

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER INAUGURATING THE SEMINAR ORGANISED BY THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA, KUALA LUMPUR ON 29TH JANUARY, 1973

Prof. Ungku Aziz—Vice Chancellor University of Malaya;
Distinguished scholars, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a real pleasure for me to be here this morning to declare open your Seminar. Indeed, it is a rare occasion that we have gathered here in Kuala Lumpur so many distinguished scholars from so friendly countries far and near. I heartily share the sentiments expressed by the Chairman that in choosing Kuala Lumpur as the venue for this Seminar, your Association—The International Association of Universities—has accorded Malaysia a single honour, and in particular this University of Malaya. I have no doubt that everything possible is being done to make your brief stay in our Capital city both a pleasant and memorable.

I am particularly happy in that this Seminar has given an opportunity to our newly established institutions of higher learning, namely the Universiti Kebangsaan, Universiti Pertanian and the Institute Teknologi Kebangsaan, to take part in your deliberations side by side with the older established institutions such as the Moscow State University as well as the more recent ones like the Universite Nationale du Zaïre. I am confident that you and all will benefit tremendously from the exchange of ideas and experiences in your deliberations during the next few days.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Having been at one time Minister of Education and now as Chancellor of the University Kebangsaan of Malaysia, I have always maintained an abiding interest in higher education. I am therefore very keenly interested in the theme of your Seminar—The Social Responsibility of the University in Asian countries, Obligations and Opportunities—which I think is very appropriate in the context of our endeavour to create a new social order and build a better world for mankind.

As I see it, the most universal characteristic of the past decade has been the thrust of change and rapid progress in the field of higher learning, both among the developed as well as the developing nations. While the causes and consequences of the change may have differed from one country to another, the fact remains that very few have escaped the compelling circumstances which underline the need for change in one form or another.

There are, admittedly, divergent views as to the true role of the University and its responsibility to the society which it is meant to serve. I am reminded of the debate which was widely publicised in the United States some years ago, where on the one hand it was argued that as a result of its deep involvement with the problems of society, the University has been diverted from its primary role of teaching. On the other hand, it was equally strongly argued that the University must not only transmit knowledge but must at the same time apply that knowledge to urgent social problems.

I am personally inclined to the second viewpoint since many of us, particularly in developing countries whether in Asia or elsewhere, are well aware of the need for our universities to undertake special obligations for economic, social and even political changes. As we know, the University has within it the climate and around it the prestige that gives it special leverage in confronting social problems. In the process of its growth, the University would have obtained, both from indigenous sources and outside, substantial reservoir of the particular kind of human talent required for dealing with the problems of society as distinguished from other fields. Other than the government itself, no other institution would focus attention and energy on the design of national educational programme or the pressing demand of maintaining our ecological balance or on the formulation of foreign policy. In short, the University must necessarily have the body of men and women who are concerned with and are competent to give informed and intelligent views on such problems.

However, what is of immediate interest to me or any leader of government is that the young men and women who are to implement the plans for development will in the main have to come from the University—i.e. from our own universities. They need to be prepared adequately and realistically for the responsibilities which lie ahead of them after leaving the portals of learning. That phase of their lives is crucial and indeed the kind of product

that they turn out to be would depend a great deal on their ability to inculcate in them the discipline of objectivity nurtured by the University besides the benefit they can obtain from the unexhaustible reservoir of learning and research.

I am happy to say that our Universities have admirably adjusted their role to meet the nation's demand in terms of preparing and providing educated and trained manpower. In order to provide the realistic training, it is important that the University should come out of the artificial ivory tower which is characteristic of the colonial regime. Today many of our Asian universities are giving the students and the staff direct experience of social action and development work as part of the normal teaching process.

In the final analysis, the University can only be true to itself by its readiness to accept its burden of responsibility as determined by the society which supports it. The knowledge available at its command or within its reach can be mobilised in the national effort to achieve stable economic growth, to research into the social problems of our cities or into the causes of racial conflict. In other words, the University must inevitably be drawn into social issues, or to put it aptly—become one of the active shapers of society.

Thus, during the present phase of our national development and for some time to come, the nation necessarily expects our universities to accept increasing responsibility for moving ideas along the road to action, to develop the knowledge needed, and to apply this useful knowledge towards achieving our national objectives i.e. creating a new social order when our people will enjoy a life of peace, prosperity and happiness.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would also like to touch briefly on one of the three topics which will demand the focus of your attention during the next few days. While I do not wish to anticipate the trend of your deliberations, I would like nonetheless to offer some views on the subject.

Specifically, on the question of language and national identity, since achieving independence some fifteen years ago, we have pledged ourselves to put the national language—Bahasa Malaysia—in its rightful place as the sole official language of the nation.

As we all know, since ancient times, this region was the focal point for at least three languages with roots in great civilizations of the past namely Sanskrit, Chinese and Arabic. In later years, with the advent of Europeans into the Asian scene, European languages, such as English, left a lasting influence on our indigenous language.

Today we accept the fact that Malay is the national and sole official language of the country, while we permit the use of Chinese and Tamil languages for unofficial purposes. This is clearly stipulated in our Constitution and in the Rukunegara which is our national guiding principles.

As for English, we regard it as our link-language that will enable our people to have direct access to the vast reservoir of accumulated knowledge available today. It is true that there are several other great languages which can open the doors to modern science and technology, but for our present needs, we consider it sufficient for a limited number of scholars, technologists and administrators to be conversant in them.

It also might interest you to know that Bahasa Malaysia—our national language—is in the process of being scientifically developed so that by the middle-eighties, it will be the medium of instruction in our national education system from primary to post-graduate level. Meanwhile, it will play its important role in providing the stimulus to national unity and the basis for moulding our national identity.

Another significant development in this area is the linguistic unity that has taken place following the agreement between ourselves and Indonesia on a common spelling system and co-ordinated development of one language which will serve our 120 million people. In due time, the unified language will contribute to stability and progress of this region.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again I wish to say how happy I am at the opportunity of being with you this morning and to share some thoughts on the issues before us. On behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia, I wish to thank the International Association of Universities for having organized this Seminar in collaboration with the University of Malaya.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare open this Seminar and to wish all of you success in your deliberations.