

Khairy opens a watery can of worms

Kinibiz.com

May 6, 2014

By Khairul Khalid

The war of words between Minister of Sports Khairy Jamaluddin and Damansara Utama state assemblywoman Yeo Bee Yin have brought to focus Malaysia's chronic NRW (non-revenue water) problems. High time we start grappling with the issues, Tiger thinks, rather than point paws and claws at each other.

Minister of Youth and Sports Khairy Jamaluddin had recently waded into the Selangor water crisis, trading barbs and zingers with Damansara Utama state assemblywoman Yeo Bee Yin.

Both sides make some valid points, albeit aligned to their respective political affiliations, about the root cause of the problem. Who to believe? Who to blame? Was the delay of Langat 2 the main cause of the water issue? Did the state government blunder by giving away free water and stopping the tariff hikes? Did the federal government force the Langat 2 project to enrich cronies?

Tiger feels the public is intelligent enough to decide for themselves but one thing is for sure, the tiresome politics of water is rearing its ugly head again (and again).

Tiger has previously written about the bad idea of mixing the two and this latest tit-for-tat between the BN (Barisan Nasional) federal government and Selangor state's PR (Pakatan Rakyat) only reaffirms Tiger's instincts.

One thing from Khairy's comments did catch Tiger's eye, though. The sports minister reveals NRW (non-revenue water) figures, not just for Selangor but other states as well.

"Selangor/KL's NRW is at 32% and lower than the national average (36%), and certainly lower than Pahang (56%), Kelantan (55%), Sabah (50%) and Kedah (47%). Yet they do not have water shortage," said Khairy.

It is an extraordinary reference to make, under the circumstances. Rather than a "my wife is prettier than yours" comparison, it unfortunately comes across as more of a "my loo is less grimy than yours" contrast. It certainly paints a bleak picture, not just of Selangor's management of water resources, but the whole of Malaysia.

NRW is basically water that is produced and lost before it reaches its intended destination – our homes, businesses, offices and other premises. Some of the causes of NRW are ageing pipes, illegal connections, poor maintenance and haphazard implementations.

Malaysia's problems with NRW have been well documented but Khairy's remarks are still a shock to the system. It just shows how endemic our water problems are nationwide when roughly 36% of water that is produced is lost and wasted.

When completed, Langat 2 is said to be able to process approximately 1.1 billion litres of water a day. Nevertheless, at Selangor's current 32% NRW rate, if not improved, it would be losing approximately 361 million litres a day. That staggering amount of potential water lost is almost equivalent to the capacity of Sungai Langat's water treatment plant of 386 million litres per day.

And on that account, why is Selangor buying water from Pahang that is evidently much more wasteful in managing its water with an astounding NRW of 56%? At that going rate, Pahang is losing more than half the water it is producing.

No matter what the rationale, there is something inherently wrong with the idea of transferring water from a state with a more chronic water management – it's like borrowing medicine from a sicker cousin.

Pahang may have a much smaller population and blessed with abundant rivers and water sources but is it entirely inconceivable that Pahang may be afflicted with a Selangor-like water crisis in the future? Would Pahang then reduce water to Langat 2 or raise tariffs to Selangor?

Pahang's capital Kuantan is being identified as a Special Economic Zone in the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) and is expected to generate RM90 billion of investments and provide 200,000 new jobs by 2020. Naturally, water demand will spike.

It may be a minuscule quantity compared to Selangor's economic statistics and numbers but it's still no excuse for Pahang's water profligacy. One fine day this inefficiency will manifest itself either through higher prices, poorer quality of water or simply, as in Selangor's recent example, taps will just run dry. Either way, consumers on both sides of the Langat 2 water tunnel could suffer.

Span (National Water Services Commission) has acknowledged Malaysia's NRW crisis and undertaken programmes to reduce NRW levels. Some states like Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Johor have shown some improvement.

However, Span admits that many of its NRW reduction programmes have been ineffective in the long run.

“This was because if programs achieve an initial reduction in NRW levels, they often increase again over the years to the same or even higher levels than before the programme due to poor follow through actions,” said Span.

In other words, if Tiger reads correctly between the lines, there is insufficient political will to enforce the necessary programmes.

In Khairy’s enthusiasm to put forth his points about the crisis, he may have inadvertently opened a can of worms that is broader issue of the nation’s NRW malaise.

However, Tiger feels that it’s rather timely that the nation’s NRW (and not just Selangor’s) is brought back to the centre of the water discourse again after being buried under the avalanche of talk about water rationing, Langat 2, WSIA (Water Services Industry Act) and other political bickering in recent months.

Despite various efforts, there is no sense that the federal and state governments are getting to grips with the NRW problem, other than playing the blame game. The World Bank recommends that NRW should be less than 25%. Singapore’s NRW is 5% while Japan’s NRW is approximately 7%.

Khairy confidently pronounces that Pahang, Kelantan, Sabah and Kedah don’t have water shortages, despite their high rates of NRW.

Not yet, at least — that should be the operative word. Don’t tempt fate. Mother nature can be such a fickle beast, and Tiger would know.

GRRR!

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd

Source: <http://www.kinibiz.com/story/tigertalk/84737/khairy-opens-a-watery-can-of-worms.html>