

Fear is what divides us

Nearly 50 years after independence, national integration is a concept that is still being debated. If schoolchildren aren't integrated, teachers are blamed. Who is responsible for integration? Two educationists, former education director-general Tan Sri Murad Mohammed Noor and National Union of the Teaching Profession secretary-general Loke Yim Peng, share their thoughts with ANIZA DAMIS

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TAN SRI MURAD MOHAMMED NOOR

Q: Why is there a divide among the races in schools?

A: Today, everybody associates the language medium with the pupils' race. But this only happens in primary school. When you go to secondary school, everybody goes to a Malay-type school.

Why this six-year gap at the beginning?

Suddenly, when they go to university, there is no separation. In the workplace, there is no separation. The separation is only at the start. In the end, children must not operate as a single race.

Otherwise, suddenly at the age of 18 or 19, they (Malays) meet the Chinese. They see a lot of differences.

But, if they are so used to it from 6, the differences are not so marked.

Q: Does this mean we should not have vernacular schools?

A: I don't believe in the concept of doing away with vernacular schools — that's radical. It won't change things. In fact, it would do more harm than good.

What we should do, and I believe what the prime minister is trying to do, is "*memperkasakan sekolah kebangsaan*".

"*Memperkasakan*" means making national schools the preferred school for all.

Q: But some say national schools are becoming more Malay, and, in some instances, even non-Malay girls are required to wear baju kurung?

A: That is not what divides us. What makes non-Malays fear going to a Malay school, especially in the rural areas, is the fear of "*masuk Melayu*" (becoming a Malay and by virtue of that, a Muslim).

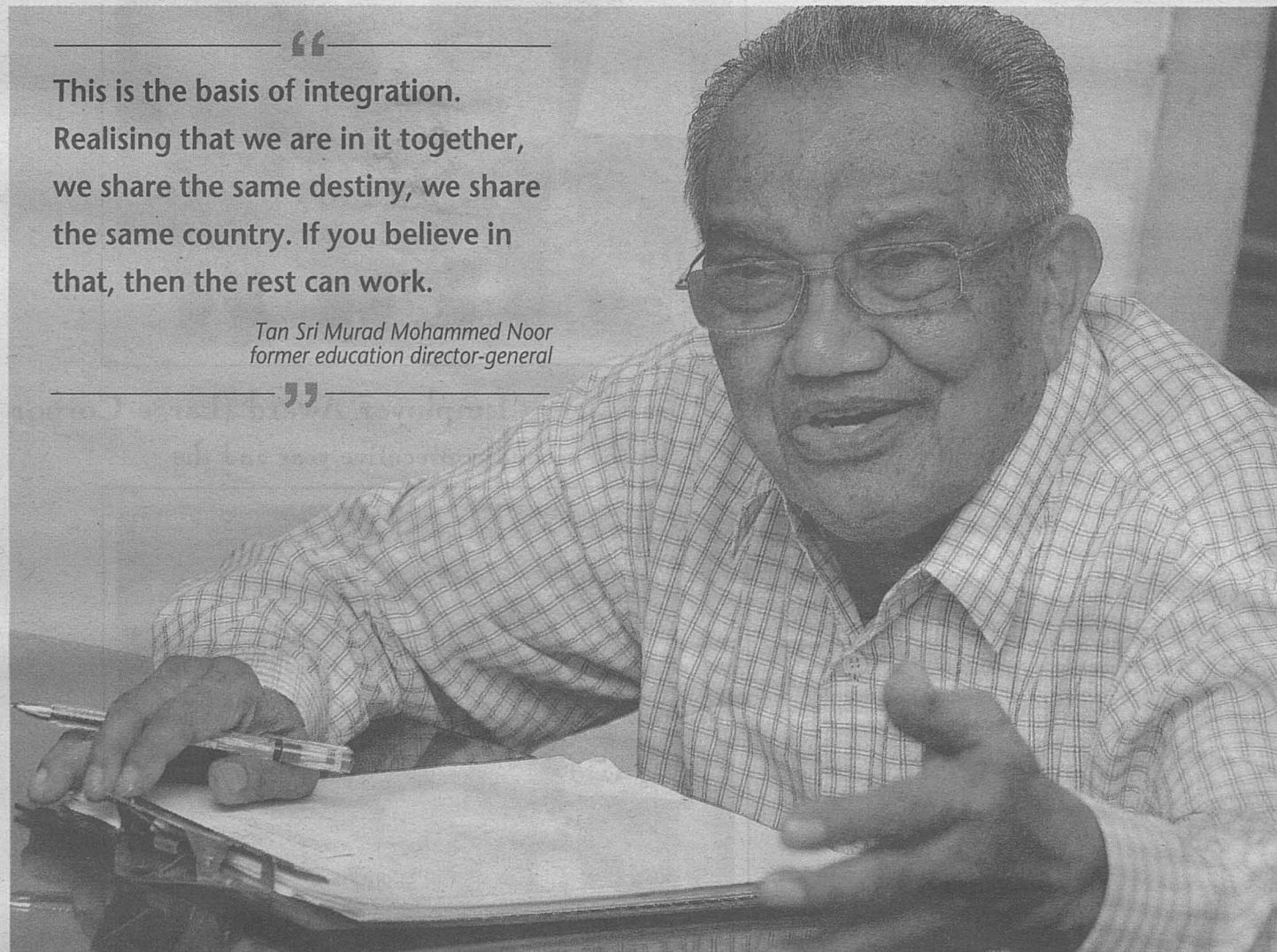
But going to a Malay school doesn't mean that you "*masuk Melayu*".

