

## LEARNING CURVE PERSPECTIVE

## The 'm' word

I HAVE been trying to hold back for some time now, partly because I lack the wisdom to articulate a complex issue with a rather vague concept. However, after reading an article in a daily last week, I am persuaded to have my say, not that I am any the wiser and neither is the issue less complex — in fact it gets more blurry and even wishy-washy to quote my favourite comics strip, *Peanuts*.

I am referring to the "m" word (Hint: "m" in lower case. So rule out Malay, Muslim, Malaysia, even Mahathir.)

What changed my mind is a former aide of the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Alhaj claiming that the former prime minister was roped in. I certainly do not doubt it as I grew up under his leadership. As the "m" word was not in

vogue then, Tunku Abdul Rahman used to say *sabaq* — the Kedah

vocalisation of *sabar* — a lot. The "m" word raises a number of other questions, namely was he a "m" in the struggle for Merdeka?

How about in the fight against Chin Peng who killed and maimed innocents? What about when Singapore seceded from Malaysia or when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was sacked from Umno?

I am positive that some of the answers are a resounding "yes" but not to all of them (at least not the one regarding Dr M). In fact, it could be quite the opposite, for example, in the fight against Malayan Union. Or the Konfrontasi for that matter. I recall reading some harsh (ex-

treme?) statements the Tunku Abdul Rahman made when dealing

with some of these issues. His *sabaq* ran out.

My point: while it is good to be "m", it is all within a context. In some contexts, to be "m" can be counter-productive.

This is the discussion that I am missing because people are quick to label when one comes from a different context. In the face of a threat, any community is unlikely to remain "m" if it feels it has lost, is about to lose something (possessions, power, rights) it thinks its members have, or are used to having. Tunku Abdul Rahman understood this well.

Currently, the context is more ethno-religious in nature, tainted with politics.

There is relatively little discussion in the socio-economic context. The "m" word is not banded around as much when it comes to ever widening socio-economic divides. That wealth seems to grav-

itate to fewer hands does not fall into an extremism of sorts and, therefore, it is allowable, if not encouraged. On the contrary, should anyone try to suggest otherwise, the extremist label will apply immediately.

Simply put, in the socio-economic context, the "m" word has a different connotation. It is not about building an egalitarian society. To insist on it can be construed as an extreme act, although this is what is expected of a true "m". But do not bet on it. A political "m" may well be an economic extremist. And that is cool!

Try applying this culturally, it can lead to more havoc. Each culture has its own notion and nuances of the meaning of "m".

At a recent forum, Professor Datuk Mohamad Abu Bakar of University of Malaya was wise to advise caution since one man's meat is another man's poison. So I will not attempt it, suffice to illustrate with a simple daily gesture like a handshake.

For some reason, most traditional Asian cultures share common acts of greetings that do not involve

the shaking of hands, at least not between opposite genders. Yet, not accepting a handshake is deemed extreme. But to violate this cultural norm is "m".

In short, it cannot be overemphasised that the "m" word is not a one-size-fits-all to flaunt as one pleases, at times for obvious self-interest and ulterior motives. To make it worse, little do they care that the "m" word can be traced to the 2007 RAND Corporation document as applied to Muslims in particular whom it labelled "liberal" and "secular" (as discussed in this column). Not only are Muslims targeted, but to also deviously colour them as liberal and secular is schizophrenic and bizarre, if not plain ignorant. Unless, of course, there is a specific design for this.

As to the design, the RAND document spelt it out quite clearly, drawing from the Cold War strategy to divide and conquer. Could this be the wisdom, that we want to subscribe to — if at all — unknowingly or otherwise?

If so, I am sure that the late Tunku Abdul Rahman too would have reservation.



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