

31/08/2002

Let's reclaim our imagination

WE'RE a society given to rituals. Wave a flag (even so, flag-flying should be a matter of course and not begged by the Government), wear a smile - that's what we do every Merdeka Day, which has become a public holiday like any other. But beyond that?

What have you, citizens of Malaysia, in mind for the nation's 45th birthday or is it, with apologies to John F. Kennedy, "ask not what you can do for the country, but what the country can do for you"?

Sorry for the sarcasm. But generally, we're a society not naturally inclined to introspection. A certain ad-hocism has defined the collective mentality of a people accustomed to letting events shape our destiny and history slip into irrelevance, if not oblivion. Conservatism? Nay, it is intellectual and moral laziness.

Behold, the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out. But we no longer do that; we retire in our cocoon. The not-in-my-backyard and isn't-that-the-Government's-duty mentality is our ethos. We have become self-indulgent, self-serving and self-complacent. When things go wrong, we blame the system. But we conveniently forget that we are all part of the system, in smaller or larger measure.

We have lost our capacity for feeling a sense of moral concern over issues in the public domain. We let our hearts harden to the pleas from our brethren for help: little liver patient Sofea Qhairunnisa Ali who passed away on Tuesday; and there's more of these tiny, needy citizens profiled in the media - bet you have forgotten their names.

Society is struck by the "diminution phenomenon". The sense of public duty and public accountability, the role of the middle class as a bulwark against religious radicalism and racial intolerance, the influence of the public intellectuals, the integrity of men in both public and religious office and respect for our elders have all diminished. Not your fault, you said. But surely, the men who diminish them and we, the silent spectators, who allow them to desecrate the things we hold dear should both be blamed.

We cling to archaic notions as seen in the chauvinistic insistence that language is a sacred zone over which to declare a nation's sovereignty or an ethnic group's identity, never mind that the tide of globalisation engulfing the world has made mastery of English a do-or-die necessity. We forget that change is an imperative for national survival and dynamism.

Here lies the root of our post-independence misery: Not in our inability to think but in our refusal to surrender ideas of the old and accept change. How long must we rely on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to churn out ideas for the nation's growth? Historically, changes in society are always preceded by a flow of ideas. The collective stream of ideas breaks the mould and becomes a catalyst of change towards a greater us, a greater nation.

What gives? We reckon the people's moral universe has undergone a change, which is what enables religious and racial fascism to get away with their politics of hate. By this, we do not mean that people should be preoccupied with questions of morality but a degree of confusion, uncertainty and fuzziness has gotten into the moral conceptions of the majority.

Moral equilibrium - the socially and widely prevalent notions of right and wrong that people usually hold with clarity and certainty - is fast disappearing at the societal level. There is moral apathy and moral

confusion (one example: God is a gangster). And so we shut our eyes, ears and mouth when, in reality, our engagement with society is desperately needed. So what will it be: Them or us; bigots or moderates? Vocal minority or silent majority? The rejection of new ideas or the harmonisation of the new and old? Do we emerge from our cobwebbed sleep or do we remain locked in mediocrity's embrace?

On the 45th year of our Independence, we must reclaim for ourselves the once-colonised freedom of imagination and freedom of thinking from the new figures of colonialists, including the religio-politico radicals and racial bigots. Dr Mahathir, in his Merdeka Day speech, had to remind us once again of the subtle and insidious methods of neo-colonialism.

Let us rekindle the hope that suffused the people, strengthen the bonds of kinship among all races and revive the determination that drove our founding fathers to Independence: Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!