

When Anwar supported Muhyiddin against liberty

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COMMENT The Asia economics editor of The Economist magazine asked me earlier this week how Malaysians react to the endeavour of Ideas' (Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs) to propose policies based on 'first principles'.

I said the biggest problem that we actually face is that most people usually do not ask about first principles. Principles don't seem to matter. Debating technicalities takes precedent.

It is this lack of first principles that results in a mish-mash of policies, and even more confused implementation of policies, which in the end puts us, the citizens, in a dilemma.

najib abdul razak in perth chogm 1Let me use as an example the recent debacle over the teaching of science and maths in English (PPSMI) .

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (left) said in 2009 that the era of 'government knows best' had ended with him at the helm.

I was delighted with this statement, even though I think that era never existed.

Najib also went on to say that he wants to put people first.

Both these are, to put it simply, wonderful assertions.

The Parents Action Group on Education (Page) has been lobbying hard for the government to respect choices made by parents.

They submitted dossier after dossier calling for the government to allow parents to choose whether they want their children to be taught science and maths in English or in Malay.

For Page, by giving parents choice, the government can show that it respects the wishes of the rakyat, and acknowledges that it cannot possibly know better than parents about what is best for an individual child.

I believe Page's proposal is fair and balanced. All they want is choice, not the imposition of a policy assumed to be fitting for all.

Page's plea also fits in well with one of the core first principles that we in Ideas are promoting, that in a free society, individuals must have both liberty and responsibility.

Giving choice to parents means we respect their liberty to decide what is best for them and their families.

Similarly, by getting parents involved in making educational choices, we will eventually create a more responsible society, not a society wherein parents 'dump' their children in schools because they assume teachers will take over their responsibility as parents.

Parents coerced

Let me make one clarification. When Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister introduced PPSMI and made it compulsory, I was against it. My reason at that time was that parents were coerced rather than given choice.

To me, that too was wrong. The current proposal by Page is superior than what Mahathir introduced.

Coming back to the current debate, if we look at how Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin reacts to Page's plea, it seems as if he is bent on rubbishing Najib's assertions.

At the time this article was written, Muhyiddin (right) still believes that simply because the prime minister appointed him as minister of education, he automatically knows better than you and I about what is best for our children.

Hence, he refuses to let us choose how our children will be educated.

Clearly he does not share the same first principles with the very person who appointed him.

The same can be said about some leaders in Pakatan Rakyat too. Many of us would be familiar with their call for kuasa rakyat (people power) .

This has been one of the slogans they have shouted for many years. Ironically, when a group like Page asks for the power to be given to the rakyat to choose, many Pakatan leaders balk.

This time, the same Pakatan leaders choose to be in cahoots with the deputy prime minister to deny choice from the rakyat.

Foul play

Similarly, when Anwar Ibrahim was denied his liberty, they claimed it was foul play for political reasons.

But they hardly hesitate to deny individuals like you and me our liberty to choose what is best for our families, perhaps because it is politically expedient for them to do so. After all, they too are hungry for Malay votes.

In fact, in a statement dated Jan 15, 2009, Anwar (right) himself labelled those who support PPSMI as traitors to the Malay struggle, making him sound more extreme than some of the nationalists in Umno.

Once again, we see how the lack of commitment to first principles - that of individual liberty and responsibility - led to the same people who shout loudest for kuasa rakyat (people power) to unashamedly deny the rakyat from kuasa when it counts.

I cannot hide my disappointment with some of those who claim to want a Malaysia that is free and fair.

What can be more free and more fair than giving the choice to common people like you and me?

Most of the arguments against PPSMI as an option are technical issues.

I posit that if only we could agree on the first principle first, then it should become the responsibility of government to solve the technical hurdles. They should not give us technical hurdles as an excuse right from the start.

It is certainly ironic - or perhaps telling? - that when politicians from both sides unite, we suddenly find ourselves losing our liberty.

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