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To criticise is human

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NOT too long ago, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad told off Malaysians who labelled all of the Government's infrastructural projects as "mega". Claiming that these critics were simply aping Western journalists who attacked Malaysia with ulterior motives, he said that without the Twin Towers, Penang Bridge, the North-South Expressway, and others, Malaysia would be little different from most Third World countries.

Here, I feel that Dr Mahathir was mostly right. Every work morning I would come to the Kuala Lumpur NST office from Petaling Jaya by the Light Rail Transit (LRT), and sometimes return home with the commuter train (KTM). These rails are a fast and very affordable form of transportation, and no doubt of great benefit to the working class. And anyone who has been away for some years would go ga-ga over the superhighways: he or she could drive to Penang island and be back in a matter of hours, feeling none the worse for the experience.

Nevertheless, it would be surprising if no one had criticised the large government projects. The problem here is not the criticism which is normal and necessary in a democracy, but with the human tendency to oppose anything the other side does or proposes to do. Thus we always find something wrong with our neighbour - his lifestyle, his dirty front porch perhaps, or his bad parking, or even his noisy, nagging wife. We often discover something that is less than commendable in everyone except ourselves, and in every organisation except the one under our charge. It just feels good to find something to oppose, whether in politics or in our social life.

That could be a reason why we often behave like teenagers who, as many parents believe, are about the most contrary creatures in existence. Tell your teenage daughter to date only handsome millionaires and chances are she'll bring an unshaven, unemployable guitarist home for supper. Instruct your 15-year old son to focus on his studies and he'd be playing video games all through the weeknights. You're more likely to get them do what you want by preaching the opposite of what you really intended.

This was allegedly Aristotle's technique with his student, the mighty Alexander the Great. The story goes that Alexander had a habit of razing the cities he conquered, destroying, among other things, ancient books and other precious artifacts. So, when the young conqueror was contemplating on seizing a city well-known for its institutions of advanced learning, his learned tutor hastily approached him to give some heartfelt advice.

Alexander, knowing what Aristotle had in mind, stopped his venerable teacher and said pre-emptively: "Whatever you request, I will do the opposite."

"Burn the city," Aristotle quickly said.

The story's probably apocryphal, but the message remains authentic: most humans, and not only the young, dislike doing what they are asked to do and will frequently do what is least expected of them. This was the reason why, when Confucius revealed to Lao Tzu his plans for a better society, the latter told him: "The plans are fine, but the people will refuse to follow because you're telling them to do so."

As Dostoevsky's Underground Man points out, give a person all his needs and wants and he would still do something ungrateful, something to prove that he is in control of himself and not simply a piano key. Reason is

not sufficient to guide or direct human action: two and two can make four only when the Underground Man says so, and not until then.

That is why I've always read Mark Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* in a slightly different way from most people I know. For those unaware of the story, Jim Smiley was a fellow who would bet on anything - horse races, dog fights, cat fights, and even chicken fights if they'd been allowed to take place. Once, a lady was very sick but her husband informed him that, with God's blessing, she might get well yet. Smiley, without thinking, said he would bet against her recovery (by the way, he was also the one who finally lost the frog-jumping contest because his frog was secretly stuffed with quail shots by his rival).

Most readers, therefore, would see Smiley as someone addicted to betting. Yet, unlike his opponents, he would bet on ANY side. If you think you have a better chance betting on Smiley's choice, he would give you his choice and then bet against you.

In other words, Smiley appears to be someone who simply loved to be on the opposite side of anything in creation. In this, he is quite like the contrary teenager, the Underground Man, and indeed, like most other human beings.

Is the urge to be contrary a bad thing? Taken to the extreme, it probably is. Most of the time, however, opposite ideas give us new perspectives and serve as a sort of quality control over our actions. We are, at the very least, forced to acknowledge that there are at least two sides to every question, and thus more circumspect over our divine right to truth.

"Man is the measure of all things," says Protagoras, which means that knowledge is subjective and that, for each of us, things are what we believe them to be. The Greek sophist does not deny that there are objective realities, but that we could know them only as individual sensations. It is quite natural, then, that each of us should think ourselves right and others wrong, or at least not as right as we are. Knowing this, we should be alert and always try to listen to all sides. This is a powerful message not only for political parties, but also for all citizens in their pursuit of true judgement.

Especially parents.

So the next time our teenager says we do not understand the "real world," perhaps we don't. At least from their point of view.