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The Royal Military College formula

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AT the 50th anniversary dinner of the Royal Military College (RMC) organised by the Old Putera Association (OPA) last July, which was graced by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the Raja Permaisuri Agong, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, when delivering the speech by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, re-called the success of the RMC formula and promised that there would be a return to it.

When I was president of the OPA, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was the guest of honour at the Gala Fund-Raising dinner in 1998, acknowledged in his speech the contribution of the products of RMC to national life and values, based on the principles of its foundation.

What is the formula and what are those principles?

The RMC, which was founded by Tun Sir Gerald Templer in 1952, was intended to prepare young Malaysians to serve to lead, in the ranks of the armed forces, the civil service, business and the professions, and politics. Many have done, and continue to do so, with distinction.

Where did they come from? They were chosen to join the RMC at upper secondary level from schools around the country based on objective intelligence and physical tests. The ratio of Malay to non-Malay students was 3:1.

So clearly there was an intention to give the Malays an opportunity to excel, founded on true capability and potential, but in a multi-racial environment where the non-Malays have at least equal capability and potential.

All this happened years before the NEP was even thought of, but the formula can be considered to be its precursor, more rigorously implemented to give opportunity to capable Malays in an environment where they have to compete and excel against the non-Malays without rancour and suspicion.

Indeed initially, in some instances, Malays from one part of the country got on better with the non-Malays than they did with Malays from some other part of the country. But in the socialisation process, there was a levelling off which even threw up some surprises.

I remember a Malay from the east coast whose abiding interest at RMC was the Persatuan Kebudayaan Kebangsaan and another Malay, not from the east coast, more inclined towards English elocution and drama, crossing swords in London after the race riots in May 1969; the former actually was rather anti - the Malay position, going for a socialist solution, and the latter, somewhat surprisingly, rooting for the Malay cause.

The top awards at RMC were always fiercely contested, as were the achievement of the best examination results. Many Malay students won the best allround student Commandant's Prize, which required excellent performance in both academic and extra-curricular activities. They could have won the Director of Studies award for academic achievement alone if they had not been considered for the higher Commandant's Prize.

I remember also the fierce competition in the playing fields for the Board of Governor's Cup for best sportsman.

The point is there was keen competition in a multi-racial environment where the best Malay students took on the best non-Malay, and frequently triumphed. There was no fear and no suspicion. There was keen but friendly competition. You became close friends for life, having started at different poles from different races and different parts of the country.

Very clearly, multi-racialism worked. Very clearly, giving capable

Malays good opportunity worked.

The other thing was the standard of English that was achieved at the end of the day. This was remarkable given the disparity in English language capability among the students when they first arrived at RMC, with the east coast students again being backward. (Well, their spoken Malay was also a little difficult to understand, but that's a different story).

I guess when you are in classes of 18, it is somewhat easier to achieve a turnaround in academic excellence; nevertheless this was the whole point of RMC - to achieve excellence in a certain environment by picking the best and brightest from among all the races, even if their levels of English were not the same in the first place.

I remember four non-Malay students from Penang Free School who rather swaggered about (you know, better developed part of the country, better spoken English), until some from Kuala Kerai and Kuala Lipis showed they could also tango in English.

The English language capability became a tool to acquire knowledge to achieve excellence which did not make the students from the east coast any the less Malay. It made them able to compete effectively with the non-Malays and, today, in the world.

Losing Direction

SOMEWHERE along the way, as parts of the political process got captured by religious bigotry and racial narrow-mindedness and language pseudonationalism, the winning RMC formula was discarded.

The RMC became 100 per cent Malay. The choice of joining the armed forces or going for higher studies was not given. And, of course, as happened across the nation, excellence in the standard of English was lost.

The college became average. The examination results were nothing to shout about. The performance on the playing field was no longer stirring. Everything was run down, from the physical to the intellectual, a classic reflection of loss of direction. Nobody was actually courageous enough to stand up against the drift of mediocrity and say, this is wrong, what was before worked and achieved excellence.

Indeed some former students of the era of excellence were also caught by this popular drift, becoming bigoted and narrow-minded themselves.

Thankfully, they are in a minority which, nevertheless, shows that even the products of the best institutions can fall prey to emotional appeals of the previous products.

In Malay, we say, when you lose direction, we say you Balik ke pangkal jalan. This, it would seem, is what is happening.

We need to emphasise and go back to multi-racialism, give Malays found to be good the best opportunity, revive the use and mastery of the English language to attain knowledge and excellence.

Those who do not see this as the formula for peace, prosperity and success are either stupid or bigoted, perhaps both.