

**Debate idea set to bloom**  
**MalaysiaKini.com**  
**February 20, 2012**  
**Terence Netto**

COMMENT The topic for the debate did not matter; in any case, it was too vague for the speakers to make much sense of it.

The moderator was not up to the task; in any case, allowing questions from antagonistic members of rival parties was an invitation to dishevelment.

Nevertheless, the speakers got off the hits they must have been honing all week; in any event, this was whole point of the exercise.

chua soi lek and lim guan eng debateIn sum, the principle of debate and of its utility between leaders of contending political parties came off well from the Dr Chua Soi Lek versus Lim Guan Eng televised clash yesterday.

Score one for the fledgling idea which may well come to be called the 'Great Malaysian Electoral Debates'.

This series - it appears there may be a round two between Soi Lek and Guan Eng, this time in Bahasa Malaysia or English - could well be a worthy successor of the 'Great Malaysian Economic Debate'.

The latter was at one time held every year in November or so, by the Economics Society of Universiti Malaya and hosted at the Dewan Tunku Chancellor.

Those debates pitted government ministers against opposition leaders and were moderated by university professors and featured questions from the floor.

They were not televised but were hugely attended, with any signs of flakiness among the invited speakers roundly booed by the largely student audience.

After the debates took a hit from Dr Mahathir Mohamad who, despite taking part in one edition in 1974 where he gave an impressive performance, went on to deride the series as neither great in stature nor economic in content, the annual affair was gradually discontinued and the principle of debate between leaders of contending political parties withered on the vine.

Pressure is on Najib

Now the drooping concept is being revived through the examples of Anwar Ibrahim's match-up in 2008 with Shabery Cheek on live television on the topic of the price of oil, followed by Koh Tsu Koon's head-to-head duel with Lim shortly after, and the recent joust between Khairy Jamaluddin and Rafizi Ramli.

MCA president Chua had it somewhat right when after his going toe-to-toe with Lim yesterday, he offered the view that the winners of the exchange were the Malaysian people, presumably because the televised contest gave them the chance to evaluate the debating mettle of leaders vying for their votes in the coming general election.

Needless to say, the grand finale to these preludes would be BN supremo Najib Razak going head-to-head with Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar has said in jest that he is agreeable to allowing Najib double the speaking time allotted him; so

keen is the Pakatan chief's desire to cater to the need of the public to assess on television the convictions that animate our top leaders and the articulation they command.

With TV having become a ubiquitous medium, the absence of a live debate between contenders for the premiership of the country must rank as a deprivation to the electorate.

Lim did well to advert to the need for a televised duel between Najib and Anwar in his opening remarks at yesterday's contest.

Thus he used his debate with Soi Lek to constructive and collaborative effect, displaying in that way the rapport he enjoys with his Pakatan supremo.

Plurality of views

Small as that tell-tale sign was, it threw into relief the utilitarian, not to mention, exploitative nature of the bond between Soi Lek's MCA and Najib's Umno.

On the one hand, the former berates DAP for being a tool in PAS's quest to impose theocratic rule in Malaysia; on the other, MCA's ally, Umno, chides PAS for sacrificing its religious ideals by going to bed with DAP.

Soi Lek's relentless espousal of the point about DAP allowing itself to be duped by PAS in tandem with Umno's taunting the same party for the same weakness vis-à-vis DAP make the ruling BN coalition resemble a boat whose oarsmen are rowing in opposite directions.

That fundamental incoherence contrasts with the make-up of an opposition coalition which allows for a plurality of views within an overarching agreed-on manifesto that prioritises good and clean governance, and democratic norms, an agenda that by its very operation would preclude the imposition of theocracy.

Lim used yesterday's debate to hew steadily to that message in the face of an opponent whose lunging and lurching was like cargo come loose in the hold of a boat rowed by contrarian oarsmen.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd  
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/189582>