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PM deserves better from Chinese-based parties

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AS an English-educated Chinese who took pride in a certain mastery of a single Chinese language subject in primary school (but who is ashamed and utterly remorseful to admit a near-complete loss of Chinese language literacy), I have resisted any comment on the raging controversy over the teaching in English of Science and Mathematics in Chinese schools thus far.

It is simply a no-win argument whichever side one is coming from. The unfortunate thing is it doesn't seem likely to blow away anytime soon. The Government has finally spoken.

Usually that signals the end of debate. Why does this one look like it still has some life left in it?

If there is a fault that the Chinese can be identified with, it is the "fault" of being eminently pragmatic people. To the extent that they are not infrequently labelled as without any scruples or principles.

Not if you were to judge by the ferocity and tenacity of the opposition to this newly laid-down education policy. An opposition which has put the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party and the Sabah Progressive Party together with the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Gerakan so uncomfortably on the defensive.

This is a political hot potato of the first order and anyone wondering why it has become so - as some Chinese educationists do - are being completely disingenuous.

I suspect the opposition stems mostly from the fact the groups opposing may actually have a point - the new policy poses a threat to the long-term existence of Chinese schools though not their actual right to exist.

These groups have consistency - they held on to the constitutionally-sanctioned rights to mother-tongue education when the national medium was Bahasa Malaysia and remain true when the Government decided to switch back to English.

It is a principled line of opposition which the Government probably had not anticipated. It ought to have been expected, based on the precedent of the lingering emotional bad taste some older Singaporean Chinese surprisingly still feel against their own Government, for something similar - only more abrupt - that occurred in the island republic some decades earlier.

Over here and now, a Malay-dominated Government in a Malay-majority Malaysia has to tread carefully over particular Chinese sensitivities which the Chinese-led Government of overwhelmingly Chinese Singapore never had to worry too much about.

In Singapore's case, the national interest held unambiguous and relatively uncomplicated sway over issues as potentially explosive as language and education.

In our case, the Malaysian Government would like to make a case for the national interest similarly holding uncontested sway but is inevitably hindered by our own complex racial equation into having to make do with more nuanced approaches and policies.

Only masterful statesmen of the calibre of a Dr Mahathir, or a Lee Kuan Yew, the former Singapore Prime Minister, would stand any chance of pulling off such a robust defence of their respective country's long-term national interests in the face of determined and emotion-laden opposition.

In Malaysia's case, the Prime Minister deserves a lot better than the

weak-kneed and cool response, however understandable, from the Chinese-based parties in the Barisan Nasional.

These parties have to take a bold political gamble that their electoral constituencies are much more than the sum of all their most powerful interest groups.

They have to have the courage to lead the charge in persuading their supporters that national interest takes precedence over all else, even things as emotive as constitutional rights over language. They have to prove more than equal to the political Opposition's likely line of attack and expose any temptation to reap unfair political hay by portraying this as the Government seeking to erode the community's rights when all it is trying to do is to further enhance the future rights of all Malaysians.

The issue needs to be framed in such a way that the Chinese community in Malaysia is left in no doubt that it cannot have its cake and eat it, too. Malaysians collectively have arrived at a critical juncture in their history where their collective rights can be expanded only if all the different communities agree to curb their narrow sectoral rights.

I doubt that the Chinese in today's Singapore feel any less Chinese from having their "rights" to Chinese education so suddenly taken away or in any way disadvantaged by being forcibly taught in English rather than Chinese.

In any case, if losing some of our "Chineseness" is the price to pay for advancing the cause of "Malaysianness", I suspect the vast majority of pragmatic Malaysian Chinese will more than gladly pay.