

Making 'two pillows, one dream' concept work
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By Chris Tan

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way ..." (Charles Dickens, from 'A Tale Of Two Cities').

We are more alike than different

Charles Dickens' "A Tale Of Two Cities" was published in 1859. Using the French Revolution as its canvas, he described in vivid detail what happens when people, in their zeal to correct offences - having become so deeply mired in their recollections and perceptions of past excesses and injustices - start demonstrating the same behaviors of their so called "oppressors".

The lines between Good and Evil, Justice and Revenge, Common Sense and Popular Sentiment, become blurred in the pursuit of consolidating political positions.

After 150 years, Dickens' message rings as loudly and as clearly as it did, I'm sure, when it was first published.

Classic literature is rife with such metaphors. George Orwell's "Animal Farm", and William Golding's "Lord of The Flies" immediately come to mind as prime examples of the ironic turnabouts that we Penangites might describe using our now famous Pi mai, pi mai, tang tu. I'm sure there are others.

Mankind has provided much fodder for critical authors to entertain and cajole us with our own, shall we say, eccentricities?

The bottom line: "We are more alike than we are different" despite the flags we carry.

Differences are not problems

Rich or Poor. Agnostic or Religious. Socialist or Capitalist. Optimist or Pessimist. Introvert or Extrovert. You can name any number of similar pairings. These are merely polarities. They are different ends of the same spectrum. These differences between us are what make the fabric of our society richer.

Much has been written, all over the world, expounding the benefits of diversity and the need to build upon them. These differences are NOT problems.

Yet, in serious national forums, leaders and critiques, often forget (or probably conveniently disregard?) the distinction between polarities and problems.

The distinction being: You can solve problems. You cannot "solve" a polarity.

Let me offer the simplest of examples : I am a boy. You are a girl. There are certainly pronounced differences between you and I - and what wondrous differences they are too.

However, these differences most certainly cannot be "solved" - with apologies to the practitioners of sexual reassignment surgery - but they most certainly can be managed.

Acknowledging Polarities

During the administration of Tun Abdullah Badawi, a particular polarity surfaced in the national discussion. The growing disparity between Malaysia's urban centres and the rest of the hinterland was recognised as an issue that needed to be addressed.

"Divide" became an overused buzzword. The economic divide. The educational divide. The digital divide. Etc.

But the government never saw this as a "problem" to be solved. No policy was created to equalise urban and rural communities as that would smack too much of the most extreme manifestation of socialism.

Instead, the government recognised that the different regions of the nation could leverage upon each other. And that by coordinating different urban and sub-urban/rural development strategies, as a nation, we would be able to unleash multiple synergies.

This led to the launch of the Growth Corridor Program in 2007. Starting with the Iskandar Development Corridor, the program eventually grew to include the Northern, East Coast, Sabah and Sarawak regions with their own Corridor Masterplans.

In March of 2008, the so called "political tsunami" happened. Suddenly, and thanks to our nation's constitution, Federal and State leaders were forced to work together irrespective of their political loyalties. Nowhere was this more acutely felt than in the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) where three of the original four menteri besar and chief ministers in the NCER council were changed just as the implementation plans were getting off the ground.

The MBs of Kedah and Perak, and the CM of Penang ceased to be BN representatives. And they ALL had final veto power over any project to be implemented in their states. This was assured under the provisions of the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) Act.

It would have been easy to amend or repeal the NCIA Act if anyone was so inclined. The BN, despite losing its two-thirds parliamentary majority did still have a simple majority to see to it.

The program was in early infancy; its absence would not have been felt. And it would certainly have been easy for the federal government to cease funding the Corridor projects to "punish" the voters. There were calls from disgruntled local politicians to do just that. But wisdom prevailed.

For maybe the first time, certainly in my memory, three Pakatan Rakyat CMs sat in committees chaired by the Prime Minister - in his capacity as leader of the BN - to guide the development plans of the NCIA.

The responsibility of ensuring the continued prosperity of the NCER, anchored by the manufacturing powerhouses of Penang, required the wisdom of Solomon.

Any council member who was seeking to compromise the development plans for political expediency was assured of almost immediate exposure as the "false mother" in that most famous example of King Solomon's tales. (To settle the claims of two women over a young child, King Solomon offered to cut the child into two pieces. The false mother accepted the deal. The real mother gave up her claim in order that the child may live.)

Consolidating the bipartisan approach

In the NCER, and under the administration of current Prime Minister Dato Sri Najib, the concept of dua bantal, satu mimpi" (two pillows, one dream) stopped being merely a witty catchphrase, but became a practical work method. The welfare of the people of Penang, of the NCER, and by extension, of the entire nation dictated no other option.

