

Umno allows the know-nothings free rein

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COMMENT Only the other day, PKR central leadership council member Khalid Jaafar observed that Umno has "zero intellectuals".

Khalid, one of PKR's vaunted intellectuals, made the remarks at a public forum in Penang held to launch the Bahasa translation of Friedrich Hayek's 'Road to Serfdom'.

The book is regarded as one of the seminal treatises of the 20th century. Its central argument was that a free market system allowed society to make the least bad allocation of its resources.

The 'serfdom' in the book's title refers to the bondage that Hayek predicted would result from an economy of command in decisions affecting the allocation of resources.

Hayek's 'serfdom' can also be taken to mean the stultification that results when not just scarce economic resources are poorly allocated but also when a society's intellectual resources are neglected, disregarded or simply forgotten.

Khalid (left) may have been too sweeping in his assessment that Umno is void of intellectuals.

In the past two to three weeks alone, Umno has had three of its stellar lights vent views that demonstrated that its intellectual veins are not exactly anemic.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the country's most durable parliamentarian, in a thoughtful speech at the opening of the Perkasa annual general assembly, told the Malay right-wing party that it was barking up the wrong tree when it came to fighting for the economic rights of the majority race.

Razaleigh was not alone among the Umno crowd in taking rationally argued and liberal stances.

Saifuddin Abdullah - he of the Global Movement for Moderates - in recent weeks has been consistently trying to direct illuminating shafts into the national debate on already risen prices of good, and looming increases in tariffs on electricity and highway tolls.

Then Musa Hitam told the 60th annual History Summit that there was a need for a new historical narrative about the country's origins to avert the disintegration that stems from parochial renditions of our past.

In sum, Musa was saying that our education system lacks a core curriculum that could imbue its citizens with values held in common - the glue that is indispensable for national integration.

Umno outsources thinking to Perkasa

In his sweeping lament on the intellectual vacuum in Umno's vaults, PKR's Khalid neglected a rigorous rule laid down by TS Eliot that an intellectual has to "look at life steadily, and look at it whole."

Perhaps, Khalid allowed himself to be driven to distraction by the rabid elements in the party who are reflexively anti-intellectual and who have outsourced their thinking to Perkasa.

Particularly astounding to Khalid was the opinion of Umno president and Prime Minister Najib Razak that liberal thinking was "wrong and a threat to Islam."

Khalid noted that Najib (right) was suffering from intellectual amnesia because it was under the rule of the PM's father, Abdul Razak Hussein in the 1970s that the Rukunegara, regarded as the guide to national unity, was inaugurated with the goal of creating a liberal society enunciated in its preamble.

"In truth, Razak was the architect of the Rukunegara which in its preamble states that we want to build a liberal society," Khalid reminded his audience at the book launch in Penang.

Khalid did not allude to the possibility of Najib suffering from a political version of Freud's Oedipus Complex, which the famed psychoanalyst described as a son's desire to do-in the father; he merely regretted the lapse of memory that led the son to renounce the liberalism that these days Umno's top brass finds so alien an orientation.

In its aversion to the liberal orientation embedded in the Rukunegara, the party just now has hit a nadir of sorts when Umno Veterans Club secretary Mustapha Yaakub called on the editor of Catholic weekly The Herald to convert to Islam if he insisted on using the term 'Allah' which Umno, with the concurrence of our Courts of Appeal, has decreed is exclusive to Muslims, with an exemption granted to Christians in

Sabah and Sarawak.

This is the kind of head-twirling stuff that a government and a political party invite when they decide to proscribe the liberal mindset as anathema.

Letting our gut rule our heads inexorably leads to the know nothings taking over the reins. The next stage is perdition.

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