

PM's lost chance to show concern over strays
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak had the golden opportunity of educating Malaysians in particular about loving and caring for street animals such as cats and dogs, but regrettably he failed to seize the moment.

NONE Buying a kitten from the market was the first error on Najib's part. He should have taken the trouble instead of visiting animal shelters like PAWS and SPCA with the purpose of giving a cat from one of these shelters a home. Instead, Najib's kitten-buying stint became a political affair and that, too, ridiculously under the 1Malaysia banner. What has 1Malaysia got to do with a kitten?

When in my article entitled 'Animals have rights too' in Malaysiakini (April 19 this year) I asked Najib to emulate his American counterpart president Barack Obama who wasted no time in adopting a mutt upon becoming the president of the United States, the intention was for Najib to put on his walking boots and visit the animal shelters, his conscience all out to help give a deprived cat a good home.

But for Najib, buying a kitten was another way of trying to win the people's hearts and hopefully their votes come the next general election. What a pity that Najib failed in his bid to perform a good deed like did the Obama family.

NONE Even more humiliating was to note how conveniently Najib passed the buck of naming the cat to Malaysians, again turning the whole affair into a political gimmick, all for the sake of becoming popular with the rakyat.

Adopting a cat or a dog from shelters is not about seeking glory nor is it about attaining poularity for doing a good deed. It is in all its essence an effort at giving these abandoned or homeless animals a better life by committing one's time and affection towards them. It is all about dedication and certainly not about making it to the list of the most popular prime minister.

Looking at the turn of events, it can be concluded that Najib was not the least prepared to adopt a cat. If he was he would know why he was doing it and would have made good use of the opportunity to share his concern about stray animals with Malaysians, urging everyone to visit animal shelters and take home a pet or two.

He could have gone further by encouraging schoolchildren to develop a love for animals and become proud pet owners. Najib could have shown his concern over cruelty to animals and how it affected him. Sadly, nothing of any of this happened. The kitten that he bought was a publicity stunt, with all reasoning on why pet ownership is necessary and important going down the drain.

What a waste of a golden opportunity on Najib's behalf!

No concern for cruelty to animals

So many cases of animals abuses have been reported in Malaysia and no concern has been shown in ensuring that cruelty to animals becomes a thing of the past in Malaysia. Be it individuals or city council workers, none have spared any effort in abusing the cats or dogs and getting away unscratched.

NONE Five years ago the owner of a German Shepherd named Sheena who left her to die all because he was busy moving house and found no use for her received a pathetic fine of RM100 in default of two days' jail after he was charged under Section 44 (1) of the Animal Ordinance 1953 which carried an equally pathetic maximum fine of RM200 or a maximum of six months' jail or both.

It is said that since 1953 only two or three animal abusers received jail sentences, that too of not more than two days. And this inconsideration for animals continued until 2005 when Sheena was abandoned and finally succumbed to her death due to starvation and the shutting down of her organs.

Sincere pet owners will swear that having pets does wonders for one's mental and emotional well-being. Having pets does wonders for one, psychologically. However, since none of Malaysia's top politicians are proud pet owners, they have no inkling of what it is like to have a pet and feel its beautiful effect on their lives.

Because the top politicians are ignorant about the importance of owning a pet they lack the know-how of convincing others on the importance of giving animals at shelters a permanent home.

The act of love, be it for fellow humans or animals, comes from an enlightened and compassionate heart. That explains why some people go to great lengths to save cats and dogs from the streets or from facing further cruelty.

While humans can shout for their rights by staking claim to the rights provided for under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, pets and animals depend on their owners and humans to help safeguard their well-being. Unfortunately it is always those trusted ones who often betray the faith of their pets.

NONE It is no less a paradox that for a caring nation like Malaysia the government is indifferent towards animal rights, always turning a blind eye each time an incident of animal abuse is reported.

