

13/11/2002

National service alone is not enough

Wan Ahmad Shihab Ismail

THE idea of national service, or at least a modified version of it, is a timely one. The general view seems to be that it is high time Malaysian youths were exposed to specific training programmes that not only instil responsibility and discipline, but also, and perhaps more importantly, encourage a stronger sense of patriotism.

From the statements of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other leaders, it seems that the plan is not for a run-of-the-mill stint with the military or armed forces, or even the optional kind where youth can choose between military training and community service.

Rather, a concept is being sought that would be suitable to multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia. Ultimately, the programme will be aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, a sense of duty and responsibility to the country.

For a programme intended to last less than a year such an objective is a tall order if it is independent of "auxiliary" measures that would ensure its success.

In other words, it would be unrealistic simply to presume that once our version of national service is implemented, the objectives will be automatically achieved and that all those who enter it will emerge as perfectly patriotic individuals. Patriotism cannot be mass-produced by a short-term programme like the national service all by itself. It is a virtue, and like all virtues must come from the heart.

Therefore, apart from national service, there must be a concerted effort by all parties to ensure our children and youth learn the virtues of patriotism from a very early age. By the time a youth enrolls in national service, it becomes more of a finishing touch in bringing about the right attitude in them.

In this regard, parents and teachers play a pivotal role; the former providing informal preparation, the latter a more formal one. As far as parents are concerned, I think it's most important that they start early.

The Ministry of Education, meanwhile, should adopt suitable modifications to the current syllabus. This will ensure that what is being taught in schools, particularly matters concerning civic consciousness and national pride, will be in tandem with the training provided during national service. Only with this early preparation at home and in schools can it be conceivably said that the national service that is being planned will achieve its ultimate objective.

Finally, it must be stressed that all of this will need effort and dedication. We all have our roles to play and we must ensure that we play