

COMMENT

Finding elegant policy solutions

DON'T FEAR MISTAKES: Thinking leaders' acknowledgement of lapses can lead to brilliant fixes

IN the United States and even in Malaysia, there are many states that may have more advanced policies than the Federal Government. There are also many institutions that have policies and best practices that are more advanced than the policies at the ministerial and system levels.

This reality is as it should be because not everything from the centre is always right or ahead of the policies and practices on the ground and on site. When this reality is acknowledged, there is the acknowledgement that intelligence, initiatives and leadership are distributed across institutions, the system and society.

Mindful and diligent leaders develop mechanisms for feedback through the scouring of letters to the editor, editorials, ideas raised in talk shows and debates, conference recommendations and proceedings that are rich with ideas, suggestions, critiques and recommendations. The problems identified have to be clarified and their relationships in the network of related problems, determined.

Conscientious policy leaders define and redefine problems and their constellations of existence all

the time, anytime and anywhere. Their minds are focused on the search for relevant and significant data until they are assured that they have mastered the complex interrelationships of the problem and are ready for the formulation of strategic solutions.

Thinking leaders think for themselves and do not just depend on papers prepared by the bureaucracy or think tank groups, although such papers are important sources for the contents and processes of their thoughts.

Profoundly thinking leaders develop in themselves scientific minds and emulate scientific processes.

It was, indeed, heartening to see a thinking scientific mind in practice in a chance airport meeting, when Second Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh approached us and wanted a single significant response to the question: "Why is there graduate unemployment?"

Colleagues who were around offered different responses: There should not be unemployment be-

cause there are more than 2.9 million registered immigrant workers and almost an equal number of unregistered immigrant workers; the lack of mastery of the English language; Malaysian graduates are choosy; a mismatch between the qualifications and the needs of the industry; and, programmes offered by educational institutions are not relevant.

Idris went on to assert that the issue was really because of the fundamental economic principle of "supply and demand". The conversation continues.

There are recurring and newly emerging policy problems in education. In dealing with policy challenges, leaders at all levels, particularly at the central policy and system levels, have to deal with

the following challenges:

DEFENDING poor and sometimes unjust policies;

GENERATING novel ideas to enhance existing policies;

MAPPING out interrelated policies coherently for strategic synergy;

INITIATING forward-looking un-

popular policies;

INITIATING good and popular policies for the benefit of the greatest number of people;

INITIATING tipping-point and turning-point policies that will make a difference to the lives of people and transform mindsets, institutions, programmes, practices and society;

INITIATING policies that will proactively prevent problems in the future (water shortage, shortage of teachers, shortage of classrooms and equipment, etc);

FORMULATING policies that will accelerate development; and,

HONING policies to sustain the advantages of existing policies and practices.

For, each policy initiative or cluster of initiatives, assumptions, ideas, rationales, arguments and counter-arguments have to be clarified. Policy justifications must make sense, and be persuasive and acceptable to all stakeholders, intellectually and emotionally.

Policies as solutions to problems must not themselves create new and larger problems. Complex problems require the sophistication of mind to set conditions and enable others to solve the problems encountered. Complex problems

cannot be solved by naive minds with simplistic single-perspective solutions.

Inept and poor leaders may be able to ride the tide when the system as a whole is functioning robustly. But, when the system fails to function well and society is in disarray, the ineptness, shallowness and mindlessness of leaders at all levels will be exposed.

Encounters with leaders like Idris, who is on the never-ending quest to clarify root problems and search for elegant solutions, are refreshing stimulating.

Leaders who are serious about their responsibilities do not have time for irrelevant chatter or disengaging rhetoric.

As long as leaders have the interest of the people and are sincere and authentic, it is okay not to have all the answers all the time; it is okay not to have all the complex challenges figured out neatly. It is okay even to make mistakes sometimes, as long as leaders are transparent and do not cover up or manipulate.

In fact, from the acknowledgment of mistakes can come brilliant and elegant ideas for policy solutions.

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