Malaysia has been put to shame by countries like India, Hong Kong and United Arab Emirates who respect animal rights and reflect it through the penalties imposed on those caught for cruelty to animals. UAE's laws for instance protect not only domestic animals but also strays, with abuse of animals being punishable with a fine of not more than RM10,000 or imprisonment of up to one year or both.

In the case of Hong Kong, the animals there can breathe a sigh of relief as a few years ago the government passed the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Amendment) Bill 2006 and imposed stiffer penalties for animal cruelty. The fine was raised from US\$641 to US\$25,641 and a jail term of three years. The government went further and set up a hotline to receive reports of animal abuse and the citizens could call the police who are given the authority to arrest animal abusers.

Meanwhile, India is leading in increasing number of convictions for animal abuse with stiff penalties. One court in India stopped a bullock cart race held during temple festivals because the cows are beaten with sticks to make them move faster.

Malaysia fails in defending animal rights

And where is Malaysia when it comes to protecting animal rights? Nowhere to be proud of, sadly. If the government can splash money on promotional songs on "keep public toilets clean" and now a song on the on-going census (whatever for???), why is it not interested in allocating a budget to raise public awareness on saving street cats and dogs and providing them with homes?

Why is there no commitment from the "powers that be" on educating Malaysians on adopting animals from shelters and encouraging schools to set up pet clubs, giving them incentives each time a cat or dog is adopted from shelters?

The government must emulate what Hong Kong has done and go a step further by giving animal shelters the authority to make surprise visits to homes of those who adopt animals from pounds to make sure the animals are being cared for responsibly, failing which action will be taken against the pet owner.

NONE Sheena's case failed to tug the heart of the country's politicians, all being busy doing what they do, playing politics and counting and re-counting their bank balances. Not a second spared to think about animals in shelters homes and ways to ensure cruelty to animals becomes an unforgettable lesson for the perpetrator.

Recently, when the management of A Famosa Resort in Malacca was taken to task for sedating a tiger to make it easier to manipulate it into posing for pictures with visitors, the only cries heard were that from animal lovers. Not a murmur from the government especially from 'enlightened' leaders like Najib and former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Why? Is talking about animal rights or animal abuse a trivial topic or demeaning to a politician's so-called status?

When the government took the typical step of trying to hoodwink the people into believing it cares for the animals by amending the Animal Ordinance 1953, it was thought the government's conscience had re-awakened.

But no, the amendment was nothing but a cosmetic move as hardly any of the earlier provisions in the Ordinance were improved upon. Indeed, the "powers that be" have a heart that is cold because even the death of a loyal pet like Sheena failed to awaken their conscience and improve matters.

Unconditional love for animals

One has to care for an animal to realise how much joy it brings him or her. The unconditional love a pet gives us is heart-rending. There is nothing the animals ask of us except love and care. In return, they too shower us with their loyalty and heartfelt love. There is no happiness that comes close to the pleasure of having your pet cat or dog cuddling up in your arms for a moment's comfort; there is nothing more gratifying than this.

purchase of dogs 070206 meai yeeYet, many of us have yet to be initiated into realising what a beautiful experience it is when animals are a part of our lives.

To the politicians, instead of rattling on with your outdated rhetoric, grow up and realise that this world is not yours - it belongs to the animals too. Spare a moment for them and do all you can to make sure they are protected and live a life filled with love. Do not look down upon the street cats or dogs that cross your path every day for this world is as much theirs as it is yours.

To Najib, it is hoped you take time out from your busy schedule to bond with your cat. Do not leave it to your domestic helpers to look after your cats for the Obama family certainly does not do so. In future, remember to visit PAWS and SPCA to lend a helping hand to the animals there.

There is a lot more to do for the animals besides taking them home. For those left behind at animal shelters, they rely on public donations for their next meal, so to the "powers that be", spare them a thought and extend a hand to help them, sincerely.

(This article is dedicated to my cat Mawar Manja, who will be a mom in a matter of days, for all the love and affection she has shared with me. Thank you Mawar)

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