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Downer-Mahathir

DOWNER ASKED TO DEFEND AUSTRALIA OVER MAHATHIR ATTACK

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, June 25 (Bernama) -- The Labour Party Opposition foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton said today that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer should defend Australia's multicultural record following a mocking by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir said in Kuala Lumpur at the weekend that Australia was a place that made its Chinese residents learn to speak nasal-vowelled Strine.

But Downer has for the second time in less than a week refused to be drawn into a slanging match with Dr Mahathir.

"I think the best line we can take on this is just to let this ball fly through to the (wicket) keeper," Downer told ABC Radio.

"I don't think there is anything to be gained by us responding to this.

"This is domestic politics in Malaysia and we certainly don't wish to interfere with domestic politics there," he said.

Last week, Downer used the same cricket metaphor to decline to respond to Dr Mahathir's assertion Australia was interfering in Malaysian domestic politics through Downer's meeting with PAS leaders.

Downer also refused to comment on the Malaysian Chinese Association's decision to take over two major Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia.

"I think we will really leave this one alone because we don't want to get into some slanging match with Dr Mahathir, it is not in our national interests and I am not setting myself up as a commentator on everything he says," Downer said.

Brereton said today it was not the right response to Dr Mahathir's slurs on the national character.

"I notice that our foreign minister said this morning that this was a ball best left going through to the keeper," Brereton told ABC Radio.

"I would challenge that approach. When Australia's multicultural record is seriously misrepresented, as I believe it has been, I think it appropriate for our prime minister and our foreign minister to speak up on behalf of Australia."

Brereton said he was particularly concerned about the attack on Australia's education system and on freedom of the press, saying there were four or five Chinese language dailies published in Sydney every day without government interference.

"What you need in these circumstances is a dignified response, one that's quiet, but one that is forthright," he said.

"If there's an attack upon Australia, it's appropriate that we should respond and set the record straight," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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