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English schools may be the answer

Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Bringing back English schools, in a reversion to the British system that also allowed for separate schools in Malay, Chinese and Tamil, has been proposed as a solution to the current controversy over the teaching of English in schools.

New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad suggested this today as a way to satisfy all parties, as it would give more options to parents in choosing the medium of instruction for their children.

He stressed, however, that this suggestion was not meant for new schools, but only the old ones established by the British such as Victoria Institution and Penang Free School, among others, which were converted into national schools in the 1970s.

"Some of these established schools could be reconverted to teach again in English, with Bahasa Malaysia and Malaysian literature as compulsory subjects, and Islamic studies for Muslims. Non-Malays could opt for an additional subject in their mother tongue," Abdullah said.

He was speaking on education reform at the "Education for the K-Economy" forum organised by the Socio-Economic Development and Research Institute (Sedar), the newly launched Gerakan think-tank.

"(Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) went to an English school and he did not become less Malay because of it," Abdullah said, noting that other past and present government leaders were also educated in English schools.

While English was recognised as the main language in the K-economy, world politics, science and the media, Abdullah said its use was complicated in a multi-racial society such as Malaysia's.

"Simple truths can turn into complex issues, as the current debate on the use of English in Science and Mathematics shows.

"I am glad Dr Mahathir is firm on this, though he appears willing to continue listening to how best it can be implemented."

Abdullah said the current debate on English was being dominated by narrow, race-based interests.

"What about the silent majority? They are sensible, moderate, inclusive and are holding fast to the middle ground. They should speak up against the extremists.

"Our cultural chauvinists need to take a cold shower and sober up. We have enough constitutional protections to guard our multi-culturalism without their help," he said.

Malaysians, as citizens of a multi-racial country, should actually be multi-lingual, he said. "They should know four languages and be proud of that."

Another speaker, Universiti Malaya's Prof Jomo Kwame Sundaram, said the controversy over English had been politicised and called for wider debate.

"Opening up the debate will depoliticise it. Malaysia doesn't have a culture of open debate and issues are politicised unnecessarily. What we've been having is a one-sided debate in the media."

Open debate would also help foster critical thinking and analytical skills, which were essential in a K-economy, Jomo added.

While agreeing on the need to excel in English, he said there was no consensus that learning Science and Mathematics was more effective if taught in English.

He cited examples of countries that produced top scientists but did not introduce English in their education system until higher levels.

Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Chia Kwang Chye, the third speaker, agreed with Jomo.

"If we don't allow dissenting views, we are bluffing ourselves," he said.

Chia also welcomed Abdullah's suggestion to bring back English schools.

The forum was moderated by Sedar executive chairman Datuk Dr Michael Yeoh.