

MCA shouldn't wallow in the past
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Perhaps I have been away from malaysiakini too long but the appearance of the MCA as a subject of discussion in the Letter to the Editor page provides a meaningful platform from which to learn from history.

Lovely Jin is correct to see the MCA's early roots in welfare work. But it must be impressed upon the public that back then the level of political awareness amongst the Chinese was low, with unity, either cultural or educational, never at level with the Malays. This was because the community had always been heterogeneous, divided along the lines of dialect, profession and educational orientation, differences which created different and competing political causes.

Tan Cheng Lock was quite unusual because he made the transition from elite politics in the Legislative Council to popular politics of the postwar era. This at the time when the majority of the politically aware amongst the better educated Chinese were socialists.

But the founder of the MCA had a different vision, one which gave the Chinese a Malayan homeland. Today, some 50 years later, a Chinese Malaysian community, still largely composed of different needs, has emerged.

Our contemporary situation is very interesting for a number of reasons but I will touch on only one. The majority of the Chinese in this country live in urban centres, are linked to a larger global culture and have a relatively higher income levels than their rural counterparts. Naturally, their needs are quite different from Malaysians of different classes and beliefs.

The dilemma of the MCA is based on its claim to represent all types and classes of Chinese in Malaysia. It is often challenged to prove its secular credentials in a country where religion is becoming an important defining influence.

But because the party has accepted the BN structure of politics - reduced from being an almost equal partner at Merdeka to being a big party under a very large umbrella - the party is hard-pressed to find new ways of asserting its ideals in national politics.

However, the strength of the MCA lies less with its ethnic-championing ideals but with the general attitude of the Chinese, who only want to be left alone to manage their lives in their own ways. But the pressures of globalisation, where the electronics and manufacturing industries are quickly leaving our shores, has hit the urban Chinese hardest.

The MCA, if it is to remain relevant in the cities, will have to once again become a champion of the welfare of this community. But with a different perspective, by being inclusive of other similar Malaysians who now need to be assured that their children's education and degrees will be recognised worldwide.

The urban Chinese community in Malaysia is actually quite heterogeneous and any attempt to lump them all together under some ideological umbrella of ethnic chauvinism is bound to fail in a globalising world. What model of evolution we need is provided by the Peranakan Chinese community of yore.

The first urban Chinese were at the forefront of technological change a hundred years ago and flourished because they adapted to those changes. Their hybrid identities made them open societies.

It is important to resist the seduction of diaspora, of belonging to an international Chinese platform for whilst it maybe good to have international links, one often finds the similarities between Chinese people the world over more imagined than real.

Back to the MCA. In the light of these global trends, it is opportune for the present-day Malaysian leadership to re-invent itself and change Malaysian politics by evolving different patterns of operating. Perhaps the MCA can lead the way by giving parity to its women members, simply because women are now equal to men and will outstrip their brothers in education.

MCA's urban constituents need to feel to be on the cutting-edge and be reassured that the party leadership understands their needs. Thus, it is important that the MCA creates policies with an eye to the future and its feet firmly in present ground. Looking back is important but staying there is detrimental.

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