



Monday December 14, 2009

My '5-D' Christmas wish list

Tableau Economique by STEVEN C.M.WONG



AS we close this year, instead of the usual back-slapping congratulations, how about a brutal reality check?

Instead of making starry-eyed resolutions for the coming year, what about a coldly objective checking-off of what we achieved this year, especially in making our country a more developed and united one?

As Malaysians, we like nothing more than to believe that we have the means of going toe-to-toe with the world's best.

As a result, we can be very generous about our abilities and quite fuzzy about our limitations. And that is fine because a positive mental outlook is often all that stands between being successful at something and talking about it.

And talking is something that we certainly like to do. Take the innovation economy. We have high-level committees, filled with very high-powered intellectuals. We have hired big name consultants who charge us (very) big bucks to tell us the latest big things, and what we already know or ought to know.

We have devised neat ways to state what results are expected in what areas and what indicators will be used to monitor performance. (Of course, what happens if somebody or some organisation gets a failing grade is still something of a mystery. Being a sociable and politic people, we are not very used to giving people the chop when they deserve it.)

So why are we still talking? Why haven't we been able to go beyond the powerful PowerPoint presentations telling us our needs but not how to get them?

Either we do not know what is required or are unable to speak frankly and articulate how to fulfil them. Here is my Christmas wish list of five things, all beginning with D.

Disclosure

We are not an information rich society by any means. Unlike advanced countries, we do not bother to invest a great deal of time and money in gathering data and information.

This is symptomatic of the fact that we do not place a high priority on facts. We seem to prefer to revel in our ignorance.

Where information is produced, it is often hoarded and distorted. No one questions the need for confidentiality but the lack of disclosure (or transparency) is quite often used to shirk responsibility and cover-up inaction or gigantic messes.

The media, which ought to act as the fourth estate and uphold the public interest, is frequently silent or silenced.

Dialogue

In this country, opinions abound everywhere (including this column) and on everything. True dialogue, however, is the one thing that should energise us and lead us to new consensus about what we have to do.

Instead, we argue that we ought not to cheapen our race, religion or ideology by agreeing to sit around the same table.

Reading the pages of any newspaper on any given day provides plenty of examples of foot stomping tirades at one source of unhappiness or another.

Where are the stories of good-natured public discussions and sterling compromises? Where is the hard indisputable evidence that Malaysia is, in reality, a model multicultural country?

Detachment

Malaysians are fast becoming famous for raw, unthinking, and, most often, racially-charged outbursts.

Some take to streets and stadiums, while others take to conference halls and convention centres. Apart from the inconvenience to the public, shopkeepers and drivers, the effects are about the same.

The inability to de-personalise the issues that afflict us means that we have to approach them fraught with emotion, tension and belligerence.

Our inability to step outside ourselves also means that problems are never solved; only held in abeyance and that decisions taken are increasingly illogical and inconsistent.

Dedication

I am constantly amazed in my frequent interactions with those from abroad as to exactly how switched-on they are.

It does not matter whether they are Caucasian or Asian, their energy and devotion to their professions is evident.

Equally amazing is how many Malaysians are absolutely casual and perfunctory about what they do. Many visitors to this country have observed how laid-back our people are. We may spend a lot of hours in unfocused meetings but to little avail and results.

Duty

Perhaps the most important of all, is a sense of duty to the country. The politicians and civil servants of the past had an innate sense of duty to the nation and its peoples.

I would argue that all the stories that we hear today about high-level corruption, abuse of power, bias and racism, stem from the exact opposite: a failed sense of duty.

Someone with a strong sense of duty would never use corruption, discrimination, miscarriage of justice or any one of the numerous other loathsome acts to justify their contributions to the country. We must see this for what it is: a thin and ineffective disguise to mask wrongs and illegitimate acts.

Optimally, I would have all five Ds under my Christmas tree this year. But I would be ecstatic to receive just one and the others in subsequent years. Here's to my wish coming true. A joyful Christmas to those who are celebrating it and a wonderful New Year to everyone else.

> The writer is assistant director-general of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia.