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Revolting rivers

By A Kadir Jasin

WALKING across the crystal clear Limmat River that flows through the heart of Zurich, Switzerland, reminded me of a recent newspaper report quoting the Sultan of Johor as saying that Sungai Skudai and Sungai Tebrau were dirty.

Johor is not comparable to Switzerland and Johor Bahru is certainly not Zurich. But whether we are Malaysians or Swiss, we all love beautiful things - rivers included.

The Limmat that flows from Lake Zurich into the Rhine via the Aare River is so clean and clear, you can see trout and a variety of other fishes swimming and feeding.

Only if you are unlucky do you chance upon a floating Coca-Cola can or plastic container. Remember, this river flows through one of the oldest and most industrialised regions of the world.

The Sultan has every reason to be disgusted with the filth and foul smell he encountered when sailing on the two rivers, and was right in taking the state government to task for failing to keep them clean.

But the Skudai and Tebrau are not the only filthy rivers in Johor. The writer is also familiar with the Muar and Batu Pahat Rivers. They too are dirty. Not too long ago, on a fishing trip to Pagoh on the Muar River, the writer discovered that not only was the colour of the river unsightly, it was toxic as well. Local fishermen said the river was being poisoned by farming and industrial activities. Yet, an increasing volume of water is being pumped from it to meet the rising domestic and industrial demands.

Alas, despite years of promises and stacks upon stacks of legislations, our rivers are still getting dirtier. Some have effectively 'died'. More will 'die' in years to come if politicians and government officials are satisfied with only making statements to the media.

It would appear that a high level of education, economic progress and sophistication, which Johorians would certainly identify themselves with, means little when it comes to environmental protection.

On the other hand, it would appear that the more developed the state, the dirtier its rivers. Or for that matter, the environment in general. Even in Kedah, where rice farming is key to its economy and politics, the rivers are also getting dirtier.

Yet, not a day passes without one Menteri Besar or another telling the Press that he has a dream of making his state negeri maju (developed state) in the immediate future.

When it comes to the environment, we are certainly a nation of great talkers. If we talk less and do more, we would certainly have achieved a greater degree of environmental cleanliness.

We are among the first countries in the world to have a comprehensive set of environmental legislations. They went as far back as 1973, when the late Tun Abdul Razak foresaw environmental protection as key to the sustainability of the country's economic and social development.

Today, environmental protection is mere lip service for most politicians and civil servants. Just take a look at the wholesale destruction of the wetlands.

With housing developers being allowed to destroy wetlands to enrich their coffers, we not only degrade our environment further, but also precipitate more flash floods and water shortages in future.

States should have the courage and civic responsibility to say no to

greedy and unscrupulous housing developers and warn house-buyers that houses built on peat soil are not safe.

Otherwise, criticisms by the Sultan of Johor when opening the 11th sitting of the State Legislative Assembly last month would end up as another voice in the wilderness. Dirty Skudai and Tebrau Rivers might have irked the Sultan who is a keen sailor, but for the rakyat, it means their livelihood and health.

SCRUTINISING THE MPS

THE name Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail is synonymous with modesty and decorum. The Kedah-born speaker of the Dewan Rakyat is an old-school thinker and a gentlemen. It is not in his nature to offend.

Even as a successful lawyer in Alor Star, he took time off to write recommendation letters for schoolboys and schoolgirls to apply for scholarships and for school leavers to seek jobs.

When I was a schoolboy in Alor Star in the 1960's, and later as a Berita correspondent for Kedah and Perlis, Mohamed Zahir was always a source of inspiration and wisdom.

His contemporaries in Alor Star include former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tan Sri Khalid Abdullah, former chairman of Utusan Melayu Bhd.

So, it should be read with some measure of circumspection when Mohamed Zahir recently told the Press that 'the quality of Members of Parliament (MPs) has improved since 1957,' adding that many of today's elected representatives have academic qualifications.

They may be better qualified, but that does not necessarily mean that they are any wiser. In recent years, many MPs made their names by shouting down other MPs or arguing with the chair. Instead of refined, thoughtful debaters, we have hecklers and jesters.

Instead of filling seats in the chamber, they are more often seen filling the seats in the Parliament canteen. That is perhaps the real reason why some MPs, including ministers, are so adamantly against live telecast. If there is a live telecast, they cannot easily ponteng or speak rubbish.

Of course, the Opposition will use this opportunity to promote their political interest. The government MPs will almost certainly do the same. After all, Parliament is the culmination of a political process - the general election.

When this writer was the editor of the New Straits Times newspaper and introduced the roll call to count the number of MPs in the house, many of them were upset. They accused the paper of prying and of not having sufficient trust in them.

They have every reason to object because the roll call consistently showed that more MPs were away from the chamber than in it.

With the Government promising greater transparency and accountability, proceedings of the Dewan Rakyat must not only be more decorous but should also be scrutinised.

Oh, how I miss the days when Dr Mahathir and the late Syed Jaafar Albar crossed swords with Lee Kuan Yew in the Malaysian Parliament back in 1964 and 1965.

Those days, even newspaper and radio reports on parliamentary proceedings were inspiring and sometimes entertaining. Today, more newspaper readers are likely to read murder trials and watch TV dramas than follow parliamentary debates. Given the paucity of the debates, they are not to be blamed.

TRY TO CATCH UP

RADIO and Television Malaysia Bhd (RTM) stands a fair chance of reclaiming its long lost pivotal position as the number one broadcaster by

providing live telecast of parliamentary proceedings, or at the very least, giving more airtime to parliamentary affairs.

With the Barisan Nasional nearly monopolising the enlarged Parliament, a wider and more detailed coverage of parliamentary debates could assure voters that they had made the right choice.

Otherwise, there will not be much benefit to be derived from having more MPs, and more viewers will switch to private terrestrial channels or subscribe to Astro.

RTM must decide what it really wants to be - an official broadcast network or a commercial player. Today, RTM is a confusing mix of both. Instead of promoting national interest, it purveys anything from Hollywood flicks to Hong Kong and Mumbai blood and gore.

Yet, despite enjoying an unfair advantage of receiving public funding and earning advertising revenue, RTM is unable to compete with private broadcasters who depend exclusively on advertising revenue. It is facing an even bigger threat from Astro which enjoys both advertising and subscription revenues.

In the interest of the taxpayers, RTM should offer high quality wholesome family entertainment, information and education instead of merely competing with private broadcasters.

Some thought must also be given to the future of domestic broadcasters vis-a-vis Astro, since the latter is a foreign-based operator and seems to be enjoying considerable autonomy.

Astro's ultimate holding company, Astro All Asia Network plc, is domiciled in the United Kingdom (UK). While its shareholding and control is based in the UK, it operates exclusively in Malaysia. It earns revenue and trades shares in this country.

But, being a foreign company, it is free to repatriate its profits to its home base. Its prospectus clearly states that it is 'incorporated in England and Wales under the UK Companies Act 1945.'

In April, Astro proposed to raise subscription rates, which according to newspaper reports, would add RM83 million to its annual revenue based on a subscriber strength of 1.39 million as of end January.

Being a component of a huge conglomerate that spans satellite operation, telecommunications and telephone services, publishing and gaming, Astro also benefits from cross selling and promotions.

It would not be surprising if it is proven that Astro is more 'influential' than RTM in the broadcast industry, especially in the urban areas.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

MANY people were surprised when Datuk Seri Rais Yatim was made Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage. All kinds of speculations were made.

Some said it was a demotion prompted by his statement to the Press that at least 18 high-profile corruption cases were pending.

The writer would like to differ. I think Rais is the right man for the job. At last, we have someone who truly understands culture, arts and heritage.

Even if there are people who think that Rais should have been kept where he was or given a significant assignment, I believe in the Malay saying that 'benih yang baik jatuh ke laut menjadi pulau' - literally translated it means a good seed, when it falls into the sea, becomes an island.

In Malaysia, where fewer and fewer people can speak Malay and English without turning them into vomit, Rais is a pleasure to listen to. Yes, vomit - muntah. It is worse than bahasa rojak. At least, rojak is good to eat.

Bahasa muntah has now become the rule rather than the exception with an increasing number of Bahasa Malaysia speakers.

The same applies to kebudayaan (culture) and kesenian (arts), especially those that are presented on television and performed for the benefit of tourists.

We are not talking about borrowing from other languages. No language in the world is free from that. The Malay language is full of words and expressions borrowed from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, English, Dutch and Spanish.

What should be a cause for concern is the wholesale adoption of foreign terms when there are perfectly good Malay terms.

The real pain is when the Malay and English languages are mixed in a manner that has now become the staple and trademark of radio disc jockeys and TV entertainment presenters.

Let's hope that, while preserving the physical aspects of our heritage, Rais will do his best to preserve our linguistic heritage as well.

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Besides 'Malaysian Business', Kadir also contributes to local Bahasa Malaysia and English newspapers. These articles can be accessed at www.beritapublishing.com.my under the heading 'In My Own Write'.

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