

30/09/2002

Clubbing for unity

THE lack of integration in tertiary institutions and certain occupations are signposts to a larger societal malaise: we are moving towards a polarised citizenry.

Although the universities' unity clubs might at this point only address the symptoms, they form a critical first step in wearing down the psychological barriers to racial integration - deliberate ignorance and the belief that racial identities can only be preserved by mutual apartness. The perceived race-based education system - a misconception that arises from a poor understanding of the New Economic Policy - has caused resentment among some. Somehow, the class-based affirmative action in the NEP's second prong has been drowned - deliberately or otherwise - by the focus on the racial component of its first prong.

Misconceptions aside, race-based preferences can divide racial groups whereas class-based preferences tend to unite them in a way that will enhance the fight for a fairer society. Which is why we feel it is time the Malays abandon the "crutch" of government assistance, as advocated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the last Umno general assembly. The move towards meritocracy in education is, for example, a good start.

Meritocracy can wither the chauvinistic defence of vernacular schools, which remains a fixation after 45 years of Independence. Constructive pedagogical ways for the learning of the mother tongue can be incorporated in the national curricula. But there are some who practise the politics of fear and whose desperate need for popular affection is at the expense of the national agenda. Look no further than the Vision School - the half-hearted support of some politicians initially gave it the look and feel of an obituary. It is time we stand up for Bangsa Malaysia in Vision 2020 - even if that means challenging the interests of some quarters.