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We must give merit more room

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BEING a Malaysian is not being at odds with being a Bumiputera, Chinese or Indian. It is time for a new debate to get rid of the stale battle between special rights and meritocracy.

I am Malaysian and proud of it, but I have never regarded being pro- the disadvantaged as being anti-Malaysian or anything else. In this day and age when the whole world is moving closer together, it is absurd for us to ignore talent and deprive clever Malaysians of higher education.

The time will come, I am sure, when we will be at "ease" with ourselves. But before that and even after that, I am certain, there will always be people who for a variety of reasons will want to find fault with their country. They should know what to do then or the .....

But we cannot and must not go on in this country educating only the top students and ignoring the majority, nor educating only the majority and disregarding the high achievers.

The two-day National Unity Convention over the weekend recommended, among others, the formation of a multi-racial political party under the Barisan Nasional (BN) to help forge greater national solidarity prior to the birth of Bangsa Malaysia.

It does perplex me: Aren't Gerakan, SUPP and one or two state-based parties multi-racial parties and components of BN? Yes, they are and no - well, not quite, multi-racial in the real sense of the word or political substance.

It saddens me, it really does. Why can't this high-profile convention be honest about what it wants instead of beating around the bush?

I think I know what they want. They want the three racial giants - Umno, MCA and MIC - to become Malaysian parties open to all Malaysians. The MCA and MIC will have to change their names, but Umno needs only to replace the word Malay with Malaysian.

Half a century ago, the founding president of Umno, Datuk Sir Jaafar Onn, the grandfather of Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, left Umno to form the multi-racial Independence of Malaya Party and failed, rather spectacularly, too.

No major leader (of any race) has since then endeavoured again. DAP is Chinese-based and led, Keadilan Anwarist-based and led, Parti Rakyat Malay socialist-based and led. Pas is multi-racial but Islamic-based.

The Bumiputeras can't have everything they want nor the other Malaysians everything that they demand, cherish and desire; otherwise there will be no end to their demands - all ingredients for racial trouble.

A middle ground was found and entrenched in the Constitution. However, I agree and sympathise with those who have found the implementation of the quota system leaves much to be desired.

What was claimed by the president of Cuepacs, Datuk Siva Subramaniam, that the Government's unity efforts had been "sabotaged" on behalf of an obscurantist agenda was not untrue. The Government, to be fair, must urgently, squarely, fairly and boldly tackle the escalating and dangerous trends before the obscurantists run amok!

The non-Malay participation in the civil service, the armed forces and the police must be increased. I am glad the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has now come out to state openly the urgent need to redress the worsening situation, as also the need to enlarge Malay participation in the private sector.

A top Umno leader said to me after the convention: "Others may zigzag, two different things in one breath, but the Malays are reasonable people - all they want is a quid pro quo, some exchange taking place. Otherwise we will not have a just, equitable and peaceful society ever."

I was a panellist during the convention and here is the longer version of what I said out there for the record.

"The topic for last Saturday morning's session on 'Overcoming Impediments to National Unity - Addressing the Roots, Managing Conflict and Regenerating Confidence' implies that there is indeed a paradox in our society, and that it needs to be addressed squarely and honestly.

"The dire consequence of British bias was that the indigenous Malays were sidelined and made to feel inadequate and inferior in their own homeland. Through the rural-based education afforded them their children could at most aspire to be school teachers, mata mata (policemen), soldiers and low-grade government servants in the colonial administration.

"In the early days of independent Malaysia, there was the practice of meritocracy in higher education. The headstart that the Chinese and Indians were given under British rule quickly entrenched their academic prowess in higher education, especially in mathematics and science-based disciplines like engineering and medicine. This enabled them to take on better-paid jobs in commerce and industry and to start their own businesses.

"Successive governments saw the need to uplift the educational and economic deprivation of the rural Malays and thus bridge the societal imbalance between the urban rich and the rural poor, the haves and have nots by giving them greater opportunities in education through a quota system for higher education as well as financial support. Through what was agreed upon as affirmative action to reconstruct Malaysian society, the 55 per cent (now 66 per cent) Malay population were eventually to have 30 per cent equity in the economy of their country.

