

**Our flag still a bargain at RM5.50**  
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**Tunku Abdul Aziz**

IN the early 1970s, I took part in a memorable public discussion in Penang on the future direction of Malaysian education.

The late Geoff Leembruggen, then general manager of Malaysian Industrial Development Finance Bhd (MIDF), chaired the meeting.

When it was my turn to speak as a member of the panel of four, I questioned the wisdom of creating special residential institutions of higher education, such as Mara colleges, exclusively for the Malays.

To me, the very idea of a special race-based institution smacked of an educational ghetto where Malay students would live and study in splendid isolation and be cut off from the rest of the Malaysian student community.

I went further. I said that while I understood the political and social imperatives, and the need to increase Malay tertiary student numbers rapidly, I wondered if that was the right way of going about creating a united Malaysia of the future.

I was also concerned at the prospect of Malay students being denied an opportunity to take on "all comers" intellectually. I thought it would be a pity to isolate the Malays and protect them from open competition.

I did not believe that Malays needed crutches if they were given sensible opportunities to bring themselves up to scratch.

It would be all too easy to develop a false sense of one's own intellectual prowess when one was competing in a closed, restricted educational environment.

Worst of all, to be shut off from engaging socially with non-Malay students was in itself a serious disadvantage for anyone growing up in a multi-racial country.

The reaction of some in the audience to my innocuous remarks took me completely by surprise. One man, in particular, went completely wild, eyes bulging.

I remain convinced to this day that if I had been within striking distance, he would have attacked me physically. "You are anti-national," he thundered.

I would not have minded if he had called me anything else. I was on my feet like a shot, to take him on for his gratuitous comment, when I felt a sudden tug on my right elbow and heard Geoff say in a firm and calm voice, "Don't go down to his level!" I agreed with Geoff and let it ride.

I am reminded of this unpleasant incident as we step back collectively to reflect upon the passage of half a century during which we have been our own masters, determining the destiny of our country.

There is no question that we have done rather well on many fronts to change the face of our country; outstanding achievements by any measure.

On the debit side, I fear that we have made some policy decisions on education which have been detrimental to national unity and the integration process.

Our policy should not only have been to provide the best education for all of our boys and girls regardless of race but also, more importantly, to have prepared them to think as Malaysians and to contribute to the future development of their country with pride and commitment.

On this score, I am afraid, we have failed. I say this because the non-Malays continue to feel that they are being discriminated against as far as educational opportunities are concerned.

We have made mistakes and we have to unmake them. We cannot allow ourselves to be continually burdened by the baggage of history, a sense of guilt and regret as we enter the next phase of our national life.

We must finish any unfinished business so that we will be free to chart a new course that reflects the larger national interests — rather than selfish, narrow, sectional interests.

The sectarian instincts or emotional impulses to retain the so-called special character of "Chinese-ness", "Malay-ness" or "Indian-ness" must be moderated, if not altogether subordinated, to the demands and imperatives of our country that is still in search of a distinctive "all-Malaysian" identity.

We cannot aspire to be a strong, united Malaysia without each community giving something up and making some small sacrifices along the way.

I believe with all my heart that we must accept diversity as the bedrock of our nation. We have little or no choice in the matter because we are, in a very real sense, a "tangle of races".

For better or for worse, as in a marriage, we have to find accommodation. It is a matter of survival.

Let us make a conscious effort to look for similarities that bind us rather than expending our energies unearthing differences, often of no great consequence, that separate us as people.

Without unity, diversity is merely a physical state or condition in demographic terms.

In a society such as ours, national unity must not be allowed to remain forever in the realm or level of abstractions or ideas, but managed and nurtured carefully to make it not merely a fact but a way of Malaysian life.

It will not be easy and it will take time, but the time to put policies in place that will help bring about the necessary change is now.

Some argue that we have wasted the last 50 years. No, we have not. We have been trying to find the best solutions to our many problems that always accompany the birth of a nation.

The birth itself was relatively easy because just as we were fortunate to have as the principal "midwife of the nation", Tunku Abdul Rahman, whom the colonial government

trusted and believed they could do business with. We were equally blessed in the wisdom, goodwill, loyalty and integrity of the other people who supported the Tunku throughout his crucially important constitutional negotiations in London, including the Malayan Chinese and Indian leaders.

But it saddens me to notice that 50 years on, there are many Malaysians who openly say that they have no reason to rejoice.

I will be the first to admit that flying the Malaysian flag does not necessarily signify your patriotism for your country of birth.

It does, however, show your neighbours and friends that you are with them in celebrating a joyous national occasion.

While the prices of many items have risen in the last few years, a well made 6x3 flag of fine synthetic material in fast colours retails at only RM5.50. Need I say more?

And, finally, as I wish all New Straits Times readers a Happy 50th anniversary of Merdeka, let me remind all Malaysians that they should learn to differentiate between their motherland and the government.

We sometimes feel justifiably unhappy with certain official policies, but we should not punish our mother for the sins of our father.

In every society we will find inequalities, injustices, distortions and poverty, and Malaysia is no different.

At least in our country, we enjoy peace and harmony. And we do have a functioning government that has the general welfare of the citizens at heart. Let us fly the flag with pride and joy in our hearts. Merdeka!

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