



Let's Discuss and Not Make a Fuss

Rather than being slighted by the slightest hint of criticism, it would bode well for our politicians to articulate their thoughts and feelings in public to avoid unnecessary confusion and distrust.

A VISIT to a politician's Open House, irrespective of whether the host is on the government's side or the opposition's, has not always been a pleasant experience if you are a scribe, more so if you write other than for the purpose of pleasing him.

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Of course, you stand a good chance of being declared his 'public enemy number one' if you criticise him. Such is the nature of politics and politicians in our environment.

Over the years, I have acquired quite a bit of knowledge about handling such people. One of the ways is to visit them during their Open Houses. On such occasions, they are more forgiving and are not likely to make a scene in the presence of other guests. Also, they do not have the time to engage you in lengthy conversations.

The climax to these visits is the Prime Minister's *Hari Raya* Open House, which in the last two years has been enlarged to become a joint Open House by Muslim Cabinet members. This is one of the innovations introduced by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he became Prime Minister at the end of 2003.

So, I have gone to two Cabinet Open Houses so far. The latest, on Nov 3 — the first day of *Hari Raya* — was held at the Putra World Trade Centre. When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was Prime Minister, he held it at Seri Perdana, the Prime Minister's official residence. I have always considered Seri Perdana a better place for such an occasion. It is more homely — which is one of the key elements of *Raya* visits — and gives an opportunity to the people to get to know where the Prime Minister lives. After all, Seri Perdana is supposed to be open to the public.

During my most recent visit to Seri Perdana, I noticed that the statehouse had been fairly extensively renovated.

According to a Parliament question-and-answer session, the renovation cost RM12.5 million.

Don't sweep issues under the carpet

IN my humble opinion, it is good for the Prime Minister, Ministers and other public servants to share with the people,

at least once a year, the comfort of their homes. After all, if not the houses, their upkeep is paid for by the people.

For me, these visits offer an opportunity to *minta ampun* (seek forgiveness), say thank you and renew friendships. I think we should try to remain friends even though we disagree with each other.

It is for this reason that I feel comfortable greeting and engaging the Parliament Opposition Leader, Lim Kit Siang, in small talk at these Open Houses. Not only because we are regulars at Raju's banana leaf restaurant, but also because he has a healthy way of disagreeing with the Press. When I was appointed Group Editor of the *New Straits Times* in 1988, his party's newspaper — *The Rocket* — wrote a stinging report saying that I was given the job as a reward for supporting the privatisation of the North-South Highway.

I think it would do a lot of good if politicians make it a point to respond to media reports and analyses by writing to them instead of making general complaints and using their power to discourage certain issues from being discussed.

They may not have the time or the flair to write, but with so many of them employing supposedly well-educated and highly intelligent *pegawai khas* (special officers), they should instruct these young men and women to write the replies for them.

The last passionate letter addressed to this column (when it appeared in the *New Sunday Times*) came from Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

He was responding to my assessment of his father's rule (1976-1981), which he thought was inaccurate and unjust. It was a very well-penned letter and the *New Sunday Times* published it in full. Hishammuddin is now Education Minister.

The most recent response from a politician to this column came from the Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Dr

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Mohamad Khir Toyo. He instructed a former subordinate of mine from my *New Straits Times* days, who is now working for him, to write a reply. I thank him for his efforts.

In line with today's mantra of transparency, accountability and integrity, I think politicians should be more willing to argue their case and articulate their thoughts in public.

They cannot simply say that we should not discuss this or that subject – like our relations with Singapore, the sale of Malaysian companies to foreigners and the downgrading of our *bursa* – in the media or in public.

Sweeping these and other important issues under the carpet or muffling the Press will not solve the problem. The ostrich burying its head in the sand will not stop the sandstorm.

DUMMING DOWN

IN a world addicted to celebrity, having a celebrity wife, as some people have found out the hard way, is not always a bonus. But if you are a celebrity-addict and love the limelight, then that is exactly what you should do.

Get yourself a celebrity wife and you become an overnight sensation. That is if you are equally well-known. If you are not, then you must be prepared to be reduced to 'the man who married a famous singer'.

That was what happened to a young man who married the beautiful wife of a late Malay singer some years ago. To spare this man and his wife of any embarrassment, let us call him Encik Abu. From being Encik Abu, he was reduced to 'the husband of the woman who was formally married to singer so-and-so'. And there is nothing as unkind and hurtful than when the man's children from his previous marriage to his dearly departed wife are referred to as '*anak tiri*' (stepchildren) so-and-so'.

Since celebrity and entertainment have become so important to so many Malaysians, I wonder whether it is a good media practice to continue concealing the identities of people romantically linked to celebrities? For instance, the popular media has, for months, been referring to a certain 'Datuk K' as being romantically linked to singer Siti Nurhaliza Taruddin.

Half of Malaysia knows who 'Datuk K' is. The cellular phone companies make quite a considerable amount of money on account of people sending SMS to tell friends about 'Datuk K'.

I may be wrong. If I am, I apologise. But friends in the entertainment media and the corporate world tell me that 'Datuk K' is a successful Kedah businessman by the name of Khalid Jawa.

I think the media should get over this business of concealing a person's identity by reducing his or her name to a single letter of the alphabet.

In doing so, they are doing injustice to all the maligned

There may be two reasons for this 'dumbing down' process — an education system that does not encourage critical thinking and readers who are getting fed-up with the spin by the mainstream media.

