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# The more things change, the more they stay the same

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IT was October 1985, and this country was having another of its vintage years. The Mahathir Administration had entered its fifth year. The Penang Bridge was newly completed, as was the Putra World Trade Centre.

The Proton Saga had purred onto Malaysian roads. Meanwhile in the global commodity markets, prices had begun to slide towards what would be the following year's recession.

All business as unusual for the newly Incorporated Malaysia, Looking East, Buying British Last and generally working itself into a lather of new prospects both good and ill.

Then, out of local academia came this startling assertion: "Only five to 10 per cent of the population really need to know English. Politicians, community leaders, government officers and undergraduates. Why should the remaining 90 per cent be made to master English when it is not necessary?" From where this writer was sitting at the time (in the leader writers' room of the NST's old building) that was a red flag to a bull. I tore into the subject and the issuer of that statement, a local university professor.

Was she suggesting, I asked in my column, that our future as a nation was independent of the world? Did we no longer need Malaysians who could communicate with other nations through the media, diplomacy or face-to-face?

If it were true that only five to 10 per cent of the population needed English, I ventured, it would be the five to 10 per cent that actually ran the country. Acknowledging that this elite did indeed include politicians and government officers, I went further to mention teachers, businessmen, bankers, doctors, scientists, bureaucrats, technocrats and, oh yes, journalists.

This was not about neo-colonialism, nationalism or culture, I railed. This was about education, "which," I wrote, "ranks far above all three as a determinant of this nation's future."

That riled the professor even more, as you might imagine. She sent me a note saying she'd been misquoted, decrying my bias and warning of the neglect afflicting the national language, Malay. That, of course, was so much more grist for another column. Malay was suffering from abuse, I observed, and English from disuse. "Don't simply shoot from the lip and expect people to roll over and play dead," I wrote.

And there we left it, as another sprinkling of broken glass along the rumbustious road of Malaysian life and letters.

The years passed. Life went on. Issues rose and fell. Elections came and went. I left the NST to travel the world. More years passed. I came home and wrote a book. Even more years passed. I rejoined the NST.

And here she is again! Nearly 17 years after our briefly spectacular dingdong in these pages, the very same academic popped up again at another university seminar a couple of weeks ago to condemn the Government's move to promote English in schools, and to restate her old assertion - with one significant amendment. Now, she says, less than five per cent of Malaysians need to possess a good command of English.

She has also modified her exclusion list. In an interesting shift of emphasis, the only Malaysians who need to speak English are no longer "politicians, community leaders, government servants and undergraduates" but "diplomats, businessmen and paper presenters." (By which I'm not sure

she means us.)

The Government's current initiative to restore English in education seems to be generating a rare and paradoxical unity of parochialists, as Chinese and Indian educationists join their Malay counterparts in attempting to forestall this latest effort to give everyone's kids a leg up into the real world. But no, it seems there are some who fear that our bases of identity are so threatened and fragile that educating people risks cultural collapse.

In a horrid historical irony, this is pretty much what Frank Swettenham feared a century ago, when he opposed educating the Malays. Swettenham did not believe any good would come of giving the natives ideas above their station, as had happened to such disastrous effect in India. Far better to keep them as ignorant, tractable and happy as they were, with perhaps the rudiments of literacy and numeracy to help the smarter of them be of some household use.

Who knows? He might have been right. For better or worse, however, nobody important at the time agreed with him. The rest is history.

A history, incidentally, that led to Independence, social development, economic dynamism, political stability, geopolitical relevance, regional leadership and the sort of academic expansion that has provided long and rewarding careers for some obviously disadvantaged people.

This is the saddest and most pernicious failing of preferential policies: the cosseting of the limited, ignorant and uncompetitive as they rise to positions of authority and influence, which they then use to disengage and alienate those not as limited, ignorant and uncompetitive as themselves.

The better part of a generation has passed since the decline of English usage in this country was first noted with alarm. Perhaps this academic and those who share her feelings might be credited with having stymied the effort to arrest that decline 17 years ago. Perhaps they deserve some kind of acknowledgement for the standards of language - all languages, for language is about mind, not tongue - being even lower now than they were then.

Back then, I closed out my riposte to the professor's ideas by averring: "What you have said in maintaining that only five to 10 per cent of this nation needs English is that 90-95 per cent of this nation does not need to be so educated. You call that progress?"

Seventeen years and eight million more Malaysians later, the answer stares us in the face. Again.