

The national school path to unity

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THE Umno annual assembly and the very open discussions on racial matters have generated much reaction, understandable concern, and raised questions on where we are heading as a united nation.

The doom and gloom is an overreaction. For those who have attended Umno, or other race-based political gatherings, such blustering has been the norm. At the end of the day all regain their senses.

But the concern cannot be dismissed either. It is probably a manifestation of what society is feeling, and cannot possibly be blamed on out-of-turn speakers.

Now everyone is talking about unity, or the state of the nation's race relations, like it is a new-found religion. Of course, we need unity like we need oxygen. Admitting we have a problem with it helps. But where do we go beyond the hand-wringing and hair-pulling?

My mind wanders to little children, the most innocent of us, unhurried by pretensions and untainted by prejudices.

Five-year-old Zuleika is colour-blind as far as race is concerned. She attends kindergarten with children from all races, including quite

a number of foreigners. She sees physical differences between the races as incidental or quirksome, like why some of her friends prefer blue when she loves pink.

But at such a tender age she is already shown how her world would be changed. Most of her classmates will not be around next year for pre-school. Some will move to Chinese pre-schools in preparation for the Chinese school system, others to private or international pre-schools.

This is where the segregation begins, and polarisation starts to take shape, well before the children's formative years. Polarisation, like in magnets of differing poles, will always repel, and is difficult to overcome.

The slow and systematic desertion of national schools by non-Malays — only one out of 10 Chinese children attends a national school — is giving rise to a new phenomenon in race relations.

The Malays go to national schools, watch TV and listen to radio programmes in Malay, read newspapers, magazines and books in Malay, and go home to their Malay-Muslim community.

Similarly, for some Chinese

kids attending Chinese schools, they go home in schoolbuses filled with Chinese kids, get a steady dose of Chinese TV and radio entertainment, see Chinese doctors when they are sick, and eat at Chinese restaurants.

It is not uncommon now to have Malaysians going through life with minimal interaction with people of other races. For some, the only interaction with fellow citizens of other races is through official dealings with the government, which is predominantly

Malay, and commerce, which is predominantly Chinese.

What we have collectively done over the years is the systematic segregation of the races, each living within the confines of their communities, and each defining their roles in our society.

We have, to borrow a term in physics, attained equilibrium, or a state of rest, where all forces cancel each other out. Any change in the equation will threaten the equilibrium. Restoring this state of rest will require the greatest effort, es-

pecially when it is held together by the flimsiest of threads.

The root of our problem is the national school system.

The easy thing to do is to convince parents that the best thing for the country is for their kids to be together. But it is not that easy, as parents' primary motivation is what is best for their children, and not necessarily the country.

If they feel a non-national-type school is best for their kids, for whatever reason, then they will act accordingly.

We are blessed with many choices in our education system. While choice can be a curse to the national school and, to some extent, national unity, it is for the government to make the national schools attractive to parents, again.

Sure the government is doing many things to make national schools popular again — *memperkasakan sekolah kebangsaan* — or to make national schools pre-eminent, as it were. It was announced recently that Chinese and Tamil languages would be offered as subjects in national schools, and with the re-emphasis on English, it looks like national schools are getting to be rather attractive.

But there is also the need to

address complaints that our national schools are becoming Malay-Islamic institutions that are turning many parents off.

The school is beyond preparing our children for examinations. It is supposed to be an educational experience that thrives in a microcosm of the real world. The national school system with its egalitarian approach offers the best approach to unity issues.

Let us have a high-level committee, perhaps to be headed by the deputy prime minister or prime minister, to look at how to make national schools the school of choice.

Let us not concentrate on how to make our kids smarter, but what would make them closer. Let unity be the focus of the committee, and nothing else, not even how to make our kids competitive in the globalised world.

Include everyone, and be open to all ideas. Leave politics at the door. Make the mantra unity, unity and unity.

It may take years, but our ultimate aim should be that those opting for their kids to be in non-national schools do not do it out of dismay. The answer to our unity problem is staring us in the face: It is the national school system.