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A cheap shot at a cheap price

"WATER Talks? If Only It Could", the propaganda booklet published by Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, should have been the title of a government-sponsored theatre of the absurd. But it couldn't have been more appropriate to reflect the already whitewashed water supply negotiations between the republic and Malaysia. Indeed, if only water could talk, it would be shrieking in disbelief at how cheap it is now - three sen per 4,500 litres, the price Singapore has been paying for the last 76 years.

Yes, if only water could talk, it would also ask the Singapore Government to name an item or a commodity that is still being sold at a price set in 1927. It would snigger at tactics and strategies used by the republic to stall talks so as to continue paying a pittance for as long as possible. And it would bemoan the fact that Singapore is content at only seeing - and wanting others to see - its side of the story.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad too must have had it with Singapore over the water talks when he said he was not hopeful of a resolution before he steps down in October. And who could blame him for the pessimism when the republic seems to be getting more unrealistic at every turn? This, of course, is made worse by unethical tactics such as the publication and distribution of a stilted, slanted broadside containing official correspondence between the two countries on the water issue.

The very act of making such letters public evinces a lack of decorum and respect for its negotiation partner on the part of Singapore and, more pointedly, a lack of sincerity in wanting to resolve the issue. The dearth of goodwill is appalling considering the fact that the republic itself has been making profits from the water it buys dirt-cheap from Johor.

If all this is a deliberate ploy by Singapore to delay settlement of the dispute until after Dr Mahathir steps down and a new Prime Minister takes over, thinking perhaps that he would be "less tough", it is sadly mistaken. The Malaysian Government will remain the same and the country's interests will continue to be actively pursued, only with a different person at the helm. Malaysians know this already.