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One step forward ...

GO easy on the celebrations, Chinese educationists. The MCA's decision not to support the Government's initiative on English in education may have been a victory for the Dong Jiao Zhong and the conservative rural support base of the Barisan Nasional's second-largest partner, but it is now up to those recalcitrant quarters to show the rest of us how this decision is not a defeat for the country, a setback to the reform of education policy, and a blow to the BN system of consociation for the common good.

Yet, the clarity of hindsight now suggests that a consensus of sorts indeed had been emerging over the past several months of emotional toing and froing on this issue. Gerakan's declaration of opposition to the proposal two months ago stirred a hornet's nest of rebuke, which party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik shrugged off as he has all else in the course of his long and durable political career. It seems now, however, that Dr Lim drew his resolve from knowing he was speaking for more than himself and Gerakan after his party's central committee conclave last August 17.

Very well, the legitimate representatives of the Malaysian Chinese in the Government have spoken. They are against the use of English as a medium of instruction in Chinese schools. If English is to be reintroduced at all in the teaching of Science and Mathematics, they would wish to see it done only in secondary schools. They may, however, accept the introduction of "terminology" and "bilingual texts" in certain circumstances in primary schools. In a word, they just said "no" to the best hope the national education system has emerged with in decades to stop the slide, raise the bar, and take on the world.

Those quarters of the nation that truly wish to see English-language education return to reality in Malaysia might grasp at a couple of straws. MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik prefaced his party's rejection with the remark that he was in favour of promoting English proficiency among students. (As well he might - it didn't undermine his own grounding at Taiping's venerable King Edward VII and the Royal Military College in Sungei Besi.) With his subsequent torpedoing of the English proposal, however, perhaps he meant banners and posters.

The MCA's decision is most regrettable, however, in that it flies in the face of what the public already knows is the overall national sentiment on the issue. The repeated assurances of the proposal's initiator and principal champion, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, that the spirit of the initiative in no way impinges on vernacular education or anyone's cultural integrity have been set aside. The Oct 9 gathering at Bukit Jalil of 500 cultural associations and business guilds in support of the move, led by the Federation of Chinese Guilds and Associations, was for all its razzle-dazzle a heartfelt indication that not all those for whom the MCA speaks would agree with the uncompromising stand the party has now taken.

The MCA's BN associates have the weekend to mull over how to field their Number Two partner's decision at next Tuesday's supreme council meeting. We hope the thinking is deep, insightful, and sensitive to the fact that the MCA is struggling to speak for itself in these faction-riddled days. Perhaps huddling with the BN's other Chinese-based parties grants the MCA wider options in managing its internal divisions. If so, this is a high-stakes way to play the game of political survival. The MCA's tradition of

going along with the main party in the BN had not been forged by a habit of appeasement. Its history shows how dearly it paid for every leap it took from the moderate centre.