

KONGSTER SAYS: Let's bridge the differences

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Some people associate bridges with goodwill. And one phrase often used in international relations is “building bridges between nations”. For long, Malaysia has wanted to literally build a bridge to Singapore, one that replaces the colonial-era Causeway. That’s progress. But the response from our neighbour has been tepid.

Singapore, according to its critics, is building a wall on the issue. Officially, the republic says it wants more discussions. Of late, many folk have become interested in bridges and their designs – half, full, straight and crooked. They also talked about Singapore’s disinterest and whether the republic was being kiasu for fear of losing out on something.

Anyway, for the coming Chap Goh Meh, we can expect maidens from Malaysia and Singapore to stand on bridges and throw oranges in search for a husband.

You can say that for the romantics, the bridge represents a walk over the river of love, a path to each other’s heart. And Bollywood directors couldn’t agree more.

Much, ups and downs, has flowed across the Causeway in the last 41 years, and love too, with Malaysians and Singaporeans marrying each other. So much so, the Malaysia-Singapore relationship is considered special in the Asean family.

Work and business wise, many Malaysians go over to Singapore, and many Singaporeans over to Malaysia. More than 100,000 people cross the Causeway every day.

The peoples of the two nations will certainly give their thumbs-up if there is a wide bridge to smoothen their life, as many prefer to drive, or take buses in view of the skyrocketing airfares, and the many excellent roads around us. But bridges can also invite the mind to be cynical.

When the Government decided to call the bridge “scenic bridge” instead of “crooked bridge”, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in reference to Singapore’s less than positive approach, said: “Is it spelt c-y-n-i-c? Is that how you spell it?”

Well, all said and done, Malaysia and Singapore do share a unique relationship that has helped made the two nations the most dynamic in Southeast Asia. Sure, Malaysia and Singapore have argued over a rock in the sea (Pulau Batu Puteh), over water, land and airspace, but it all leads to the negotiation table. So, it is okay to haggle over a bridge now, just continue negotiating, as it has always been the case.

England and France have proved that despite the Hundred Years’ War between them in the 14th century, neighbourly spirit runs deep when the two nations built the US\$21 billion (RM79 billion) underwater Channel Tunnel in 1994.

As Singapore is so economically buoyant, it certainly won’t dilute its coffers if the island commits itself to a bridge. But Singapore’s stand is that it wants to bridge the gap in differences on

several issues with more discussions. Anyway, Malaysia is ever accommodating.

At the same time, Malaysia is going ahead to build a scenic bridge or a half bridge in its own waters. We hope eventually it will turn into a full bridge that symbolises full cooperation between two neighbours, not just half-heartedly.

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