

Hishammuddin's bent for miscues
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COMMENT Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein's penchant for miscues on issues where right and wrong can be fairly easily sorted out has now become a byword among journalists and political observers.

It would not have mattered if, say, he didn't possess a pedigree (his father was former prime minister Hussein Onn and his grandfather was Umno founder Onn Jaafar) synonymous with a kind of uprightness that is almost impossible to find these days in politics.

With his lineage you would think that Hishammuddin would get some things at least right, if not by heredity then by something more mystical.

NONE From the 'Allah' issue to the cowhead protesters and now the matter of verbal misconduct by two school principals, Hishammuddin has tended to stick his foot in the matter at hand.

His comments on the verbal misbehaviour of two school principals, one in Johor and the other in Kedah, both of whom gave vent to racist remarks aimed at Chinese and Indian pupils, have to be parsed for what they are – an apologetic for conduct most unbecoming.

"It is nothing new. It happens in all countries, but it is a minority. I do not feel that this minority represents the majority of our teachers," thus was quoted of Hishammuddin by a daily when the minister was invited to comment.

This implies that for something to be regarded as morally reprehensible it has to be uncommon, startling, and must be committed by sizeable numbers. One can almost hear Hishammuddin say about racist comments - well, it's blasé, just sit among the rednecks at soccer matches in Europe and you get a earful.

No doubt, as Hishammuddin averred, it is unfair to judge a community or profession by the conduct of its less worthy members.

But ours is a country into whose genes race-consciousness is injected. Let's say, the race-consciousness was inevitable because of the need for social engineering. By that token, decency would require us to be extra wary of its excrescences.

Conduct downright offensive

When heads in strategic sectors in nation-building like education, people who are something like 20 to 25 years older than the pupils they address, use terms like those employed by the offending principals, it is not merely an indelicacy of language, an offence against the proprieties that has occurred or been committed.

It's far worse. It is a violation of the spirit of pedagogy which entails not merely a transmission of knowledge, but of values.

What was said could have been viewed as a lapse in a class teacher but is unpardonable in a school head.

A school head has anything from 800 to 2,000 pupils under his or her care. When the students are from all races in the country, it's a young nation in microcosm.

Because verbal contact is the most common form of interaction between pupils and principal, a principal's speech must be irreproachable.

Being human, they could be expected from time to time to slip up, but those instances would have to be rare and retrievable.

But when principals are downright offensive, comparing pupils displaying totems worn for religious reasons to dogs, it is indicative of a void of spirit and feeling that ought to be roundly deplored and sanctioned.

In the circumstances, the only apologia ought to be the one from the contrite and not from a minister, least of Hishammuddin's pedigree.

His attitude reflects the judgement of the poet WB Yeats: "The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

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