

PM can dish out but can't take it
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COMMENT There was not only a no-show by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak at the opposition leader's response in Parliament yesterday to the Budget address, there was also the absence of upscale members of his ministerial cohort to contend with.

Skipper and subalterns decided that they had better things to do and gave the miss to the disputation-cum-alternative version of procurement and spending that usually constitutes the lead oppositionist's reply.

There was no evidence among the ministerial set of the curiosity that economics is not just the dismal science of Thomas Carlyle's observation; it is the study of rational choice between alternative visions of how to appropriate and gainfully use finite resources.

One has to look at the alternatives for a keener evaluation of the scheme one has elected for oneself.

By their absence at the opposition leader's reply to the Budget, the government's ministerial cohort was suggesting they have no taste for what writer F Scott Fitzgerald proposed as the test of a first-rate intelligence: the ability to hold to two opposed ideas at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

In a sense, Anwar Ibrahim had already prefigured this scenario of crass governmental indifference to ideas opposed to regnant ones.

'Anything from you is gold'

A few days before the PM-cum-finance minister's Budget speech on Sept 28, Anwar told a packed audience at the Royal Selangor Club that the questions he was willing to tackle after his luncheon speech to them would have to allow for a quick wind-up because he had to attend his coalition's alternative budget session scheduled for 3pm that day at the offices of the parliamentary opposition leader.

"You know," revealed Anwar, "it is not easy sitting-in with Kit Siang and Hadi (his fellow Pakatan Rakyat leaders, Lim Kit Siang of DAP and Abdul Hadi Awang, the PAS president). They come with their questions and proposals and one has to be alert to all of them or you can't cope."

Recalled Anwar: "It was so much easier when I was with Umno and BN. They don't bother to study cabinet papers and when you propose something new, they don't care to know how it will affect things. It's like whatever that's on the table for discussion is approved with little or no debate or discussion."

Anwar said this was not the case within the leadership circles of Pakatan. Things were not exactly like a Socratic club but close, inferred the opposition supremo.

"They question what you propose and they come up with suggestions for changes," disclosed Anwar. "You have always to be on your toes."

And then Anwar did a very good pantomime of a former cabinet minister whose identity was obvious from the accent the PKR leader mimicked: "Anything that comes from you is gold, Datuk Seri ... anything that comes from you."

An irrepressible rictus of delight was visible in an audience that could make no mistake as to the object of Anwar's caricature.

Tiptoeing around tough decisions

With a subservient mainstream media available to spin the government's Budget as if it were manna from heaven, one supposes there was no real need for the Umno-BN ministerial troupe to grant the opposition leader a modicum of attention.

As for the PM himself, the past may well be prologue.

It is useful at this stage to recall a feature of his deportment when he was youth and sports minister and then education minister before he became defence and deputy prime minister.

Whenever there was a tough decision to make, he would tiptoe around the need to make it. And, then, when decision time was no longer avoidable, the announcement would be made by the deputy and not the principal holder of the portfolio who would contrive to make himself scarce.

On the other hand, whenever a decision was not hard to do, and appeared likely to draw bouquets more than brickbats, minister Najib made himself conspicuous in announcing it amid adornments to his public image as a politico of mostly rounded edges.

The ministerial past of the PM has indeed been predictive, which is why all the fancy managerial jargon about 'transformation' he readily employs comports so oddly with the past image and current reality of a leader who has never heard of US President Harry Truman's brusque advice to the clay-footed:

"If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

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