The government must go all out to make national schools acceptable to all.

Q: Where are we in terms of integration?

A: The Malays say they don't want to give up their privileges.

But the Chinese say: "With those privileges, your children can



This is the basis of integration.

Realising that we are in it together, we share the same destiny, we share the same country. If you believe in that, then the rest can work.

Tan Sri Murad Mohammed Noor
former education director-general

go to university, you don't have to worry. I've got to sell my house to send my child to university.

"But I am a citizen like you, I pay taxes like you... what integration are you talking about?"

That is the Chinese point of view.

The Malays say: "No, this is in our constitution, before we got independence. This is what we agreed upon."

My question is: Why are we still at that stage? We should have passed that stage by now.

To truly integrate, we have got to take a bold step. And this involves sacrifices from both sides.

Q: Are we ready for integration?

A: If you remind people that Umno means United Malays National Organisation, you will be boed.

Datuk Onn Jaafar left Umno because he wanted integration far too early.

And 50 years later, it is still too early. So, where do we go from here?

Are we going to continue building bridges for the next 50 years?

So far, that is what we have done. We have been building bridges and bridges and bridges, and nothing else.

Q: So what do we need to do?

A: What do we expect to see in our country in 2020? Children today are meant for the 2020 market. They are the ones who will build the foundation for 2057.

The education policy we had was good, but it is too old.

Let's look at the system anew and see whether it can meet our needs for the next century.

Do not condemn the existing system because it is the ladder that we have climbed on. But, now, we are going much higher.

The same ladder cannot take us any more... so, we need to find a new ladder to get us to the next goal.

Q: What is "the next goal"?

A: I always think it as globalisation. People can no longer be divided on racial grounds.

Europe has become the European Union. They threw away their money (and embraced the euro). Everyone can travel within the EU without a passport.

All those things are coming to us. It's not something that you can stay away from.

Racial integration is but a small part of that big picture.

If we are not integrated, we will

not be able to do all that I am talking about. We, the nation, will be left behind.

Integration is but one small aspect of the preparation for the future.

Q: Is this something that we can learn in school?

A: When I was in university, there weren't any universities in Malaysia.

By the time I graduated, Universiti Malaya (which was then in Singapore) established a branch here. Now, how many universities do we have here?

Whatever we learned, whatever we knew 50 years ago, which was a privilege to those who went to university, today, everybody knows.

Maybe what was taught 50 years ago in a university is now

taught at the school certificate level.

And with the advances of computers — the Internet — we learn in spite of teachers.

So, the role of teachers must change.

Teachers then were the providers of knowledge, givers of wisdom.

Today, it is no more. That little box will provide you with the knowledge you want.

Teachers should be able to guide what to select, what is the best to select.

Are we preparing the teachers for this? Teachers are no longer for teaching. They must work together with students.

Q: Where to from here?

A: Integration is an open-ended subject. There is no restriction. The only restriction is that we must never look back and say: "Look, this is why we are not integrated".

In our 50th year of independence, we have achieved so much, economically and politically. But our integration is on flimsy ground.

The next 50 years, we need to build from here. Not to start from scratch.

What is the next 50 years? We have to start from what we have achieved. If we find that integration is weak, we have to strengthen that.

We cannot afford to throw away or destroy our old houses and build new ones. We've got to start from what we have achieved.

This Merdeka Day, all of us should have the determination to make the next 50 years much better.

Currently, we are trying to put a spotlight on the past, instead of looking to the future.

Q: Do you believe integration is possible?

A: Integration shouldn't only be a catchword. It should be done in a practical way. And it must be done by both parties.

There is no need to condemn the past. We have built so much. The way we are talking about it, I fear that we are going to destroy what we have built.

We don't want to destroy what we have built. We want to build from there. We talk about goodwill, but there is no goodwill.

Don't be suspicious of the Malays. Don't be suspicious of the non-Malays.

We are in it together, for good.

You can talk about the Malays having no other place to go, but this is true for the non-Malays, too. They have no other place but this country.

So, we are in it together.

This is the basis of integration. Realising that we are in it together, we share the same destiny, we share the same country.

If you believe in that, then the rest can work.