

National schools the key to unity

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WHEN the subject of national unity was brought to the table at the weekly Cabinet meeting last Wednesday, two things, it seems, were mentioned most in the proceedings: National Service and national schools.

The issue was discussed at length, according to a minister.

And that kind of attention reflected the gravity of problems on race relations, a hot topic of late.

It has often been said that this is a rather odd situation for the country that is on the eve of its 50th anniversary as an independent nation.

Indeed, if it were a man, Malaysia would even be older — four years older to be exact

— than its Education Minister. Yet, it has found itself grappling with never-ending and far-reaching issues concerning race and religion.

The Cabinet deliberation and concern on the matter was confirmed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at his briefing to editors last Thursday.

Unity seems to be very fragile and so brittle, he said. "A lot of lessons can be learnt from history.

"I understand May 13 because I was there right in the middle of it and I saw it.

"I don't want this to happen again.

"I don't want the concept of racial unity to be just a facade

or just superficial."

It is learnt that at the Cabinet meeting, most ministers mentioned the National Service programme and national schools as the best hope for a long-term solution to racial problems.

"National Service is an excellent way to promote harmony," the prime minister said at the briefing for editors.

"But National Service cannot reach or cover the entire school population."

The next best way, he added, was to bring the National Service culture to the schools.

He cited the Scout movement or Red Crescent Society as examples of activities which

should be emulated and expanded by the school-going population.

It is understood that the Cabinet then acknowledged that the key lay in national schools, that the whole scheme could only work if national schools are the schools of choice, since right now only two per cent of non-Malay children go to these schools at primary level.

The rest prefer to study in Chinese or Tamil schools.

This matter about national schools has actually been flogged to death the last couple of years without showing much headway given the inconsistencies of policy implementation down the line.

In the briefing, Abdullah gave three main factors that could make national schools popular.

One, of course, is raising the quality of teaching which could be reflected in the examination results.

The second is to have Mandarin and Tamil classes in these schools to attract non-Malays.

The third, which has yet to be tried out, is to introduce something like a report card system for all national schools and the names of schools showing success in meeting the desired goals would be announced every year.

A proper evaluation will be made and only the names of

the good national schools will be proclaimed so that the people know them.

They will become the schools of choice, he said.

At this point, it is relevant and very interesting to quote Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein in his interview with *Mingguan Malaysia* two days ago.

Among other things, he said of efforts to strengthen national schools: "The programme is in place, the political will on the part of the government is also in place and so is financial allocation.

"What is needed now is the desired leadership at the school-level and political will among the people."