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Malaysia Hall more than a mere meeting place since colonial era

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CERTAIN things just cannot be quantified by dollars and cents. Pride and dignity, love and most of all patriotism and nationalism are a few that quickly come to mind.

Falling within the same bracket are history, heritage and sentimental values. These are priceless treasures that can neither be sold nor rewritten.

So for the hundreds of thousands of Malaysians who have walked the corridors of Malaysia Hall in London a million times over, the announcement by the Education Ministry on Tuesday that the lease for two of the four units of property housing the Malaysian Students Department and Malaysia Hall will not be renewed, would come as a great shock.

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad had announced that the lease for two units of the property, No 46 and No 47, would not be renewed when it expires next September.

The Malaysia Hall building consisting four units - Nos 44, 45, 46 and 47 - was leased to the Malayan Government in 1951. The lease for units 44 and 45 will only expire in 2013.

The London MSD office and Malaysia Hall are located adjacently with the department occupying two units of the block and Malaysia Hall the other two.

Come next September, the canteen where Malaysians meet will no longer exist because it is spread across units 46 and 47. The hall where leaders hold regular meetings with students will also cease to exist.

It may have been difficult but the Cabinet's decision not to renew the lease for the two units spells the end of a legacy. For many years, students, on their own free will, gather at Malaysia Hall for festivals and other auspicious occasions.

The existence of the hall prevented Malaysian students, some of whom were new to a foreign country and suffering from culture shock, from going astray.

Malaysia Hall is also where they meet fellow students, lecturers and tutors from other universities to compare notes and exchange ideas. Some bring their foreign friends and lecturers to experience scenes of Malaysian life and of course to savour the cheap Malaysian food. This is where nationalism is kept alive.

The property at Bryanston Square has seen historic moments tied closely to the fortunes of far-flung Malaya of the colonial era and the rising fortunes of independent Malaysia.

It was here that Bapa Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman declared in 1956 that Malaysia would get its Independence from Great Britain the following year.

It was home to hundreds of thousands of Malaysian men and women, leaders of the past and present who chose to pursue their education in Britain. Tun Abdul Razak, Sultan of Perak Sultan Azlan Shah and Sultan of Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah, to name a few, were those who stayed at Malaysia Hall at one time or the other.

Come autumn next year the hall, described by a fellow writer as "a beacon of hospitality for Malaysians in London", will fade into oblivion.

When rumours were rife a year ago that the Government might not renew the lease for the two units, Malaysians in Britain launched a strong campaign to convince the Government not to forgo the Malaysian heritage.

They used the various channels to convey their appeals.

Some did it through the Malaysian High Commission in London while some appealed directly to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during his two visits to London last year.

Some took the opportunity to raise the issue every time a member of the Malaysian Government visited London.

Spearheading the campaign was long-time resident in Britain Datuk Yunus Raiss, who, despite living in Britain for the last 40 years, continues to defend Malaysia and Malaysians in his little but meaningful ways.

In fact, he is so defensive of Malaysia, the Prime Minister and the Government that the British Press has stopped inviting him for television shows and Press interviews - accusing him of being biased.

Yunus is best remembered for taking on the then Sunday Times Editor Andrew Neil, who had accused Malaysian leaders of receiving kickbacks in the aid-for-arms issue in 1994.

For Yunus, the first Malaysian to open an English college in London, to be made magistrate and Justice of Peace, losing Malaysia Hall would disappoint every Malaysian who had lived, worked or studied in Britain.

Malaysia Hall serves a great purpose to Malaysian students there. It adds dignity to Malaysians in England. That is where Malaysians meet and socialise. There is no other place in London where Malaysians are so much Malaysian, able to speak their own language and eat their own food.

Malaysia Hall is also a place for Malaysians to keep in touch with home. The Government's decision not to renew the lease, would deprive many Malaysians of a place of their own because the canteen and hall are the two most important meeting places.

In terms of the cost of keeping Malaysia Hall, it is a pittance compared to the benefits it gives to Malaysians in Britain, argues Yunus.

Although the landlord, Portman Settled Estate Ltd, may be asking an annual rental fee of STG300,000 (about RM1.74 million), it has been said by many that MSD could make far higher profits.

If the Government is going to spend STG10 million to buy a new property, why not just invest part of it on the hall to yield an income.

It has been said there are parties just waiting eagerly for MSD to move out.

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