"Affirmative action in America has become the strength of its democracy because of its stated aim of helping marginalised peoples and redressing imbalances in society. A predominantly white government helping educationally and economically deprived blacks, red Indians and other Americans of colour is perceived to be democracy at its best. In Malaysia, however, the same objective is being viewed as biased and partisan because, unfortunately, the predominantly Malay Government is helping to redress imbalances of their own people.

"We have emerged from an archaic, socially divisive feudal system and the more sinister separatist policies of a colonial government and have grown into a modern nation state built on democratic principles. This we have achieved with relatively little turmoil. For this we must again give credit to the people for having the sensitivity and good sense to be fair-minded in dealing with their heterogeneous heritage.

"The Malays have always been honest about their economic shortcomings. Unlike the Chinese migrants who brought with them deeply entrenched traditions of commercial activity and networking, the pre-Merdeka Malays were mainly farmers struggling to survive in a subsistence economy. No doubt at that time they envied the success of the Chinese and Indians who were given special boosts by a colonial government intent on reaping the profits of their economic activities and labour.

"The fact that the Chinese were demographically urban further enhanced their social standing as they were able to send their children to the best schools built by the British in the major towns and also by their own industry and philanthropy. While the rural Malays had to be content with the sekolah pondok and the poorer facilities of the sekolah Melayu in the rural areas, Chinese intelligentsia thrived in the urban schools producing

in turn professionally qualified citizens confident of their skills and secure in their ability to earn a good living.

"Behind them the Malays struggled to catch up. The best among the Malays are as good as the best Chinese and Indians driven to achieve economic success before and later through the affirmative action plan of the Government. The last four decades have seen the Malays being given the props to change from a rural agrarian community to a community of semi-professionals and professionals in the main sectors of the country's economy. Their commercial and entrepreneurial skills have improved substantially with education and exposure to business undertakings. The restructuring of Malay society is taking effect.

"But still, the scientifically determined figure of 30 per cent equity has not been reached. The general perception therefore is that despite government aid, the people lack the will for greater self-improvement to bring them at par with the Chinese in education, commerce and industry.

"I would like to suggest that it is unrealistic to expect the Malays as a people to make an about-turn when deep-rooted problems of rural and urban poverty and social deprivation are still widespread. It is my view that to implement outright meritocracy is unjust when the socio-economic status of the people is still unequal. The time must come, but not now or in the near future.

"I would like to suggest that we are perhaps ready - this is my personal opinion - to implement a modified and controlled system of meritocracy in which the higher education quota of 55 per cent Bumiputera, 45 per cent non-Bumiputera be revised to 50 per cent Bumiputera, 35 per cent non-Bumiputera and the remaining 15 per cent based on merit alone. This way we can get the best brains irrespective of their origins into universities and colleges. By implementing meritocracy stage by stage, the Malays will be better equipped with the competitive spirit and resilience necessary for modern-day survival."

Education, if properly channelled and administered, is the great leveller. We will be safe, continue to succeed, progress and prosper, but I submit only if we treat education with respect and responsibility because it remains the greatest inspiration.

Higher education, like primary education, must be made available to everybody. A Chinese proverb says: by nature all men are alike, but by education widely different.

The irony is, education is the area which is fast becoming the breeding ground for polarisation and racial imbalance in the subject choices of the different races, which in turn segregate them from secondary school right through to college and university.

Chinese students have been traditionally attracted to mathematics and the sciences because of their early exposure to these subjects and the marketability of a maths and science qualification in commerce and industry. Malay students are more inclined towards a liberal arts education which equips them for work as administrators and bureaucrats.

Thus, what seems to be the democratic exercise of choice has in fact given rise to the imbalance in educational achievement and, by extension, economic achievements of the races.

What was at first the natural separation or streaming of students according to subject preferences has grown to be a serious problem of racial and cultural polarisation in the universities and other institutions of higher learning, a polarisation which then extends into their professional and private life.

I would like to call upon the Government to review the subject prejudices and biases of the different races to bring about a more equitable spread of subject choices among the various races.

Perhaps one way of attracting the Chinese students to a liberal arts education is to increase the non-Bumiputera quota in these disciplines and to offer scholarships to deserving students. Universities could also make arts subjects compulsory in the science and technically-based programmes.

In this way universities will fulfil their societal obligation of producing well-rounded graduates who will be able to meet the various challenges of professional life.

More importantly, it will create a natural environment for students of all races to study together and involve themselves in the healthy intellectual discourse that the arts and humanities encourage.

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