Race, ethnicity and integrating Singaporeans

PROFESSOR David Chan ("Five Cs to manage integration"; June 16) uses the term "Singaporeans", which is vital to integration efforts, and wisely eschews words like "race" or "racial" when referring to the ethnic communities.

British Singapore constructed cultural differences based on the European ideology of "race", which led to the racial segregation of Singapore's ethnic communities.

The colonial regime imposed "racial" theories on those it considered "inferior" by a system of social distinction and racial segregation.

Independent Singapore found it impractical to ignore this social reality, and has wisely and pragmatically continued to use the concept of "race" to integrate ethnic groups and communities.

Such an arrangement has not only worked out well, but has also led to Singapore's growth and prosperity.

Interestingly, "race" and "ethnicity" are used interchangeably by the Government and the public, with a preference for the word "race".

According to the Department of Statistics, "ethnic group" refers to a person's race. Citizens also see it as normal to regard themselves and the other groups as "races".

I am sometimes wary when I hear the word "race" being bandied about innocently, because it could at times have the effect of unwittingly creating adverse reactions and reinforcing negative stereotypes or repercussions among our various ethnic groups.

Rightly or wrongly, Singaporeans accept the biological features of fellow citizens as a reality and so, act in accordance with their beliefs.

Despite high levels of ethnic and national identification, what it means to be a Singaporean remains an important cultural and national dilemma.

The state views ethnicity as a tool of identity formation that helps in the long-term process of integration through a generalised national identity.

In this respect, the Government is sparing no effort to find a way to come to terms with the past and promote integration across historically produced ethnic and "racial" divides.

Achieving the integration of the nation by encouraging proactive efforts at cohesion among the various communities is uppermost in the Government's mind.

We, as citizens, should contribute towards this goal.

Prof Chan's article could, therefore, not have come at a more opportune time.

Dr V. Subramaniam