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Bitter, but it makes sense

Harris Iskandar Taib

SO, YOU have to pay 10 sen more for fuel. Personally, what we're paying in Malaysia is a lot cheaper when you compare prices in neighbouring countries. Try filling up in Singapore when it'll cost you almost double the price locally.

When news of the increase announced in the Budget 2002 flashed on TV, the consumers interviewed reflected a more frustrated bunch rather than those who understood just what is at stake.

One person I recalled, had said he felt frustrated that the price increase took effect immediately.

At the back of my mind, even if consumers were given ample time before the increase, just how much of difference will an absolutely full tank do? Just how much can you hoard?

What many Malaysians - whether or not they realise it - have taken for granted is the subsidies we have all been privileged with all these years. Naturally, when some of this is taken away or absorbed back by the Government, we become angry.

I for one, do not claim to understand why some decisions are made as they are, but in cases like this, you have to have faith in the people in power and what they feel is best for the country.

Fuel is something that reaches the masses, and so are cigarettes. But it's not that you don't have an alternative - you can either take the public transport, cycle or walk, or even stop smoking if benefits are the only thing you're after.

I believe the Budget of a country, like any other, is one big and precarious juggling act. How do you tell the people that the country needs to raise enough money to bring up the economy. What I can understand is you don't do it by increasing taxes, but you go about it in a more subtle and less alarming manner.

I still recall something our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said many years ago. Replying to criticisms of privatized highways and high toll charges he said the people had an alternative - if you want better roads you will have to pay for it, if not you can use the existing routes.

It might not have been sweet, but it makes sense. Something good just doesn't fall out of the sky and you have to work for it.

It would be unfair to compare Malaysia to wealthier states like Brunei for example, which for such a small nation rich in oil, felt it could fully subsidise the country's infrastructure needs. This is not the same scenario in Malaysia.

We are less fortunate in some ways, but we can be grateful for a lot more other things.

Just look at Singapore; If you were to buy a Perodua Kancil there it would cost S\$62, 800 or approximately RM124,000, the price of four Kancils in Malaysia. In Japan, you will need to buy a parking space in order to get a car. In Indonesia, not everyone can afford a cheap second-hand car.

Some people I spoke to denounced the fact that the increase would benefit the oil companies the most. But why be so engrossed into the profits others make, that is if they are indeed making it. Nothing is always as it seems.

What we need to bear in mind is that the Budget, in whatever form it takes, is a design to spur the economy.

What we and the relevant authorities need to do now is to curb unscrupulous parties from hiking other prices, the price to take a taxi for example, to the price it will cost to have the vegetables delivered from Cameron Highlands. Just because fuel prices go up by 10 sen doesn't mean consumers must pay 10 sen more for chicken, cooking oil or even a bar of soap, especially when such a hike would not be reflective of the way the goods are transportated, which is mostly in bulk.

You cannot deny them from increasing prices, but you can limit just how much of an increase is involved.