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THE backlash against Housing and Local Government Minister Nga Kor Ming's suggestion that Malaysia applies for Chinese New Villages in Selangor to have Unesco World Heritage Site status was swift and all too predictable.

This was apparently another case of the minister putting his foot in his mouth or jumping the gun (both idioms apply in this case). The storm of criticism, mainly from the Malay community, has forced him to backtrack. The proposal is now apparently at the "preliminary" stage and needs Cabinet approval first.

Regardless of the merits of the case, we should examine the criteria for Unesco World Heritage status before coming to conclusions.

According to the official website, to be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of 10 selection criteria.

These 10 criteria are too long to list here. But suffice to say that the Chinese New Villages, even though relatively young, having been initiated only in 1948, would still fit one or more of the qualifications for selection.

Chinese New Villages were settlements first developed in 1950 during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) by British General Sir Harold Briggs. These camps were originally created to isolate the Communist guerrillas from their

A stretch too far

The process of obtaining the Unesco World Heritage Site status is a lengthy and complicated one.

supporters within the rural civilian populations.

Do these villages still have historical value? The Communist threat is non-existent now but many of these new villages still exist and have been modernised and integrated with other townships.

They do have historical significance. But we would be stretching it by comparing them to much older sites that have immense heritage and cultural value.

Currently, only four venues across the nation are recognised as World Heritage Sites: Gunung Mulu National Park and Kinabalu Park, listed in 2000. The Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca listed in 2008, and, the most recent one, the Archaeological Heritage of the Lengong Valley, listed in 2012.

Even if the Cabinet does agree with Nga's proposal, it would not be easy to get the Unesco endorsement. Apart from the aforementioned criteria, there is a series of lengthy processes that needs to be completed for the candidacy to be approved, including presenting supporting documents to the

BRIAN MARTIN

@KlangRed



On your side

Unesco World Heritage Convention secretariat.

If it is indeed the housing and local government ministry that decides on submitting heritage status proposals, one would like to know what the rationale and merits of including the Chinese New Villages are. And if so, why not other places of historical significance?

Take Kampung Baru for example. Established in 1899, this Malay enclave of traditional wooden houses appears to be stuck in time surrounded by Kuala Lumpur's skyscrapers. Or how about Batu Caves, also established in the late 1890s? It is possibly the most popular tourist destination in KL currently.

A quick check on the World Heritage Convention website reveals that Malaysia has submitted other sites for consideration. There are currently six under various stages of evaluation.

These are Taman Negara National Park, FRIM Selangor Forest Park, Gombak Selangor Quartz Ridge, Royal Belum State Park, Sungai Buloh Leprosarium and The Archaeological Heritage of Niah National Park's Caves Complex, Sarawak.

Getting a Unesco World Heritage Site classification carries a lot of weight; it offers huge economic and tourism potential.

Georgetown and Melaka are a case in point: both were granted heritage status in 2008 as part of the historic cities of the Straits of Malacca.

The Unesco badge has allowed the state governments to preserve historical landmarks and even restrict development in historically sensitive locations. Renovations at shophouses or residential properties are strictly controlled and original facades must be maintained.

Both these cities are now firm-

ly on the tourist map as must visit destinations in Malaysia. In fact, Melaka celebrates its declaration as a historical city next Tuesday and can take pride in the fact that its hugely significant cultural and historical landmarks have been preserved for posterity.

The city, which can trace its roots back to the 14th century, has Malay, Chinese and Indian influences, not to mention Dutch and Portuguese.

There is generally a lack of awareness on the importance of preserving and promoting our cultural and historical assets in this country. And the knee-jerk reaction to the Chinese New Village proposal once again shows that the country continues to be divided along racial lines.

The tit-for-tat between Umno and DAP politicians over Nga's proposal proves that race should not come into any consideration if we are to ensure that Malaysia is given more than just the four places we have on the World Heritage Sites list.

Policymakers, civil servants and other stakeholders should undertake a systematic evaluation of the intrinsic value of the heritage locale before we submit a candidate to the world body.

It will have a far-reaching impact, as the Unesco recognition will allow the natural wonders and ancient monuments we are blessed with to be preserved for future generations.