

# Uneasiness over new council's 'independence'

**T**he announcement by the Prime Minister was swift. It caught Wisma Putra officials by surprise.

They had expected Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to announce the relaunch of the Palestinian Fund in his speech at the launching of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations' new campus in Kuala Lumpur last week.

Instead, he proposed the setting up of a body ala the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

It is to provide support and assistance for the conduct of Malaysia's international relations and diplomacy.

The idea is noble.

It is also to establish a broad forum for a more informed discussion of regional and international issues involving policy-makers and other stakeholders in the country.

Its membership will be drawn from prominent Malaysians from diverse backgrounds such as politics, business, diplomacy and the civil service, academia, research

A Malaysian council on foreign relations may be in the offing but questions are being raised as to what its actual role will be or if it will be just another duplicate of existing think tanks.

institutions, journalism and civil society.

Abdullah said such a forum or a council on foreign relations and diplomacy should be independent and dedicated to increasing Malaysia's understanding of the world - through objective debate, discussion and research.

But the word "independent" is causing uneasiness among some quarters and is already being seen as a competitor to existing think tanks in the country.

Questions are being raised on the funding and whether it will just echo the Government's present foreign policies just like what most think tanks are doing presently.

More importantly, whose ambit the council should be under.

The truth is the idea for such a council has been floating for some time.



The time is ripe for its establishment with the growing interest of the country's foreign policies among non governmental organisations and academicians.

Of course there is another group of diplomats who have retired from service but have valuable experience to offer to the Government.

On the political front, there is also insufficient feedback on current foreign policies save for the ones debated by Members of Parliament.

Another area that is screaming

for attention is research.

Abdullah has said that the Government would provide the initial funding to start off the council.

But then the independence of such a council if it gets any financial grant from the Government becomes questionable.

Supporters for the council are saying that perhaps for a start the council should get some form of grant from the Government due to the lack of resources and interest among the corporate world.

They say this "umbilical cord" should be severed once they can find alternative funding.

Just like the American one, it should not limit itself to just promoting its ideas to the keepers of the country's foreign policies.

Instead, the distinguished members of the proposed council could generate ideas from discussions or

forums, take certain positions and give their input to the Government.

At the end of the day, it is the prerogative of the Government to use the input.

Some quarters are also questioning whether with government funding, any input that comes from the council will be mandatory.

There are even suggestions that it should be established by Parliament like Suhakam, among which whose role is to advise and assist the Government in formulating legislation and procedures and recommend the necessary measures in the field of human rights.

The council must not be a watchdog to what Wisma Putra has been tasked to do or risk the resentment of serving diplomats.

There are already whispers in the Foreign Ministry corridors that the council is another platform for those retiring from the diplomatic circle.

So it will be interesting to see whether the council will take off before Abdullah leaves the centre-stage.