

**Dear PM, your citizens are not illiterate**  
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COMMENT I honestly believe that the furore over Agriculture and Agro-Based Industries Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob's Facebook post earlier this week is not the biggest issue the country has faced this week.

It is far from the real issue. The more telling concern would be if a learned individual writes 'salt' on a piece of paper but insists that he was actually talking about 'pepper'.

More so if the individual is a member of the government. In this case, there is not an individual to single out, but an entire group of people aligned to the government singing the same defence tune.

It's there in writing, posted, with screenshot. Ismail Sabri suggests there should be a boycott on Chinese traders for being "stubborn" in refusing to bring down the prices of goods following the recent drop in oil prices.

He also seems to take a direct aim at a business entity - Old Town White Coffee to be precise - insinuating that a DAP politician holds shares in the company.

There is no denial about the existence of the writings.

But no, it is not racist, says its author. In fact, it is said to be a "noble" statement.

All those who had interpreted the writings as having racial undertones were deemed to be opposition sympathisers, opposition members themselves, or mere political enemies. When an MCA leader raises criticism over the statement, he is immediately accused of being bedfellows with the opposition party DAP.

### **If not racist, then irresponsible, lazy**

You start by questioning the intelligence of the argument put forth, but when you hear the same argument often enough, narrated with such conviction and absolute surety, you begin to question your own intelligence. It is your intelligence that gets insulted at the end of the day.

I am not Ismail Sabri's political enemy but I'm pretty sure, unless almost two decades of coming through the Malaysian education system had failed me, that Ismail Sabri did single out the Chinese with his statement.

At the very least, even if not construed to be racist, it was an irresponsible, blanket and lazy statement that would not help solve anything.

Because there is no need for lateral interpretation to understand what he was trying to say with his Facebook post.

Yet, we have dozens of people trying to convince us that we had read the statement wrongly, as if it was a Sandro Boticelli artwork that needs to be studied through each different layer. All over the refusal to issue an apology.

We have dozens blaming all the criticisms against Ismail Sabri squarely at the doorstep of DAP instead of questioning the wordings of the minister's supposedly "noble" attempt to get people talking about the price of goods.

### **PM's elegant silence in need**

Ismail Sabri defending himself was not surprising, to be honest.

But the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) reacting with such jest to the criticisms was a surprise. The statement the PMO pieced together, after actually discussing the matter in a cabinet meeting yesterday, was appalling.

It claims Ismail Sabri was referring to all traders irrespective of race.

Why, then, was there a line that explicitly states that Chinese will continue to oppress the Malays if the latter do not stand up for themselves? How is that a reference to all the traders? Why was Old Town White Coffee specifically mentioned?

If Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak cannot put forth a statement with more conviction and sense of leadership, he should opt to stay silent, just like the elegant silence he has maintained on many other pressing issues such as 1MDB's debts, and so on.

But the fact that the statement was attributed to a vague 'spokesperson' from the PMO probably underscores how badly this country lacks leadership.

Just that this time, there is an assumption that Malaysians are illiterate to the extent that they needed Putrajaya to tell them what is the actual meaning of a statement put forth in social media by a cabinet minister who is unable to leave behind his Umno skin and act like a cabinet minister.

There need not be attempts to explain "context" for a fairly straightforward statement.

We can read, we can digest, we can interpret.

If an apology hurts so badly, given the absence of an accountability culture in Malaysia, the top leaders in the country should have kept quiet.

Because, in hindsight, being silent sounds more intelligent than having something to say in order to defend the indefensible.

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