

The scorn that Kassim pours on Anwar
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Nobody seems to have devised a way of building intellectual circles without adding immeasurably to the usual stock of nastiness, bitchery and backbiting that are the lot of human nature.

Perhaps that is the price society has to pay for the centres that generate ideas.

Concerning the spleen author-cum-politician Kassim Ahmad vented against Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim and, to a lesser extent, PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat in an interview he gave Malaysiakini, one is not surprised at its anger, given what we know of the orneriness that regularly courses through intellectual circles.

But from someone like Kassim, you don't expect what he says about personages as weighty to the political scene as Anwar and Nik Aziz to be an intellectual content-free zone, unburdened by reason or analysis.

This isn't a crime; ordinary mortals, even intellectual ones, can be moody and in that state may feel as depleted as an overdrawn bank account and exasperated at the predicament.

Invective, paraphrasing Dr Samuel Johnson on the topic of patriotism, may be the last refuge of weather-worn intellectuals.

Repeat readings of the vitriol Kassim spewed on Anwar and Nik Aziz in the Malaysiakini interview indicate that his rant was a mood-piece, a window into the unstable emotional state intellectual elitists are heir to.

NONEA quarter century has passed since Anwar incurred the wrath of Kassim in the controversy over the latter's book 'Hadis: Satu Penilaian Semula', which was an argument for a reappraisal of the status of the hadith (the sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad) in the Islamic canon.

The book was banned and though Kassim now absolves Anwar of responsibility for the ban, he was known to be apoplectic at the very mention of the man's name in the recriminations that followed.

Rage continues to burn

Twenty-five years on from that furore, it appears Kassim's hackles on the matter of Anwar's presumed role against what he was trying to do - get a debate going on the status of the hadith in Islamic exegesis - have not subsided.

That the passage of a quarter century has not softened the edge of that anger tells you that intellectual vendettas can be as enduring as tribal ones.

NONEThe scorn Kassim pours on Anwar is more denigratory of him as an intellectual than it is defining of the differences between the two exponents of Islamic thought.

One would have felt that the discovery that Anwar's stance these days on Islam's interpretation - away from textual rigidity and inclined to emphasise the principle behind the

parable - would have entitled Kassim to a sense of triumph, of vindication.

Instead one finds the rage that must have attended the beginnings of the controversy more than two decades ago continues to burn till this day with an intensity that is disabling.

The difference between a thinker like Kassim and an intellectual politician like Anwar is that the thinker looks for a universal truth that will help explain unique events while a cerebral politico tends to endow the unique with an intimation of the universal.

The danger in the one is monism - the attempt to explain the world through the lens of a single idea; the limitation in the other lies in the utilitarian value attached to ideas - as a motor to drive people to the change that society needs, and nothing more.

Let's say the difference in the two attitudes is not calculated to engender mutual respect.

Here lies the rub.

The underlying ideals of the separate political trajectories of Kassim and Anwar, from their genesis in the 1960s to the present, have more in common than the principals may be willing to concede.

More that unites than divides them

Intellectuals both, possessed of a worldview that transcends their provincial upbringing, exponents of the Malay language as a unifying medium, and campaigners for the alleviation of Malay poverty within the context of inclusive development of all of Malaysian society, there's more that unites than divides them.

NONE You wouldn't suspect there were these similarities between the two from the vituperation Kassim has just now shown Anwar.

But in a curious way the passage of time tends to draw a veil over faults and render old conflicts obsolete provided successful creation endures.

If the opposition Pakatan Rakyat endures, that would count as successful and outstanding creation - no need to mention to whose credit that would be.

Poet TS Eliot noticed the absolving effect of time and successful creation on the scourges and disputes of the English civil way. In 'Little Gidding' he wrote:

I think of a king at nightfall,
Of three men and more on a scaffold,
And a few other who died forgotten,
In places here and abroad.

These men and those who opposed them,
And those whom they opposed,
Accept the constitution of silence
And are folded in a single party.

Given the threats to national well-being posed by the Umno-BN plutocracy, now at the height of its extractive ardor, only the narcissism of small differences can prevent the broad assembly of forces and leaders, formerly (like Kassim) and presently (like Anwar) opposed

to it, from being "folded in a single party."

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