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Activating the centre

THROUGHOUT the unconscionably contentious saga of the Government's move to re-introduce English in Malaysian education, the issue has been hijacked by a gaggle of extremists, chauvinists, jingoists and a generally motley crew of the sort of Malaysians who, frankly, may not have survived to make so much noise had it not been for the great Malaysian virtue of tolerance-to-a-fault.

If anything, the controversies kicked up over the teaching of English have revealed only the long-term damage caused by past education policies that erred on the side of inclusion, accommodation, and university places for all. A generation ago, it could not have been envisaged that education policy in this country - aimed at providing opportunities for every Malaysian child - would result in the exaltation of ineptitude, throwing up such narrow-mindedness and arrogance as has been demonstrated in the course of this issue.

If the push for English in education is an effort to bring out the best in us, the opposition to the move has revealed our worst. Silly, unfounded fears have been allowed to rise in dudgeon that would be almost comical if it wasn't so damaging. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself must have wondered what became of the Malaysian centre; the sensible, rational middle ground, among whom the concept of a well-rounded education could not possibly be anathema. Judging by the positions taken by some of the most vociferous communal politicians and "educationists", however, this country is little more than an agglomeration of bigots.

The evidence that this is manifestly not so is all around us, every moment of our lives. The education issue is therefore another instance of the wilding fringes pre-suming to take centre-stage and impose their sundry smallnesses on the whole. This usurpation has gone quite far enough. Dr Mahathir's plea directly to parents to think of their children's future, and to students to think about whether they'd like to grow up in the world or under coconut shells, is a clarion call to the Malaysian centre to shed itself of the dead weight of the wilfully immobile fringes of their communities.

No one will lose from the move to restore English in education. Not parents, not teachers, and certainly not the schoolchildren themselves. The only losers will be those who need to perpetuate narrow-mindedness, communalism and immobility in order to maintain their own political agendas. It's time for the Malaysian centre to shake off the mavericks whose narrow concerns have not changed since the time of Merdeka, and curb their disproportionate influence on national policy. With the Federation of Chinese Associations having now declared their support for consensus, all should be well in the New Year.