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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Great teachers, great students and great administrators

By Datuk Dr. Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid

comments 0

ADDRESSES by heads of state or national leaders are always anticipated. They are interesting because of the new promises of change and the analyses and reasons given for failed projects and broken promises.

At the very least, the addresses contain some interesting rhetoric and substance worthy of attention.

In American politics, the State of the Union address continues to be inspiring, exciting and controversial. After the address, analysts will applaud or criticise specific aspects of the address.

In Malaysia, typically in January every year, every minister will make their amanat -- a kind of address regarding the challenges and achievements of the particular ministry. However, typically, no analysts will criticise the ministry.

Across government ministries, the amanat is about what they had done successfully the past year and what projects the ministry or government were planning for the coming year.

In his State of the Union address 2012, President Barack Obama took a stance regarding education. Among them were the following:

"We have convinced nearly every state in the country to raise their standards of teaching and learning...

"We know a good teacher can increase the lifetime income of (students)... A great teacher can offer an escape from poverty to the child who dreams beyond his circumstance.

"Every person in this chamber can point to a teacher who changed the trajectory of their lives. Most teachers work tirelessly, with modest pay, sometimes digging into their own pockets for school supplies -- just to make a difference.

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"Teachers matter. So, instead of bashing them, or defending their status quo, let's offer schools a deal. Give them the resources to keep good teachers on the job, and reward the best ones.

"In return, grant schools flexibility: to teach with creativity and passion, to stop teaching to the test and to replace teachers who just aren't helping kids learn..."

There was the emphasis on raising standards of teaching and learning; the distinction between what a good teacher does and what a great teacher can do; to stop teaching just to pass examinations; to reward the best teachers; to boldly take action against non-performing teachers; and acknowledgement and indebtedness to teachers.

On higher education Obama proposed:

"And give more young people the chance to earn their way through college by doubling the number of work study jobs in the next five years..."

Our elitist education system was inherited from the British. The learning years are separated from the working years.

If we are debating about the right to vote for our students in universities, we need to debate on the policy of "work study". This will change the undergraduate culture and accelerate maturity and personal accountability.

Just as the institution of National Service has begun to make a difference, work study will change the subsidy mentality of the teenage and young adult generation.

As they have empowerment for choice of their representatives, they must have empowerment for self-management during the study years. To change society through the next generation, work study as a national policy and societal culture must be in place.

To institutions of higher education, Obama had this to say:

"We can't just keep subsidising skyrocketing tuition, we'll run out of money... And colleges and universities have to do their part by working to keep costs down.

"So let me put colleges and universities on notice: if you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down. Higher education can't be a luxury -- it's an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford..."

Tuition fees for private colleges and universities are rising. The allocations for management of public colleges and universities are also rising.

The notion of government subsidies in other sectors of existence has been raised. Likewise, allocations to public colleges and universities will be questioned by the people and the Public Accounts Committee.

All leaders have to be mindful of the use of public funds. The accountability rests with university leadership.

What the president of the world's most powerful nation says may resonate well with teachers throughout the world. Our politicians have made similar statements, with some follow-through and some

forgetfulness.

If we remove the name of the leader or nation, and just retain the contents, such messages seem as if they are uttered by our national leaders. The education development agenda across many nations seem somewhat similar.

This is because there is reciprocity of influences among nations set by international agencies. One such shared global agenda is the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

One such book shared by all nations is Learning: the Treasure Within, the report to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century.

Stakeholders in tertiary education now again await the 2012 address by the minister of higher education on the theme "Think globally and act locally".



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