

Civility of discourse
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DEPUTY Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's call to Malaysians, particularly our politicians, to stop "raising contentious issues in a contentious manner", is essentially a needed reminder of the special responsibility we all bear when expressing and exchanging views about the things we are concerned about when it comes to our country.

It's a special responsibility we hold, because Malaysia was never an agreement in which there were no differences to begin with. But instead of allowing those differences to stand in the way, our founding fathers found ways to agree. That they were able to develop a consensus to bind a people made up of a multitude of ethnic groups and religions was an inch short of a miracle, and it is something we should always bear in mind.

True, in the 50 years since Merdeka, some differences have lingered in the background. Perhaps new ones cropped up along the way as subsequent generations of Malaysians came of age. Realising that there are issues we can perhaps never fully resolve, how the "conflict" is managed becomes critical — how our differences of views are articulated. Done with inadequate care, it will be our anger over what we feel is wrong that ends up becoming the bigger issue. This is the worry — that in the discourse on where Malaysia seems headed, shadows get painted when there are none. We see it in the occasional though still worrying instances when politicians in a blind populist quest for support from their community utter hurtful words specifically calculated to sow discontent and anger in others. As Najib asked: "Is the pursuit of political support the be-all and end-all of a political party? Are we so desperate for votes that we are willing to sow hatred and suspicion?"

We have a duty to make sure that the answer to both questions is "no". And no, too, to those who feel that a reminder to temper the discourse with greater responsibility amounts to suppression. The deputy prime minister agreed that Malaysians should not "gloss over the country's flaws and sweep problems under the carpet". What he questioned was why some are bent on suggesting that things are worse now, and using a divisive logic in their arguments. In standing up for what we consider to be right and against what we think is wrong, the choice of direction we want to take the discourse to is ours. Let us not make the wrong one.

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