

Content replaces dazzle in debates

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AN anti-climax – that was the conclusion of many of those listening to the state Umno chiefs as they debated the motion of thanks on the presidential address.

Only a few of the state chiefs are orators and most of them read from prepared texts.

"It was likelisting to speeches rather than a real debate," said an Umno delegate from Perak.

The tone of this year's debates has been much more sober because the usual Umno orators, the ones whomadepeople ooh and aah over their flair for the Malay language and whose jokes and anecdotes made delegateslaughtill their eyes teared, were not on the rostrum.

Many of the speeches may have been too seriousforthe taste of the average delegate but there was certainly greater content.

For instance, Kelantan Umno chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamad made a well-researched and measured speech that focused on the economy. It was done without any showmanship but that is what Mustapa is like.

Likewise, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman's speech reflected his intellect and his no-frills nature. Both men do not pretend to be what they are not.

Puteri chief Azalina Othman Said made a huge impact with her gutsy speech that saw her taking on PAS by the horns whereas Wanita leader Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz's message was direct and simple. Many appre-

ciated that Rafidah managed to express the wing's gratitude to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad without it turning into an eulogy.

Actually most of the state chief debaters were not short on content but some of their speeches seemed such a far cry from their usual speaking styles that delegates could only conclude that the speeches were "well-prepared".

"It's not only the message. The messenger is also important," said Terengganu delegate Datuk Wan Far-id Wan Salleh.

One also does not have to shout or joke or cry to get the attention of those on the floor and on the stage 35 demonstrated by Perak delegate Husni Hanadzlah. Husni's speech was first-class – erudite, knowledgeable and sincere.

Dr Mahathir is one of those who enjoys the factual speeches. He listens intently, hand on his chin, occasionally taking down notes.

However, it appears as though this year's debate has generally failed to capture the attention of delegates.

Yesterday, the emcee almost lost her cool when calling for the delegates to gather at the Dewan Merdeka for the afternoon session. The session was scheduled to begin at 3pm after Friday prayers and lunch, but at 3.08pm, the hall was still sporadically occupied.

The embarrassing thing was that half the chairs on the stage were also empty even the supreme council members had yet to turn up.

At one stage, the emcee had to

invoke the name of Dr Mahathir to get the delegates into the hall but even that had a marginal effect.

Johor delegate Adam Hamid pointed out that the debates at party assemblies have grown rather bland and mild over the years.

"Some of us are worried that the debaters tend to say what they think the leaders want to hear rather than what should be said. There is a syndrome among speakers to sweet-talk and praise," said Adam, who is known for his unorthodox streak.

Then again, Umno assemblies in the 1970s and 1980s were more fiery and unrestrained because there was still much that the Malays had yet to achieve.

"Poverty and education were big issues. Malays were still economically behind and even infrastructure was a contentious matter. Many of these basic issues have been resolved by our leaders," said Pahang delegate Sharkar Shamsuddin.

Besides, the party assembly is no longer the main venue for Malays to express their frustration and opinion.

It was inevitable that speakers at this year's assembly overlapped each other in their speeches. All of them wanted to voice their appreciation to their party president of 22 years and they did not really care if they sounded like a chorus.

What must be said has to be said. In fact, it is possible that delegates may want to hear the accolades.

Besides, the speakers are not going to get anything out of Dr

Mahathir for the latter had made it clear at a briefing a few days earlier that he did not want people using him to lobby for posts or seats when he retired.

The Prime Minister told them: "Pak Lah will be choosing the candidates for the general election. There are bound to be people who will ask me to whisper into Pak Lah's ears. I want to give an early warning that I will not entertain such requests."

Perhaps the other common thread running through the debates was the strong feelings the party leaders had against their nemesis, PAS. Many of them hit out at PAS, with Terengganu deputy chief Datuk Idris Jusoh leading the charge in a speech full of ire and accusations against the PAS government in the east coast state.

The delegates may like a good laugh for it helps lighten the mood and makes the afternoon sessions less drowsy but that does not mean they do not recognise or appreciate speakers of substance.

They reserve their applause for the "entertainers" but their votes will usually go to the serious ones, those whom they think have the brains to lead the party.

But, said vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, even if the debates this year may have failed to dazzle, the message has been adequately beamed home.

"The theme this year is unity and solidarity and to pay tribute to Dr Mahathir. Everyone is of one mind about that," said Muhyiddin.