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Plan well for a smooth sail

LETTERS all
Friday, 19 Jun 2020

DATUK Seri Mustapa Mohamed sounded the right alarm in his thoughtful comment titled "An opportunity to prepare Malaysians for jobs of the future", which was recently published in a local English daily.

This vital issue is indeed a major concern among all right-thinking Malaysians, as their jobs and that of their children, the future employment outlook and their well-being and welfare are all at stake.

It is therefore pertinent that the minister responsible for socio-economic planning in the Prime Minister's Department shares his views and rich experience as a senior civil servant and outstanding former minister (International Trade and Industry) with the public.

Having been his colleague in the Treasury many years ago, I can say with conviction that Mustapa is serious in his analysis and plans for the future. What he has proposed are necessary. However, they may not be sufficient to solve our unemployment and other socio-economic problems for now and the future. But I believe he has an open mind and will welcome and consider all relevant views for inclusion in his economic planning.

The estimated unemployment rate at 5% is worrisome, and it might become worse unless we reform the economic structure more significantly.

Mustapa has rightly proposed that we ramp up our digital agenda. But we must also raise our proficiency in English to get better access to knowledge in the English language worldwide.

We could stick to the present practices, but we will only lose out to other competing countries for trade and investment, and academic excellence. As it is, we have dropped five spots (from 22 to 27) in the Institute for Management Development's World Competitiveness Ranking for 2020.

I hope the government sets up a committee to examine the reasons for our shortfalls, as the findings may show the structural weaknesses seeping into the system. We could also send a team of our experts to Singapore, which is number one on the list, to learn what we can do to improve.

Mustapa's proposal to reduce foreign workers is laudable, but the estimate of just two million workers may be too low if you factor in the unregistered individuals who number about two million.

Furthermore, the government has to review our wage structure to reward our skilled workers, especially the frontline workers doing 3D jobs. If they can flock to Singapore to do the "dirty jobs", surely they would be happier to work at home if given better pay.

Here again, the basic needs of our society must be met as a matter of high priority, as the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the poverty, hunger and lack of housing. Health and environmental protection are serious weaknesses in our economy. These fundamental economic rights and others have been denied to millions of Malaysians. We cannot miss the boat again.

Quality of education has also declined at many levels from schools to universities. Our international scores have not been competitive enough. This is due to neglect of meritocracy where we went out more for quantity than quality education. This has a severe bearing on unemployment.

Quoting management guru Peter Drucker, Mustapa said "the ultimate resource in economic development is people". But we have over the years driven away some of our best brains due to deprivation of opportunities to study and work here at home! So we must ask ourselves how we can create opportunities to generate jobs at home.

Mustapa has done very well to stress the opportunities to revitalise, recognise, strengthen and future-proof our economy. This is a huge task and some of his sound proposals would need much more structural changes for us to sail more confidently in the rough seas of severe competition.

"Let's not miss the boat," Mustapa exhorted. I hope his bold foresight is shared by other leaders otherwise we will be left behind without much hope for more employment and greater progress!

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