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Sports deserve own ministry

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CHANGE, inventors and revolutionists keep reminding those who languish in comfort zones, is a necessity. And because it's necessary, therefore change is inevitable.

But being the mortals that we are, we often tend to question the motives of these advocates of change, with a deep sense of paranoia that often borders on distrust.

The campaign on sports to be accorded its own ministry - not attached to any other portfolio like its current partner, Youth - had raised questions on whether it's an attack on Sports (and Youth) Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

On the contrary.

Given the constraints, Hishammuddin is doing a fine job. But he can do a lot better if he has to serve just one master. Just like it's humanly impossible for a mere man to be equally attentive and amorous to all his spouses in a polygamus relationship, it's going to be just as inimical for any Minister who has to serve and please two equally demanding and challenging portfolios.

For Hishammudin, the Umno Youth Chief, it would be obvious which bed he would choose to sleep in more. Youth has, and will always command that seemingly unfair advantage.

But having said that, it wouldn't be Hishammuddin's fault if he has chosen to expend more of his energy on Youth, and tried to make a sport of it. Afterall that is his political turf, and he is expected to defend it any which way he can.

However, the niggling question that seems to keep pounding in our heads like a terrible migraine, is whether sports should serve the political agenda?

In defence of the current set-up, there were many who had argued that sports and youth are inseparable. It was argued that they play complementary roles, so splitting them up would be disastrous. Acting president of the SRA of Malaysia, Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir had opined that sports is a crucial component in uniting youths.

I won't argue with that. Sport truly transcends all barriers, it is indeed an unifying force. But in the Malaysian concept, we have sport in two contrasting forms. One as a unifying factor, and the other in a competitive form, even a business.

But sport - in its concept as a unifying factor - can still be integrated in youth programmes even after the split. The Rakan Muda programme, which serves that purpose with great efficiency, can be a part of the Youth Ministry.

But sport in its competitive form primed to thrust the nation onto the podium of world and Asian excellence, would stand a better chance of fulfilling its objectives, if it was accorded its own Ministry.

Like Olympic Council of Malaysia secretary, Datuk Sieh Kok Chi said, not all youths are into sports. In fact only about three in 10 youths are into competitive sport. For these youths, sport is not as much a unifying factor as it is a stage to acquire personal glory and pride for the nation.

And just as there is a strong need to unify youths through the Rakan Muda programme, there is just as compelling a need to provide unswerving attention to those youths seeking such glory for King and country.

There were some who had also said that splitting portfolios would not help achieve excellence if there wasn't a right administrative structure in place, or if the Minister wasn't the right man for the job.

Hishammuddin is the right man for the job, but even he wouldn't be able to fulfill all the demands of both Youth and Sports. He is already caught in the middle, having to deal with two relatively demanding protagonists who have criticised him for not paying enough attention to the other.

But can you blame the man for it?

True, Youth, given what ails it today, needs that undivided attention.

And so does sport, given the way it has evolved globally. It has evolved since the days of that legendary Frenchman Pierre De Coubertin who advocated that sport was about participation, into what it is today - about winning and affluence.

If Malaysia doesn't fare well in multi-sport events like the Asian Games, the Minister is held responsible for it. If a team fails, the coach or manager is sacked. But if everyone does well, they are handsomely rewarded. And if you are a global star, product manufacturers queue up with open cheques to sign you on.

If sport was just about participation, our failures wouldn't have been discussed in the Cabinet.

Which is why eventually we have to decide how we want to perceive sport. If what we want is to be among the best in the world, then we have to follow the ways of the best. We have to give sport its due respect and recognition.

Give sport a fighting chance, accord it its own ministry.