

31/08/2001

Negative aspect of affirmative action

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PETALING JAYA, Thurs. - Malaysia's affirmative action policy to achieve equality among the races has resulted in some people becoming too laid-back, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the policy had created such a strong sense of security in the Government that people did not see things which threatened their well-being.

"As a result, we have people who are a little laid-back and not willing to make any effort. The sense of security created by the Government was perhaps a mistake," he said.

Dr Mahathir said his intention was to achieve equality among the races but the Government had perhaps overdone things.

He also said it was not really his mistake except in the sense that the response was not as good as he had thought it would be.

Dr Mahathir was responding to a question by Far Eastern Economic Review journalist Lorien Holland on the best and worst changes in Malaysia, during a question and answer session at a luncheon forum organised by the Oxford and Cambridge Society of Malaysia.

The lunch, hosted by the society's president Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, was attended by some 300 Oxonians and Cantabrigians, and guests. They included the Raja Muda of Perak, Raja Nazrin (an Oxonian), and British High Commissioner Graham Fry, the immediate past president.

Dr Mahathir spoke off the cuff, delivering an address before answering a wide range of questions.

On the "best change" to Malaysia, Dr Mahathir paid tribute to the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

He said the Tunku had decided to adopt the free market system with elements of a centrally planned economy like state enterprises. As a result of this pragmatism, Malaysia now stands among the best.

To a question by Adhha Abdullah of Commerce International Merchant Bankers Bhd's equity derivatives section, Dr Mahathir said he has no intention of becoming an adviser to his successor or a Senior Minister.

"I will keep my mouth shut," he said.

Adhha had asked him whether he would advise his successor to use the iron fist or to soften it with a velvet glove.

Dr Mahathir also drew laughter when asked why he was maligned by the West, yet his equally straight-talking contemporary Lee Kuan Yew, Senior Minister of Singapore, was revered.

"I don't know, I consider myself very nice but I like to shoot off my mouth," he said, adding that he did not clothe his views in diplomatic language.

He agreed that Lee's views were nearly the same as his but "maybe he's better in the English language than me and puts things much better".

Asked by lawyer C.Y. Law about his unorthodox approach to the economy, he said he looked at things as they were and took necessary measures even if they were considered taboo by the international financial community.

Dr Mahathir said the world economic system would never be changed unless the rich countries became disadvantaged. He felt that this would happen eventually but the world would have to wait until then to see any changes.