



By Praba Ganesan

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FEB 3 — Snapshot Tenang: Not all Felda settlers are stupid. Neither are all Chinese stubborn.

You can direct swap the ethnicities, and the snapshot will still remain the same.

It embarrasses me that there are people who point the finger at these people who did not ask for a by-election, and say they are the reason why there is a stale political climate in the country, or a good example of the problem. That they can't fathom common sense.

That Pakatan Rakyat cannot move into the buildings in Putrajaya until the “paid-for” but not “knowing-all” Malay working class realise what they really deserve.

Or the flip side, Barisan Nasional cannot unify the country under the omnipresent 1 Malaysia until the Chinese totter back to big brother.

Whatever happened in Tenang, whoever won, the lack of belief in the country remains, isn't that the bigger unfathomable bit? Surely that should worry everyone. A country without belief in it tends to struggle. And we have been struggling for a while here regardless of the latest GDP result.

So can those accusing people on the ground of being simpletons, re-examine their own simpleton-like analysis of Malaysian voters seen through the lens of stereotypes?

Umno won. Yes. They won well, though the question if they campaigned well will always be a question mark hovering over any Barisan Nasional campaign. Can Umno win any election

without their “goodies”?

The real lesson from Tenang is that stereotypes in Malaysia are gospel truths to most Malaysians.

To the politicians, political analysts, campaign workers and voters — in Tenang and beyond. We are in fact generally not very sensible about our politics, about how we characterise ourselves, our voters and their aspirations.

Malaysia is stereotype central. Meaning: As long as we formulate the problem the same way, then the answers will be as usual, uninspiring.

The people in power do not want to dismantle the stereotypes because their empire is built on emphasising our differences as defined by stereotypes, which is our national past-time.

The people seeking power, on the other hand, are by-products of a common culture trying on broad dogmas without the courage to cross their own paradigm shifts with their obligation to stereotypes.

Even though it is up to them as challengers to shake things up and not just wait for implosion from the incumbents or for an uprising from its people, like in Egypt as we speak.

The latter is unlikely, therefore those who want the change then have to reconstruct the game, not hope to be a less evil version of the present rulers.

If we do not succumb to stereotype then we can see problems for what they are and not selectively look for further affirmation of our sweeping generalisations.

The Malay is not a completely manufactured product, homogenous. The Johor Malay is different from Malay in Malacca's Merlimau when that by-election rolls in. The psycho-historical elements drilled in will conjure up a high level of similar priorities but there will be distinct differences.

No person is defined by only one demographic element. I'm Tamil. Yes. I'm also male, in my thirties, working-class background, working in media, live in Cheras, public school boy, rock aficionado, captain of my bar football team and whole other bunch of things.

Those who speak of a welfare state will find me more attentive than those talking about religious training for young to save them moral hazards. My mother, a Tamil, would love to hear how more religion can get all of us to more "good".

Malaysia was not and indeed is not Ali, Ah Chong and Muthu holding hands. It is as much Nora, Angela, Suseela and a litany of sub-groups.

So if you are an intelligent observer, then state your opinions with qualification.

Generally in polite company it is proper to frown upon stereotyping, but here in Malaysian people just go ape crazy. I find myself offending people by not accepting their sweeping statements about all ethnicities, religions and state of origin.

Why am I making a big deal out of this?

Two reasons.

As humans our base feelings will lead to bigotry, our education will lead us to light. To have education which justifies bigotry is akin to sitting in a dark room away from the light. We yearn for the light, but dark rooms are not places of light. In our desperation we lead ourselves astray, thinking by increasing the size of the room — directed rote learning —we will somehow falsely leave the room. The light will always escape us even if our darkness is to be comforted by space.

That is the abstract one.

The less abstract one is to win the national vote. You start by rationalising voters on who they really are, and not how you can force them into boxes they don't belong.

There are not just three boxes (Malay, Chinese and Indian), there are plenty. And then you can study which subsection you can target. There are many fringe issues that mean a lot to a lot of sub-sections which are not being battled.

Most in Felda are not Umno supporters, they are government supporters. Their lives could have been better if there were better policies but that does not discount that the government that started the project in the 1960s are still the same one in power today.

It will be tough to move them. But extremely difficult if the strategy is for them to hate the government of the day.

In 2008 many older and traditional voters changed their minds because their children returned from the city with stories, and acted as unpaid agent provocateurs. This continues with younger ones coming back with horror stories.

That effect was not felt in Felda settlements. Why? Probably the demographic of the typical Felda child is different. The majority of them leave for city jobs as the country industrialises.

They are your agents, if there are institutional blocks to the Felda settler. The initiative to have ANAK to help Felda people is great, but traction will help with organic growth of different ideas in Felda territory. ANAK gives the ammunition but there has to be many salesmen.

You need an army of Felda children, winning them with issues that matter to them and getting them to carry more rural driven issues back to their family homes.

It is urban arrogance to believe we are more urbane because of where we live.

They need a kit, ready to take to their parents. But by telling their parents are incapable of thinking, well that just underlines urban arrogance.

I've talked about [jobs](#) . Talking to Felda folk about what type of jobs are available when developments are now centred to city areas will entice interest. Talking rather than telling.

Let the BN with their goodies tell and give. We can talk and understand.

There is a feeling that there is a central template used for all by-elections and indeed for the next general election.

Talk about race and talk to them in race groups. Bring race leaders from KL and not realign the whole campaign to the needs of the locals.

Again this is not to render race as a non-issue in elections. It is major. But with margins getting smaller and a more aware voting population, understanding different demographical elements will change national electioneering.

The two most underserved groups; women and young people.

Just look at the Malaysian Cabinet, or even the Pakatan Rakyat senior leadership.

More policies and appeal to those groups specifically will change the game.

Umno has more women even though men almost take all the key positions. University activists are not keen to be personal assistants to leaders, they want to lead the very people who struggled with them in campus on the national stage.

The right way of campaigning may not win more elections in the present, but it makes the people you engage more respectful of you, and that wins you more elections in the long run.

Change the question, and the answer might surprise everyone.

** The views expressed here are the personal opinion of the columnist.*

Praba Ganesan is here to build a country. He needs your help. More of the topics discussed & follow-on chats about them at prabaganesan.wordpress.com. You can also contact him at prabaganesan@hotmail.com.