

Best for DAP not to fan the embers

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COMMENT The art of letting well enough alone merely requires foresight, but the art of letting bad enough alone demands clairvoyance.

That makes it a rare art indeed; therefore the DAP may be forgiven for not having mastered it.

At this stage of the saga of Tunku Abdul Aziz Tunku Ibrahim, where the just-resigned DAP vice-chairperson has giddily hopped from a position of dissent on party policy to denunciation of Lim Guan Eng's supposed foibles, and, latterly, to endorsement of Prime Minister Najib Razak's reforms, it's best for the DAP not to fan the embers by responding to Tunku Aziz's latest fulminations.

A response would send the controversy into another spiral that would be gleefully exploited by DAP's critics to tar it with the brush its detractors in Penang and elsewhere have tried to use against the party but have failed thus far to smear it.

There are times when it's best to display a stiff upper lip to stem the waves of controversy.

This is one of those times; it would be better served by reflection on this episode of how a supposedly prominent catch has come to be a dissident-turned-carping critic in so short a span and how this could have been prevented.

True, in hindsight all vision is 20/20, but the DAP's vaunted eagerness to be seen as amenable to Malays as a party of political representation was a case of overreach.

In quickly embracing the newly-enlisted Tunku Aziz in August 2008 and elevating him to the lofty position of vice-chairperson of the party, the DAP fell for the public image of the man than for his actual substance.

Courtly manners and Old World charm

One does not know if the DAP would have been leery of Tunku Aziz had they known about the mutterings against him in the lower echelons of Transparency International (Malaysia), where he was founder-president, or at the Royal Selangor Club (RSC) where he was president for two controversy-ridden years (from 2004 to 2006); so euphoric was the party to draw a prominent Malay to its ranks that the notes that danced in the halo of the inductee's public reputation would simply, one suspects, have not mattered.

The fact of the matter, at least in the opinion of this scribe who enjoyed an insider's view of the RSC phase of Tunku Aziz's leadership in my capacity as editor of the club newsletter, the man's attachment to principle was brittle.

Tunku Aziz's courtly manners and Old World charm are potent aspects of his persona.

In an age where aristocracy is fast losing its luster from proliferating instances of behaviour that reflect the corruption of its sensibility, it is easy to deprecate the value of these manners or this charm.

However, these endearments are of small worth if it serves as cover for aristocracy's regnant weakness: the convenient setting aside of principle in tussles where its interests, or that of its minions, is at stake.

To aristocrats, propriety often matters more than principle, form more than substance.

The mere offer of a perquisite (a fellowship at Penang Institute), no doubt a gaffe from the angle of propriety, is enough to trigger in Tunku Aziz a paroxysm of public rage serious enough to goad him into a severance of membership in the DAP.

Worse, in barely the time it takes to clear one's throat that severance had now segued into support for the PM's reforms, small matter that those reforms - from the standpoint of a considerable body of opinion in the country - smack of glister than gold.

Right now, the DAP's miscue on Tunku Aziz has the savour of a public relations disaster. It can limit its scale by simply refusing to engage in an orgy of argument and reply with him. By recognising that a discreet silence is the better part of valour in this controversy, the DAP would be leaving bad enough alone.

Potent magnet for Malay membership

That and a muting of its campaign to attract more Malays to membership in its fold would help alleviate its current frustrations in the face of Tunku Aziz's broadsides now mutating into new fangled enthusiasm for PM Najib's reforms.

The DAP would have in its possession a potent magnet for Malay membership of its party if it were to succeed in making affordable housing for the middle class a reality on the island of Penang.

It is a very difficult goal but should it be feasible in what is almost certain to be a second term in charge of a Pakatan Rakyat state government in Penang, the DAP would not have to hanker after Malay membership; it would be a cinch by dint of its accomplishment of an integral aspect of its social democratic vision.

As thing stands in the saga of Tunku Aziz's erstwhile membership and rejection of the party, the DAP has suffered a nosebleed.

It can staunch the flow by the discretion of verbal restraint and reverse matters by successfully addressing an issue that would affect middle-class Malays where it most matters: their pockets.

The least that would be said when the DAP attracts members from this strata of Malay society is that it would be doubtful they would have to endure the hazard of mercurial aristocratic ire.

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