

20/05/2000

Contribute to the nation by devoting time to the thinking process

Amir Firdaus Khan

I BET with a title like The Joys of Thinking, the Prime Minister can write a bestseller, especially after his fine speech at the Umno General Assembly last Saturday.

Deposited in a quiet corner of Dewan Merdeka with a few retired politicians including Tan Sris for company, my first reaction to a speech that invited two rounds of standing ovation - this man enjoys thinking!

Someone seated behind me thought the PM was "brilliant". Another, not surprisingly, murmured "world class".

Yes, Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad was spot on when he said one ought to be inside the hall to witness the spectacle and take in the full impact.

Umno grandees - Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie and Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen - seated closer to the stage, were rooted to their seats. In the first round of the standing ovation, the applause arrived in a few waves.

The clapping tapered off then suddenly returned to reach a higher crescendo. And this was the same crowd guilty of some schoolboy heckling earlier.

By now, already, the more enthusiastic supporters must have suggested that copies be instantly made for wide distribution. Someone somewhere will make some money too. There is no harm in being enterprising.

Countless second echelon leaders will quote from the speech and blithely so, as if it was their own thoughts. The speech will overnight become the party line.

What is the reaction that will please Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the most? I suppose the Prime Minister, who is cruelly labelled by an Australian analyst as an "unloved survivor", would want all of us to enjoy thinking.

Unlike the American management gurus, he actually delivered a lesson in plain thinking for free.

Dr Mahathir's is a fertile mind. He said he enjoys working. Some of us admittedly resent our work. Since the Prime Minister enjoys working, the brain must be working all the time.

His speech this time examined the frailties in Umno in a way unheard of in recent times. Dr Mahathir spent a lot of time explaining the Anwar issue in the last two years, as he never saw the Anwar question as a political scheme.

In a way, the Umno president was liberated by the time he gave the winding-up speech.

Scores must have told him the perils of dwelling on the Anwar issue.

"It is not popular," Dr Mahathir said as much in the flourishing speech that ended without a single reference to "Anwar". So the thought process flowed in a spellbinding manner.

It swept the terrain, filling up every nook with something for us to chew.

Are we capable of similarly fine speech? Does thinking come naturally to us? Of course we are most able to look after ourselves and our families. It is the nation that tends to be neglected.

And, the country cannot run on auto mode. A way forward is to ease our glare on personalities and events and start thinking about ideas. We have to convince everyone that thinking is not a strenuous or detrimental exercise. Nor is it a malaise that, if uncurbed, will bring you pain.

Tan Sri Muhammad Taib (dubbed the fighter or Mike Tyson), too, to be

fair, touched on thinking in a manner that was stern and foreboding at the Umno General Assembly.

But Mat Taib will readily admit that his speech itself was not a result of a spectacular thinking mode. He simply intoned the words with force.

The second echelon leaders in Umno may need to create more space for them to think clearly. A veteran politician said a common mistake is to dive in with far too many speeches.

And attend far too many functions. Politicians need to be much loved, so they are obliging. Still, much thought needs to be devoted to deciding on their speaking engagements.

The Press is most definitely not going to be inspired by the run-of-the-mill speeches and would thus make passing mention of the speech in the newspapers.

Members of the audience must be eager to listen to a speech. If it is not eagerly anticipated, it is unlikely to stir much interest. Someone who goes out a few times a day and gives numerous speeches is less likely to grab the attention of an increasingly discerning audience.

Choosing which function to attend is a political decision. DAP leaders write short speeches and put them up on their website. Speeches are just like newspaper articles - they must catch the readers' eye.

Once the status of speeches is elevated, much thought will go into preparing it. Thoughtful speeches will then contribute towards the nation.

Alternatively, Ministers and VIPs can speak to select groups in small numbers in what should rightly develop into brainstorming sessions.

One would not know whether Umno has a policy unit. Major political parties around the world would have one. They provide ideas.

In fact, Umno could start recruiting the professionals to be based at the headquarters. They write. They provide suggestions. They douse fires and they speak to the members.

The better ones can be fielded as candidates in the next general election.

Everyone should be able to think. All the Umno Youth Exco members should be made to write essays and articles to newspapers to present and articulate their views.

Senior Umno leaders like Dr Mahathir and Rais Yatim are effective writers.

Thinking is not a strenuous exercise. Although there may be an association for the so-called intellectuals, thinking is not the domain of aloof gentlemen with flowing beards or with perpetual frowns.

Thinking is as simple as tucking into your meal.

Some political analysis on situations in the country come from simpletons. How do you deal with erstwhile teachers - exile them to Sabah which, Dr Mahathir pointed out, delivered the BN's 17 parliamentary seats.

How do you tackle the issue of mosques dominated by Pas? How can the Government appoint committee members when Umno members don't go to mosques in droves, asked Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir cannot continue to do the thinking for Umno forever. "Read, and be up-to-date," said party treasurer, Tun Daim Zainuddin in his own, low-keyed winding up speech.

Thinking badminton players, thinking footballers and thinking politicians. If one cuts down the time at the karaoke lounges (ever heard of the bills involved), hotel lobbies and starts some political fires somewhere, more time will be created for the thinking process.

The onus to think does not rest squarely on Umno. Umno leaders including Mat Taib have contributed immensely to society.

Compelled to levitate, forced into some deep thoughts now, should rightly be some of the most fervent detractors of Dr Mahathir. In what is

described by Dr Mahathir as a `hostile society', there are many of them.

Many ordinary Malaysians like me are appalled by the revelation that some senior executives in privatised Government bodies are those who can be regarded as "anti-establishment". Granted, the Prime Minister said they should not be ostracised.

Yet, what could possibly be on their minds right now? How can they detest the Government and yet be effective? Why can't they just come out in the open and speak their minds?

Did they listen to the Prime Minister's speech? Are they too clever, too intellectual to be listening to the Umno speeches?

(END)