and encouraging their ownership of the policy that is in the making. Meetings in town halls and community centres should be the order of the day, to involve people at the grassroots and obtain consensus.

At another level, the council will have to rely on the expertise of its members who represent all shades of political, economic and social opinion. Many would have been involved in previous vehicles that advanced social justice and economic growth. This time, however, a quantum leap will be necessary in formulating policies that anticipate needs of the next decade.

There is no substitute for homework on the issues involved and to link this with far-sighted strategies being adopted worldwide. Each committee should incorporate larger concerns such as bridging income disparities, empowerment of marginalised communities, and balancing social and environmental concerns with economic needs.

The council is obliged to accommodate reasonable comments so that this does not end up as an exercise in tokenism. Even as the policy under each committee is drawn up over the coming year, the draft should be released for further comment. The public should have sight of what has been included before the statement of intent and related action-plans are finalised.

Tedious and time-consuming as this may seem, it would be worthwhile reviewing, redefining and redirecting interest to aspects of development that will require public involvement to succeed. If nothing else, it would teach Malaysians that they are responsible for their own future.

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