

**Lessons from the Chua-Lim debate**  
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Although the Feb 18 debate between MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng was fraught with flaws, there is no doubt that Malaysians expect to see more of such events in the near future.

lim guan eng at asli debate 200212 02Thus far, critics have pointed out that the debate was problematic from the onset, because of the pointless racial overtones of the debate theme 'Chinese at a Crossroads: Is the Two Party System Becoming a Two-Race System'.

Critics have also pointed out that both Chua and Lim veered off topic, that the moderator failed to control the flow of the debate, and that the audience were mostly badly behaved and that MCA supporters had abused the Q&A session to attack Lim.

Debate questions from flooSome supporters even jeered at the debaters and carried placards condemning them.

Debate moderator Tang Ah Chai admitted that there were many weaknesses during the event. He said that instead of a dignified debate, the event descended into a "political ceramah".

But had it not been for the flaws, Tang believes that there would be fewer people talking about the debate.

"The debate is not perfect. Yet, it is a beginning," he told Malaysiakini in a recent interview.

'Emulate US, Taiwan'

Tang, who has moderated several debates before, believes that the US and Taiwan presidential debate system which are similar, should be adopted.

NONEHe said such a system would set the debate format, flow and boundaries beforehand which will encourage debaters to conduct a meaningful and intelligent exchange on policies.

And to avoid the Q&A fiasco at the Chua-Lim debate, Tang said the US and Taiwan style of selecting a specialist panel to quiz the debaters ought to be adopted.

Among others, the panel should consist of senior media practitioners and experts related to the topic. This will ensure that there will be a certain level of quality and consistency in the questions posed.

lim guan eng chua soi lek debate reaction from audience"This way, there will be no party supporters who will take the opportunity to stir up trouble," he said.

The 2008 presidential debate between Barack Obama and John McCain was moderated by US broadcaster PBS' senior journalist Jim Lehrer.

The recent Taiwanese presidential election debate had also seen media and civil society figures pose questions to the candidates, to keep the focus on national policies.

'60 minutes not enough'

Asked why he did not try to direct the two debaters back to the original topic, Tang said the allotted time for the session was short, thus he did not want to interrupt the duo.

chua soi lek and lim guan eng debate - moderator Tan Ah Chai "The debate is only one hour, after reducing the time for the moderator's introduction and audience's questions, each side had only 20 minutes to speak and I dared not interrupt them.

"I think for the next debate, we should have a longer time, maybe one-and-a-half hours or two hours," he said.

Previously, Tang (above) had told the press that he did not intentionally take more questions from MCA supporters as alleged by some Pakatan Rakyat supporters.

He said that he was merely following the instructions from live broadcasters Astro AEC as well as event organisers Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (Asli) and MCA think-tank the Institute of Strategic Analysis and Policy Research (Insap).

Lim had claimed that 12 out of 13 questions posed to him during the debate came from MCA. He also accused them of using the opportunity to attack him rather than pose civilised questions related to the debate.

#### Setting objectives

Policy analyst Tricia Yeoh, who once headed Asli's Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS), believes that a proper debate should come with a properly defined objective.

"A debate by itself is pointless unless there is an objective. For example, an objective can be to spell out (the debating parties', for example Umno or PKR's) stands on a particular topic. We must set boundaries," she said.

Yeoh suggested that future debates feature several topics to allow party representatives to present their views on several issues in a structured manner.

She cites the 2008 televised debate between PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim and then-information minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek on oil prices as a good format.

"The moderator can begin by asking questions on a few topics, even before the opening remarks. This makes it easier for viewers to follow their arguments," she said.

She stressed that a good debate needs a good moderator to put the right questions to the debaters and interrupt when the debaters stray from the topic.

"A very good moderator is important; we need someone who can challenge the debaters, more focus on policy issue, rather than empty talk."

#### Educating the audience

On the poor behavior of the live audience during the Feb 18 debate, Tang said Malaysians are still new to the idea of political debates because it rarely happens.

Debate questions from floor He said some party supporters took the opportunity for grandstanding and to vent against their opponent, rather than to pose critical questions.

He said audiences need to be educated on the basic rules of debate and this can only be done by having more debates.

"It is something like going to the cinema. You should know that mobile phones need to be switched off and to avoid talking in the cinema.

“So we have to upgrade the quality of audiences and not limit their participation,” he said.

Yeoh also said the root of the problems is that Malaysians are not trained in critical thinking and they tend to accept what their leaders say.

“We have to learn how to think critically We should be able to question our own leaders.”

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