

Let's not confuse silence with endorsement

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THERE'S a lot of talk these days, and I like it. Of course, it helps that there's much to discuss in the first place. The crooked/scenic bridge, Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission, Article 121(1A), MAS, moral policing, the petrol price hike, Islamic Family Law, Proton, 9MP, NEP, public transport — the list goes on.

What I think is fundamental to remember amid all this debate and discussion is that disagreements aren't always a bad thing. Unity is too often confused with being completely subservient to the views of others, a myth that I feel diminishes the worth of an individual and his or her ability to think.

This is perpetuated by the opinion that those who don't see things as we do are being insulting or insensitive.

If that were the case, I've insulted my friends, family and colleagues too many times in my lifetime to count, and will likely continue to do so.

How we deal with these contentious issues will be the yardstick on which we mea-

sure how far we've come together (or not) in the 42-plus years we've been known as Malaysia.

If those who see a different path for our nation continue to be silenced either by law or by being labelled unpatriotic, then it hardly bodes well for our future.

There are some who think ex-prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is right, whether about APs, Proton or the bridge. Then there are those who think he should make like Ayah Pin and disappear. I say let him be heard.

It's his prerogative to speak on whatever he wishes to — especially considering his involvement in many of the issues to begin with — much like it was the right of those who dissented when he was leader.

Maybe it's because of Dr Mahathir's undeniable stamp

on Malaysia as it is today, but we seem to forget that his statements are just that. No one is bound by them.

We can fully express our agreement and support. We can find fault with his opinion on the bridge issue, or we can say his opinions on the importance of Press freedom are far from sincere. We can make of them whatever we want. Yes, we can do that.

Likewise, despite my support for the IPCMC, I support Umno Youth, IGP Tan Sri Mohd Bakri Omar and others in their right to voice a different opinion. The public now knows their position on the issue, and we can form our opinion about them accordingly.

Because for too long, we've heard only one voice. OK, maybe it was multiple voices, but they were mostly parroting one another. The numer-

ous public disagreements we've seen recently only shows in retrospect that maybe it was silly of us to think an entire administration from local to State to federal was ever in complete agreement. It merely appeared to be.

I accept that politics is rarely simple, and that building a consensus is a tricky thing. But issues as big as national sovereignty or as small as the potholes on our roads are too important to be left undebated.

For an outside example of the danger of a lack of critical perspective, look at the US these days, with its all-knowing president, whose administration created an atmosphere where it was deemed unpatriotic to question any of his actions. If you question the president, it seems, then the terrorists have won.

Look at the result of that kind of thinking. Scandal after scandal, from corruption to wire-tapping, Guantanamo Bay to Abu Ghraib, all under this administration.

Of course, the cynic in me also raises alarm bells about all

this open debate. The art of politics is as much about what is said as what isn't.

Are all these public disagreements strictly about the topic at hand, or are they a front for political games played behind the scenes? In other words, are they real debates or just a show?

To illustrate my point: I was watching RTM1 last weekend, a rarity I confess. The programme I caught was *Fenomena Sent*, a weekly discussion programme about the arts.

Some burning issues previously discussed in the past include Mawi's capability as a singer; and who had more talent, Sudirman, M. Nasir or P. Ramlee. The episode I caught featured the topic, "*Sepet Dan Gubra: Pencemar Budaya?*"

I bring it up because while the show is presented as a debate, the episode seemed to have an ulterior motive — to dismiss the two films by director Yasmin Ahmad as bad for our society.

The topic was already loaded to begin with, and the callers offered similar opinions, as did those interviewed

on the street, while two of the three panelists had little concern for opposing views.

Which brings me to the caveat. With so many people saying so many things, more responsibility is now expected of us everyday Malaysians. We now have to listen, read, think, and yes, talk even more before forming our opinions.

Let us not be easily swayed by rhetoric, but by reason. Because the more you and I look at issues critically, and the differing perspectives presented, the more solid our view becomes.

I'll end with a quote that I find particularly resonant. It's taken from Apple Computer CEO Steve Jobs's commencement address at Stanford University last year. "Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice."

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