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Be open about race relations

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RACIAL harmony was the reverberating theme at the Gerakan's first national delegates conference of the new millennium.

The party, sensitive to the needs of the "social contract" inked by the country's founding fathers 43 years ago, is reiterating the need for continued tolerance and openness when discussing and resolving racial issues.

Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik's call to be sensible in times of racial distress, is valid, especially for a party that endorses non-racial politics to achieve peace, progress and stability.

There should be no question of the review of the social contract agreed upon 43 years ago, he implored.

Lim said this should be so especially regarding the rights of Malays and non-Malays.

This stand is made in the face of Malaysia's multi-racial composition, where maturity and responsibility at all levels is needed.

These attributes are also the key ingredients in the country's bid to create a Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian race).

For all the talk of a closeted nation not bent on discussing sensitive issues openly, one can marvel at just how open discussion on race relations have been in recent weeks.

There was further talk yesterday in the Gerakan - reinvention and renewal of the party's struggle and objectives in resolving racially sensitive issues.

But there were also reminders about not taking racial harmony for granted despite 43 years of independence.

The Malaysian way towards race relations, it seems, is still workable, considering that major powers like the United States, Britain and Australia are having trouble defining and tackling theirs.

Malaysia has, to a certain extent, buried the ghost of May 13.

But comparing the "discussion" over May 13 with the recent disclosure of Australia's "Stolen Generation" of Aborigines forcibly taken away from their families and the US' phalanx of racial bigotry that dampens blacks' advancement, it would seem that we are in good hands.

Over here, affirmative action, the very activity that sounds like a bad horror movie in the US, has been a useful tool to unite and advance the races.

While the US courts have ruled affirmative action as unconstitutional, Malaysia has made advances, particularly from the New Economic Policy and the National Development Policy.

But it is generally regarded that American fear of losing status translates into a bunker mentality - anything that threatens its economic and political hegemony must be opposed.

Flawed as the NEP or NDP may be, all races have secured major concessions but as the good doctor said, if everybody complains he or she has not gotten much, then the Government has been very equitable in its sharing of the economic cake.

While national leaders have advocated that "sensitive" issues like Malay and non-Malay rights be discussed and debated, hotly if need be, behind closed doors, there is no reason that the generalities of positive ties, like those proposed by Dr Mahathir yesterday, should not be openly debated.

It is now up to educationists, teachers, student unions and other relevant bodies to take up the Prime Minister's poser - how do we integrate students already polarised from years of complacency without disrupting the uniqueness of vernacular schools?

And to top that, how do developers build homes that integrate the races instead of setting them apart by overpricing houses to the extent that only one race can afford it?

There are many informal platforms to engage in this debate - the unique Malaysian open houses during the four great religious festivities, the Rukun Tetangga, sports meets and even Bangsar's pubs, Ampang's discotheques and Sheila Majid concerts.

These are great informal platforms to discuss what would seem to be "sensitive issues" without letting them degenerate into full-bloodied riots!

Let's give the tolerant multi-racial Malaysian public the benefit of the doubt in having fruitful, if not passionate, discussions.

In spite of politicians' claims that some Malaysians are not yet ready to discuss race relation issues in the open, there would be many who can and who will.

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