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## Cultivating intellectual character

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A SOCIETY'S wealth is all its history, vision, strategies, treasures and spirit.

A country's wealth is its people. A generation's wealth is the collection of myths, legends and wisdom. It is also their ideas, knowledge and dreams.

A people's wealth is their intellectual character. From this intellectual character comes the courage to preserve, promote and sustain virtues; to uphold and stand up for truth, justice, goodness, beauty, freedom and equality.

Intellectual character is cultivated in many domains, both real-life and fictional. Perhaps the most celebrated intellectual characters in modern western literature is Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot.

In real life, Richard Feynman, whose curiosity is so inspiring, is a fine example of intellectual character from the sciences. Others include Ibn Khaldun and Arnold Toynbee, whose encyclopaedic knowledge and interpretations of history are refreshing and instructive.

People with intellectual character are continuously engaged in arriving at the heart or truth of the matter.

They search for the essence of problems. They examine methods to understand phenomena and reexamine the processes of their thoughts and the conclusions that they arrive at. They are continuously engaged in self-censorship and self-criticism.

They are not mechanistic, ritualistic or rhetorical. There is intellectual poetry as they unravel their thoughts in words, clauses and sentences.

The romance of intellectual character is not about the twists and turns of their expressions.

It is about the patterns and processes of their thoughts and reasoning.

It is about their metaphors and examples and illustrations. It is about their humour and wit, and the sharing of their discovery of meaning. There is no falsehood or distortions, nor intention of indoctrination.

In the history of Malaysian intellectual thought, there are not many high-profile public opinion leaders who can be considered leaders with intellectual character.

There is humour from the parasitological perspective of the late Professor Dr A.A. Sandosham, the medical-politico metaphors of the late Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Khoo, the economic realism of Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid, the sociological splendour of Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas, the theological philosophy of Professor Dr Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the linguistic enlightenment of Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Asmah Omar, and the persuasive everyday wisdom and profoundness of writer Adibah Amin.

From politics there is the honest and sincere logic of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the combative fiery logic of Karpal Singh and Lim Kit Siang, the profoundly simple explanations of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the suave universalism of Tan Sri Musa Hitam, the disciplined meticulous insights of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and the legalistic discourse of Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim and the pragmatism of Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

There is the sustained arguments and fervour of Tan Sri Ainuddin Wahid

and Datuk Dr Zainal Abidin Wahid and the indigenous encyclopaedic memory of Emeritus Professor Datuk Khoo Kay Kim.

There is the cultural elegance of Tan Sri Awang Had Salleh, the realistic vision and world knowledge of Tan Sri Dr Nordin Sopiee, and the poetic elaboration of the Great Cosmic Narrative of Muslim scholar Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady.

There are several more of the high and low profile Malaysians with intellectual character whose cognitive substance and styles remain unravelled.

The Instant Cafe Theatre is one group that is cryptic with intellectual character. Its popular humour tradition invites thoughtful observation which can contribute to the fostering of more open minds.

Typically, people with intellectual character are not politicians who are masters of rhetoric. They are the masters of substance and essence. They define reality from their own disciplines and examined life experiences.

People with intellectual character are able to be self-critical and have the capacity for intellectual repentance. They have great wit and humour which are at once self-mocking and a critique on society. They have the capacity to provide reflective commentary on social contradictions.

They are also forgiving and full of compassion. The presence, commitment and dynamism of these persons give vitality to the intellectual character of the country. Their distinctive commonality is that they are experts in their own fields but curious about everything else.

People with intellectual character invest in the application of their intelligence for the good of society through their commitment to rational logic, evidence, inquiry, balanced views and imagination.

They are observant and analytical, and are masters of metaphorical thoughts which allow for the admission of esoteric data in their analysis and imagery. They bring powerful, obsessive intellect to their inquiries.

They explore the nature of faith, the transformation of society, modernity, the nature of political power, human rights and responsibilities, accountability, social injustice, national unity, national development, intelligence and reason.

However, everywhere there seem to be evidence of a lapse or lack of intellectual character. Many educated people with cognitive abilities seem to be unable to free themselves from bias.

This phenomenon occurs when schooled people sustain prejudices. They think narrowly within their cultural and discipline boxes along narrow tracks.

Worse would be when people regarded as opinion leaders in society ignore evidence, distort facts and construct falsehood.

As academicians learn to seriously recognise the meaning of intellectual character, they learn to appreciate leaders from all fields who possess such strong intellectual character.

When leaders have high self-esteem and know that they are exemplars of intellectual character, they will unequivocally set the goal of developing intellectual character in the people.

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