Datuks and Tan Sris whose names happen to start with the same letter. 'Datuk K', for instance, can be mistaken for any Datuk whose name starts with the same letter like Kadir, Kamal, Kamil, Kassim, Kasmu, Kumaraswamy, Kalimuthu, Kam, Kim, Kang and so on. Such an unnecessary mystery can also harm Siti Nurhaliza's reputation.

But thanks to the penchant for celebrity and celebrity status, the *Mawi Syndrome* has now consumed the lives of many Malaysians, in particular the Malays, causing them to drift further and further away from reason, rationale and reality.

No wonder the tabloid *Harian Metro*, that makes who-is-sleeping-with-whom and who-is-divorcing-whom in the *Syariah* courts its staple diet, is said to be set to overtake its more serious sister paper *Berita Harian* and rival *Utusan Malaysia*.

A fellow journalist calls this process 'dumbing down'. Personally, the news of *Harian Metro* overtaking its rivals, if it is true, will not come as a surprise to me.

On a lecture trip to one of the public universities in the north of the Peninsula some years ago, I was told by a professor that the most widely read newspaper among the academic staff and students of his university was *Harian Metro*, with the magazine counterpart being *Mastika*. The latter is well known for its *kubur berasap* (smoking grave) and *mayat tak reput* (corpse that did not decompose) stories.

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Whatever the case is, it does not bode well for the National Language, which is supposed to be the language of knowledge and thought, and for Malay newspapers, which are struggling to attract the advertising dollar.

THE TRUTH ABOUT CRONYISM

I'M disappointed, depressed and demoralised. But, in this particular instance, 'I' here does not refer to me although I must, in all openness, say that I sometimes feel the same way.

'I' in this case refers to a certain William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, a conservative US political magazine published by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.

Kristol was disappointed, depressed and demoralised over the nomination, by President George W Bush, of

Herriet E Miers as Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court. He wrote: 'Her selection will unavoidably be judged as reflecting a combination of cronyism and capitulation on the part of the President.'

Miers is the latest in a series of controversial nominations and appointments by Bush to the Supreme Court and other key positions in the US Government.

That a member of the Bush inner circle is being proposed, at a time when the administration and the Republican Party are facing a series of criminal indictments, is understandably an issue with many concerned Americans.

According to David Frum, who was credited with Bush's 'axis of evil' speech, Miers is not only a crony but also one who unabashedly worships the President. Frum wrote: 'In the White House that hero-worshipped the President, Miers was distinguished by the intensity of her zeal. She once told me that the President was the most brilliant man she had ever met.'

Brilliant, is of course, subjective. To Arab-bashers and Muslim-haters, a President who uses flawed intelligence reports to wage war on Muslim countries has to be brilliant!

Unfortunately, the Bush White House is not the only seat of government where megalomania rules and those who are good at prostrating before the boss get plump jobs. Cronyism is universal and almost timeless. It has happened in Imperial China and in the Holy Roman Empire. And it is happening everywhere in the world today.

Hendrik Hertzberg, writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, notes that apart from a late-1990's stint as head of the Texas Lottery Commission under Governor George W Bush, Miers has devoted herself to the interests of corporate clients and Bush, from the earliest flaps about his National Guard service right up to the Florida recount.

That cronyism is rampant in the US, particularly in the Bush White House, should be of some concern to us in Malaysia. This is because there are people who are influential in our country today who look towards the American presidential system and the likes of Carl Rove — the man dubbed the 'Bush Brain' — and the recently indicted 'Scooter' Libby for inspiration.

UNEMPLOYMENT BLUES

SO, neither 18,000 nor 80,000 was the correct estimate of the number of unemployed graduates in the country. These two figures were widely reported by the Press some months ago.

Initially, the larger figure was quoted. But when public reaction to it was less than favourable, the Press was blamed for misquoting. It was 18,000 and not 80,000, said a minister. As has always been the case, the media happily took the blame.

But on Nov 3, the *New Straits Times (NST)* reported that 'nearly 60,000 Malaysian graduates are

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unemployed'. It quoted Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn.

The figure surfaced in a survey conducted by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) of the Prime Minister's Department. The survey that started on Sept 24 saw 59,250 graduates signing up for jobs.

The profile of the unemployed graduates should send out some very alarming signals to the government. It confirmed a recent assertion by Puteri Umno head, Datuk Noraini Ahmad, that most of her movement's members were unemployed.

According to the *NST* report, the majority of the unemployed graduates — 71% of those surveyed — were female. They were mostly Malays and 81% of them had attended government universities. They generally majored in business studies and information technology (IT).

They came from poor families with a monthly household income of less than RM1,000 (61% of respondents) and 80% of them had attended university by borrowing from the National Higher Education Fund.

The EPU cited three main reasons for their inability to secure employment — lack of experience, poor command of the English language and lack of communication skills, and courses undertaken which were irrelevant to the available jobs.

We can't squarely blame employers if they are not keen on employing too many female graduates. They have to maintain some kind of ratio for productivity reasons. The business and IT sectors, which are controlled by non-Bumiputeras, require an adequate command of the English language and communication skills.

With the government no longer monitoring the racial composition of private sector employment, there is no longer the compulsion to maintain ethnic ratio. Gone are the days when Umno Youth championed Bumiputera employment in the private sector.

Whether it is *tersurat* (written) or *tersirat* (unwritten), as some Umno Youth big shots have been arguing lately, some form of policy or another that stresses on growth with distribution should be brought back.

Alienating the majority, whether intentionally or otherwise, cannot be good for a multi-racial country like ours. Kuala Lumpur burned in 1969. Paris is burning today. We cannot leave an issue as important as employment to chance. **mb**

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