

05/08/2001

Ulysses' choice

IT is an indictment that is very specific and, alas, very true. As pointed out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, today's generation of Malay students appears to display a disturbing lack of excellence and achievement in education.

Many gained admission into public universities by virtue of the quota system. Without it, more than half of the Bumiputera students who gained admission this year would have found themselves disqualified. This is the reality. But in a display of moral insouciance, some argue that it is their birth-given right to be given a seat in the higher institutions of learning, a right owed to them by any government of the day.

They are right in saying that it is a right. But it is a qualified right, one premised on the political astuteness and strength of Umno, which formulated the affirmative action for the Bumiputera. Qualified because affirmative action imposes upon its recipients binding "civic obligations" of its benefits and services. Affirmative action requires commitment, personal initiative and will-power as well as moral energy to be invested in it. Its beneficiaries bear the responsibility to reap the fruits from its benefits and services and empower themselves to greater stature, self-esteem and resilience.

In terms of the academic quota system, the beneficiaries have an obligation to pursue knowledge earnestly, not only to secure gainful employment and play a constructive role in nation-building but to fortify the community's collective intellectual culture. Indeed, the Malays not only need to master knowledge but also display a collective propensity for excellence in order to be a high-achieving community.

The failure to honour this obligation would render affirmative action counter-productive, creating a decapacitating dependency subculture. The attitude that it is an absolute right brings on a moral hazard, the free-riding phenomenon. Such attitude-bearers forget that rights come with responsibilities. And so, we have this demeaning situation where their rights are used not for an expansion of cognitive and intellectual horizons but for the pursuit of cognitive narrow-mindedness, particularistic prejudices and opportunistic politics. It may be that having been born into a system that provides social and economic security, they place a lower value on those things which they take for granted such as education.

As much as we would urge a precaution against false moves, we recognise the compelling logic in Dr Mahathir's proposal to put aside the quota system for a while and replace it with the meritocracy system. We would go a step further - meritocracy should prevail in the hierarchy of the academics. Radical, yes. But it is by no means a reduction of the nation's concerted affirmative action. The Malays should not cry foul if the meritocracy system is temporarily implemented. It is a means of equipping the Malays, albeit drastically, with a self-reinforcing and self-propelling dynamic to compete, break the medicority mould and attain academic excellence.

Given the mixed feelings, it is an Ulysses' dilemma. Ulysses is weak and knows it. He attempts to escape from his own weakness by tying himself to the mast of the ship, the sacrifice of the self. Is it self-denial or domination over "self", confronting one's inner demons for the spirit to triumph over the physical barriers? Which will it be for the Malays?

(END)