Media statements by local politicians on both sides, amplified by populist media approaches, may stir up

the odd storm in a teacup every now and then.

But the reality is that, behind the scenes, the administrative and the political sides are in constant consultation.

As I mentioned earlier, the NCIA Act requires the express approval of the CMs to implement projects within their states.

To understand and know that this consultative approach is working well, one only needs to peruse media archives to see how much the NCIA has accomplished in the NCER, including in DAP-governed Penang.

In early-2011, the Performance Management and Delivery Unit in the Prime Minister's Office, better known as Pemandu, recognised the opportunity to catalyse the implementation plans of the growth corridors.

Pemandu saw that the well laid out plans of the corridor authorities could be "turbocharged" by further refinement of implementation aspects, and convinced the Cabinet to let the corridor authorities to "go for it", putting aside political differences.

The "Corridors and Cities" (C&C) Labs were duly kicked off. In typical Pemandu lab format, the "planning and scoping" process took far longer to complete than the actual lab work itself.

Therein lies the recognition that for a lab's outcomes and recommendations to be "implementable" and to be laser focused on the correct priorities, the output must be able to withstand public scrutiny by all stakeholders - government & opposition, public and private sector, and the general public alike.

To accomplish this critical pre-requisite, intensive consultation was held between all stakeholders concerned - Federal agencies, State agencies, private sector players, etc.

The scope and direction of the Georgetown Lab, for example, while driven by the NCIA and facilitated by Pemandu, was dictated largely by the Penang state government via the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI, as it was then known; it has since been renamed the Penang Institute) and its Executive Director, YB Liew Chin Tong, MP for Bukit Bendera. The DAP Secretary General's political secretary, En Zairil Khir Johari, was appointed as the key liaison person to NCIA and PEMANDU throughout the entire process.

With this foundation of partnership and planning, it was no surprise the NCER/Georgetown Lab became a great success. All of its recommendations were reviewed AND approved by the BN Cabinet. And this was despite Penang being governed by the Pakatan Rakyat.

You could not ask for a more tangible demonstration of the seriousness of our leaders to focus on matters that matter - economic prosperity for ALL. The "dua bantal, satu mimpi" concept is becoming real.

The lab recommendations will be shared with the citizens of Georgetown and the NCER in the upcoming "Open Day". Please watch out for details!

It is the best of times; it is the worst of times.

One cannot help being energised and encouraged by the level of quality, detail and transparency built into the transformation programs.

Credit for creating this paradigm shift goes to no one individual but to the collective chain of command that enabled the work to be taken to its current lengths.

Confidence in making the quantum leap to a high income nation has never been higher. Truly, in this context, this is the best of times - with even better times to come.

Unfortunately, one also has to work tremendously hard to resist being discouraged. The transformation programs are being implemented upon a backdrop of unprecedented levels of cynicism and skepticism among Malaysians about the government's sincerity and resolve to effect the long awaited changes.

I suppose the negativity is understandable. Maybe, if I was forced to painfully endure one doctor after another, and unsuccessful treatments, I too would be skeptical of the latest physician with the cure, too. But how would I know if I don't adopt and stay with programme prescribed by the doctor?

The same argument could be used on both sides of the political divide. Then, I guess, you have to look at the track record of the players. That would be the only logical process.

Working together: The inconvenient truth

I started this article with reference to a literary work that was based on historical events. Perhaps I should end on a lighter note and make reference to my favourite hero, James Bond.

In Ian Fleming's "The Spy Who Loved Me", you will recall, in the movie version, that while the Cold War was still on, James Bond and his Soviet "counterpart", had to work together against a common enemy, evil businessman Karl Stromberg, who was threatening both their countries.

We, Malaysians, have had a lifelong love affair with intrigue and all things sensational. So I hope people will like and relate to my James Bond analogy.

Transforming the delivery system, and transforming the economy is NOT a battle between political ideologies.

Politicians and their parties merely represent polarities on the ideological spectrum. Leaders can and often do, as per my examples, find ways to manage these polarities.

The problems to be solved, and our nation's true enemies lie outside the political arena. Global economic movements will continue irrespective of our domestic politics.

The delivery systems upon which our nation's competitiveness depends are governed not by politicians, despite any illusions to the contrary. Issues there are structural, not political.

I suggest my fellow citizens take the trouble to understand what truly lies under the Malaysian selimut (blanket), and if your eyes are open wide, you will see how strange bedfellows can come together and make the dream come true.

Duabantal, satumimpi.

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