

Selangor MB's house needs a spring-cleaning
Malaysiakini.com
Disember 2, 2010

Many of us subscribe to the view that a few political leaders are fair minded, and since they have higher social goals, they would serve the public interests by distributing public goods in a fair and equal manner.

To the researchers of public choice theory however, that view is flawed, naïve, preposterous, and childish to say the least.

Irrespective of whether one happens to be a greedy entrepreneur indulging in private businesses (thus making private choices), or a politician/ bureaucrat providing public goods (thus making public choices), the self-interested nature of men is the same.

A popular university economic textbook defined "public choice theory" as "an economic theory that proceeds on the assumption that the public officials who set economic policies and regulate the players act in their own self-interest, just as firms do" (Case and Fair, 1996, 341).

Grant and Brue (2007, p. 414) are more direct, and quoted Buchanan as saying "human nature is human nature; people maximise their utility subject to constraints whether operating in the marketplace, government service, or the political arena". But public choice is not a new theory.

Buchanan (2003) sighed and claimed that men had wasted a full two hundred years of intellectual folly due to their own ignorance since the days of Adam Smith and of their American founders.

Therefore, by holding on to the said obtuse view, the long suffering people rejoiced when the Pakatan coalition took over Selangor after the 0308 general election (along with Perak, Kedah, Penang, and Kelantan) and they looked forward to a more responsible, fair, and equitable state government.

Finally, so they assumed, the state government could be held accountable, a far cry from the previous BN state government. After the recent events that unfolded in front their eyes, the people of Selangor are now forced to reassess the situation. What has gone wrong?

The latest case involved a complaint raised by Kota Alam Shah state assemblyman M. Manoharan, claiming that of the 1,571 recipients for Yayasan Selangor scholarships, only five were offered to non-Malays for 2008 and 2009 (The Star, Nov 28th 2010, p. N 4).

The question that begs an answer is: What is the state government's policy guideline in respect to the said scholarships? Is it distributed based on meritocracy, or based on quota?

In the absence of an explanation, one can only conclude that here we are witnessing another episode of a dysfunctional state department in action.

Even if one were to give the benefit of the doubt to Selangor Menteri Besar Abdul Khalid Ibrahim on the ground that he could not possibly oversee the operation of every departmental head, still one would expect him to receive monthly progress report on all aspects of the state government.

Is it asking too much? Is it a tall order? What has happened to his earlier lofty pledges? Is Khalid not leading the state "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" the way Abraham Lincoln pledged in the Battlefield of Gettysburg in 1863?

The point is; one would suspect that the old culture inherited by the bureaucrats from the previous state government is so well ingrained that it is business as usual for the former group.

Indeed, as proponents of public choice theory would argue, the bureaucrats may have their own agenda.

They serve their own interests before everything else. As an example, it was reported in The Star that Yayasan Selangor had earlier planned to spend a total of RM350,000 as part of their 40th anniversary celebrations.

James M. Buchanan did not receive the coveted 1986 Nobel Prize for creating a new economic theory. His major contribution to the mankind was his ability to show us the obvious; which is that a political agent, be it a politician or a bureaucrat, is fallible. The ball is back in the people's court.

Irrespective of whether it is a Pakatan government (state or federal), the people ought to stay alert.

To expect a "public servant" to serve the people by providing public goods diligently is foolhardy (or in Keturunan Malaysia's favorite word, oxymoronic).

The politicians are after all, akin to businessmen, self- interested and often go for utility maximisation.

The people are at their own peril if they choose to ignore the public choice theory.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/149809>