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Party leaders had better heed wake-up call or risk obsolescence

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THE wake-up call has sounded for MIC leaders charged with the future of the community. The message is overwhelmingly clear: change with society or become redundant.

Already the party is feeling the heat from certain self-styled guardians of the Indian community who have been tagged 'armchair critics' for their alleged failure to do anything tangible for the community besides their critiques.

Sensitivity to criticism aside, MIC leaders would be well-advised to heed warning signals coming largely from non-governmental organisations and apolitical academicians.

The traditional cynicism about such views has to be replaced by pragmatism aimed at getting to the truth of the matter.

MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu got it pat in his speech at the opening of the 55th MIC annual general assembly in Johor Baru yesterday when he cautioned against complacency.

Citing civil society movements and grassroots citizens groups as those who were increasingly challenging the traditional role of politicians, the veteran leader was spot on in his remarks.

Occasional leaders who "hit and run" where their responsibilities are concerned risk obsolescence, he argued in a speech that made no bones about the fact that this was the political reality of the day.

The Works Minister could not have been more right when he underlined the need for consistency in action among MIC leaders. Add on the excitement that comes with helping others and one has a winning combination.

This was what Samy Vellu seemed to be getting at when he called for a culture of getting excited about the mission objective of MIC leaders.

As the middle-class expands and increases in sophistication, calls for social reform will become more strident. This is a fact.

The implications for traditional politics are legion. In part, it means the need for greater rapport with the masses who had been taken for granted earlier.

For the MIC, more than other Barisan Nasional components, this assumes greater meaning for the simple fact that the community is small, at a mere 1.8 million people.

Unlike Umno, MCA and Gerakan which have the much larger Malay and Chinese reservoir of support to draw upon respectively, the MIC's lifeline is the small Indian community.

And failure to retain support for the party within the community could prove disastrous. The effects will especially be felt where political representation is concerned.

The post-Lunas by-election period is one where the political equation is somewhat hazy as far as Indians are concerned. Leaders and members were rocked by the unexpected outcome.

There is a lesson to be learnt by the MIC elite and rank and file: Lose touch with the masses and become inconsequential - politically and otherwise.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's declaration in his opening speech yesterday that the MIC was still the large umbrella under which Indians sought refuge should not come to naught.

There is a crying need for younger MIC elected representatives at national and State levels who can understand the youth of today. The

present crop are almost 60 years old or thereabouts with few exceptions.

This extends to the party's Central Working Committee where many are from the older generation. Efforts to search for new faces who are young will have to be intensified if the MIC really wants to stay in tune with the younger generation.

Note has to be taken of the fact that the 2004 general election will see many more eligible young voters under the new electoral roll.

The war of numbers between Indian-based political parties is also mind-boggling, what with the MIC claiming a membership of 540,000.

For the record, the Indian Progressive Front under former MIC vice-president Datuk M.G. Pandithan claims to have the support of at least 500,000 Indians.

The veracity of the figure notwithstanding, the party is certainly a force to reckon with following its strong show of support for the Barisan Nasional in recent by-elections.

The other contender for Indian support is the Peoples Progressive Party led by Datuk M. Kayveas who was embroiled in a war of words with various MIC leaders last year over the alleged crossing over of members both ways.

Given the fact that only 20 to 30 per cent of the community are card-carrying members, it is difficult to readily accept the figures being touted.

Whatever the numbers, political parties bidding for Indian support have ultimately to prove themselves. This is the acid test in the game of politics.