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Professors, share your views for a better world

THE newly formed National Professors Council (MPN) will, at its first congress on July 6 and 7, reaffirm its commitment to building a knowledge-based society and support the 1Malaysia concept, the New Economic Model, Government Transformation Plan and Economic Transformation Plan.

Launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on April 1 last year, MPN is a unique, open-ended entity which automatically welcomes as members all professors in the country's 20 public universities (some 1,600 people today, with hopes of more through the addition of professors in private universities).

MPN is focused on 14 fields of study: economics and finance; politics, security and international affairs; medicine and health sciences; history, heritage and socio-culture; social development and well-being; education and human capital development; industry and innovation; information technology and communication; science and mathematics; natural resources and the environment; engineering and technology; governance, law and public management; pharmacy and applied science; and, agriculture and food security.

Action plans developed for each cluster in the past year will be agreed at the congress.



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Through MPN, professors are encouraged to exercise roles and responsibilities as public intellectuals that transcend their normal calling of teaching and supervising students or publishing the results of their research in journals and books — to make their voices heard on issues of the day at the local and international levels.

Take, for instance, food security — a global issue of great concern as reflected in the latest World Bank Food Price Watch that showed food prices up 29 per cent in January compared with a year earlier.

Fluctuating supplies and inadequate infrastructure in many countries, particularly the developing world, limit the ability of nations to produce adequate food for their populations. In Malaysia, with a level of affluence that enables us to purchase food from abroad, the question is whether our national policies are cogent and sound enough to ensure adequate supply in the medium to long term.

Energy supply is another issue af-

fecting the rakyat in a direct way. The recent increase in tariffs, though modest, is a case in point. It is incumbent upon relevant intellectuals at universities to offer the public insight into such inevitable increases.

The challenge of energy supply is local and global in scope as well as cross-cutting in nature. There is virtually unanimous international consensus on the need to arrest global warming, as illustrated by the pronouncements at meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the advice of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Yet figures released recently by the International Energy Agency (IEA) show that nations are not exactly walking the talk. Instead of reducing carbon dioxide emissions hit a record high last year, dimming prospects for limiting global warming in 2° Celsius. Breaching this threshold sharply increases risk of severe climate impacts, including flooding, storms, rising sea levels and species extinction.

Although Malaysia is small in territory, we have ranked poorly among global carbon emitters (157th out of 224 countries). According to several reports and studies by IEA, Malaysia's carbon emissions per

capita increased from 3.1 to 7.2 tonnes per capita between 1990 and 2006. The figure could be higher today.

While we continue to depend on fossil fuels, the ultimate solution to mitigating global warming lies in the use of clean and renewable energy — solar, hydro, wind and biomass. There are pros and cons to the nuclear option, and here again the collective wisdom of MPN could enlighten the public with a balanced view.

The same is true of the controversial plan by a foreign company to construct near Kuantan a "rare earth" plant, an issue that prompted the government to engage a team of international experts to provide an independent assessment.

The materials to be processed are much sought after today in the manufacture of sophisticated gadgets such as mobile phones and plasma television sets but some of the waste arising from their extraction may result in low-level radioactivity. Within the ranks of MPN professors, there is ample expertise in the related physical and health sciences to provide the public with a balanced, dispassionate perspective.

In future, tragic landslides such the recent one in Hulu Langat could be avoided if the views of geological experts in our midst were taken

seriously by all concerned. For example, the leader of the MPN cluster for natural resources and the environment consistently provided over the last few years many valuable suggestions to mitigate the incidence of landslides, especially around populated areas.

Issues of public concern addressed by MPN are not confined to the sciences. They may also relate to such areas as national unity, social integration, the teaching of history and the content of books to be used in our school curriculum. Recently, several MPN members were involved in the national panel established by the government to defuse the polemic arising from the usage of terms deemed unsuitable by some in a well-known literature book for schools.

One year after its inception, the vision of Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin to tap the inputs of academics in nation-building is beginning to pay dividends. And, given time and space to operate independently, MPN will help maximise the benefits of our country's investment in higher education.

■ The writer is chairman of the National Professors Council and holder of the Tuanku Chancellor Chair at Universiti Sains Malaysia