

The contrasting visions of the two coalitions
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COMMENT Dr Samuel Johnson is not just famous for his aphorism on patriotism ("It's the last refuge of scoundrels"), he is also known for this bon mot: "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

In paraphrase, it could be said that when political parties know they are faced with make-or-break polls, it crystallizes their stances wonderfully.

This much is pretty sure in the immediate prelude to the 13th general election: the choice between the ruling Barisan Nasional and rivals, Pakatan Rakyat, to be made by Malaysian voters will not turn on intuition, but on clearly defined policy positions.

Rarely before has such clarity of choice been offered the Malaysian electorate and seldom has the task of decision been so momentous for the future of the country.

Fortuitously, the resurgence of two issues in recent days has helped clarify the differing positions of the coalitions.

The issues of 'Ketuanan Melayu' and meritocracy that came up with the possibility that Malaysia would have, under a Pakatan government, an ethnic Chinese as deputy prime minister if a candidate deemed by the coalition as qualified to hold the position is available.

Without going into the miasma of contention in which both issues are mired, we can say, in the one instance, that given the times, no notion of political supremacy based on race or other sectarian considerations is sustainable any longer; and, in the other instance, no qualification or disqualification for high office by dint of the same criteria is defensible.

You have to be Neanderthal to disagree.

Darwinism at work

A world transformed by technology into a borderless planet renders quaint, to say the least, race-supremacist notions.

As for denying on the basis of ethnicity somebody deemed to be qualified to hold a position – that would be not just quaint but bizarre, in this time and day.

There is a Darwinism at work in the marketplace of ideas brought on by technological advancement: no political concept can endure for long if for its survival, barriers have to be erected that act as constraints in a domain open to the tech revolution.

By this reckoning, the agenda of change espoused by Pakatan rides the modernising wave; by contrast, BN's stands athwart it.

In a nutshell, the contrasting visions of Pakatan and BN offer voters in Malaysia an

unprecedentedly clear choice – between what is modern and what is now starkly obsolete.

TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal profession for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.

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