

13/06/1999

Sow knowledge, not hatred

DOUBTLESS, teaching is a noble profession. As rightly pointed out by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, members of the scholastic profession should not abuse the trust placed in them by influencing their students to be anti-government.

His call is particularly pertinent at a point of time when irresponsible quarters have instilled anti-government sentiments into both university and school students. Several apolitical parents were reportedly shocked to hear children in primary schools voicing protest against national leaders. It is obvious they were echoing their teachers. At primary schools, this may be an aberration. But as recently observed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, such hate campaign against the elected Government of the day is being conducted throughout the country by using students instilled with a deep sense of ingratitude.

In their desperate clamour for political relevance and enthronement, certain members of the Opposition have preyed on the young and fed them with all sorts of allegations against the Government. The versions vary. But they are damning in their effect on the integrity of the Government, the country's judiciary and national unity. The critics' loathing of the Government is to the point where they abandon the cardinal rule of making critique - comments are free but facts are sacred. Accusations are made without an understanding of the Constitution and development policies. So, students are purportedly enlightened with the alleged evils of the New Economic Policy - that it fostered the growth of a rentier class; that the poor have been side-lined under the policy's aim of achieving inter-ethnic parity in occupation and equity ownership - or the economic recovery measures are to save the rich. All these fly in the face of economic statistics and the endorsement of such policies, including the success of poverty-eradication efforts, by global institutions such as the World Bank.

Falsehood is hardly edifying. To tell lies to the young, who have no means of readily checking what they are told, is morally indefensible. It does not take much to spit out a scandalous opinion but it takes perspective, humility and a reverence for the facts to give legitimate and fair criticism. Both lecturers and teachers should not preach the gospel of hatred. They must instil into the young the habit of impartial inquiry. They should judge issues on their merits, not allegations and prejudices. As Abdullah pointed out, "It is sad that at a young age, students are fed ideas to oppose the leadership. It is also sad that this is happening when the country is at a level where we can progress very much further."

Within the confines of the classroom, lecturers and teachers should stand outside the strife of political parties. They should not flatter political prejudices. It would be a sad commentary on the academia's integrity and value judgement if they fail to rise above political controversies or if they lend themselves to dishonest propaganda by disseminating demonstrable untruths to their students. Only those with a skewed notion of patriotism will associate it to endorsements of vitriolic demonisation of the Government and its public policies. It would be far from true to paint the Government as Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor who deemed the bread far more important and urgent than the freedom of the masses. Within the boundaries of the law, there is both freedom and economic prosperity.

Abdullah's call for teachers not to abuse the trust placed in them should not be misconstrued as a design to instil fear in them or suppress their liberty. Nor is it meant to evoke blind subservience and unquestioned submission. But they are asked to honour their task in building the nation by imparting good values and knowledge into their students. Ultimately, this means working for the common good of the nation. It means being guided by national interest - not the narrow interests of a few.

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