

15/10/2000

Debate to clear dust

RHETORIC is the art of persuasion. Edmund Burke, the 18th century essayist, was a past master of the art. As a Whig member of the British Parliament, he expanded his oratorical skills to champion "great, just and honourable causes". Among them was the emancipation of the American colonies. But he also spoke against the French Revolution. Because of this espousal he was bitterly attacked by detractors for betrayal of his faith in political liberty. But Burke, the consummate debator, countered that he had not changed his ground: he only turned the cannon. He opposed the atheistical Jacobinism displayed by the leaders, not the cause of the revolutionaries. As an orator Burke earned admiration from all sides. Paradoxically, many of his best speeches were said to have emptied the House of Commons.

So do many debates unless they have a captive audience of students, marshalled by the domineering eyes of teachers. So will the upcoming debate on Malay rights by leaders of the youth wings of Umno and Pas as a cartoon by Lat conceptualised a week ago. For debates are intellectual exercises. Skilled speakers deftly avail themselves of dialectics to convince a dispassionate and a disinterested audience. The proposers argue persuasively that white is black and, the opposers, black is white. Both would be intellectually correct as black and white are non-colours and ergo, they are the same. In law as in life, this is moot. But in conclusion, debates prove nothing of significance.

This salient feature of debates should be considered by initiators of the confrontational discussion of Malay rights. Moreover, the issue does not provide a clearly defined proposition, the premise for any meaningful intellectual discourse. True, Malay rights is adumbrated in the Constitution. But like all and any law writ by man, it lends itself to differing interpretation and paves the foundation of different premises, given the conflicting ideologies espoused by the opposing debators.

For that reason we endorse as does the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the debate on Malay rights. Intellectual arguments win the minds of members of opposing political parties. But race and religion strike emotive chords. Malay rights is, rightly or wrongly, imbued in both. Debate, we hope, will winnow away the emotions. We trust the speakers in the debate will use reason, not appeal to emotions. For we agree that Malay rights must be explained crystal clear. That is the overriding objective. It is pointless to use the debate as a political forum to score ideological victories. Their dialogue should be tempered, refined and shaped by non-partisan logic, not partisan emotions. The audience must be dispassionate and display an apolitical disinterest in the proceedings, least the debate degenerates into a brouhaha.

All in the country await this first dialogue on Malay rights. For it is not just the concern of Malays. Non-Malays are concerned too. And rightly so. For they also have their rights which ultimately would be determined by the definition of Malay rights. Both are sides of the same coin of unity, diversity and stability that has been the anvil of enviable progress of the country that all are equally proud of. We hope the debate would a first and giant step towards clearing the cloud of ambiguity that shrouds the concept of Malay rights.

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