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Questions linger over South Indian Labour Fund Board issue

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WAS it necessary for the Government to take over the administration of the South Indian Labour Fund Board?

This is the crucial question that should be asked in the wake of the furore over the recent decision to dissolve the fund.

To answer this, one has to go back to the original objectives behind the setting up of the board and whether these had been met over time - 41 years to be exact.

The board was established to repatriate to India retired and elderly South Indians brought in to work in Malaya by the British.

It was also to look after the welfare of the workers and their dependants or orphans.

At last count, the board was administering an old folk's home in Nibong Tebal with 38 inmates.

In effect, its assets of RM2.36 million and a 6.07ha land bank in Bukit Panchor, Nibong Tebal, were being used to look after a small group of people.

The land was donated by the late Penang tycoon N.T.S. Arumugam Pillai.

The last time it repatriated someone was in 1993. For the record, the board has repatriated some 27,000 South Indian labourers since its inception.

The answer to the original question is obvious. The original terms of reference have been more than met.

The truth, however, is that the original objectives of the board are not relevant anymore.

Is it then time to take stock and carry on, keeping as closely as possible to the spirit of the South Indian Labour Fund Board Act 1958 as envisaged by the founding fathers?

This is what the Government, via the MIC, is trying to do. The Human Resources Ministry which oversees the administration of the board will use the board's assets to help the Indian community at large.

It proposes to do so by establishing a skills training centre for the Indian community which will enable them to participate more effectively in the development process.

It is understood that half the fund's cash assets would be used to begin construction of the centre while a decision on how to raise more money would be made later.

The rest of the money has been handed over to the Welfare Department to pay monthly allowances to the inmates at the home.

If anything is in error, it may be the question of timing of the move to dissolve the board.

The question which some are asking is why now and not 20 years ago when the board had almost exhausted its responsibilities?.

A pertinent question as little has changed over the past two decades or so. No one has answered this question with the rhetoric concentrating more on whether or not the board should be dissolved.

Some have advised caution in not dissolving the board in haste.

The Government alleges the controversy revolving around the issue boils down to politics.

The MIC is alleging that the Opposition is trying to make political capital of the issue, especially with the election around the corner.

Conversely, others may be tempted to think that with polls coming soon,

the Government is trying to use the skills training centre to garner votes from the Indian community.

Personalities also seem to be clouding the issue with MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and DAP national vice-chairman M. Kulasegaran locking horns in an encounter outside Parliament.

That the fund comes under the purview of the Human Resources Ministry and not the MIC was perhaps lost on some.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said opposition to the dissolution of the fund was political and aimed at attacking the MIC and its leadership.

Deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Affifudin Omar when winding up debate on the South Indian Labour Fund (Dissolution) Bill 1999 said that the Government's aim was to bring South Indians into the mainstream of national development.

Kulasegaran charged the Government had no "moral standing" to divest all powers, rights, privileges, duties, land, assets, liabilities and obligations vested with the board.

"The fund was set up without a single sen coming from the Government.

"Thus, what is the justification for dissolving the fund and board?" he asked, describing the passing of the dissolution Bill as the "darkest" day for the Indian community.

The Malaysian Hindu Youth Council, on the other hand, is of the opinion that Indian plantation workers and the Indian community should exercise direct control over the fund.

Common to all opinions on the issue are estate workers and their dependants.

It may be prudent for the Human Resources Ministry to ensure that the cash and land assets of the fund be used to directly benefit this community which has remained in the wings of development for far too long.

This could be done in lieu of a special fund to look after the welfare of estate workers and their dependants as suggested by Malaysian Trades Union Congress president Senator Zainal Rampak.

In the final analysis, the end must justify the means.

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