

FOCUS

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE



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We should not be preoccupied with issues such as the weight of school bags or the colour of school shoes

IN the course of my public-service career, I would have heard hundreds of speeches by public service leaders. A few have stuck in my mind. One of which is that by Tan Sri Ismail Adam, a former director-general of public service.

As often as the opportunity arose, Ismail would exhort public servants to see the big picture or, in his words, "the forest for the trees". And, he walked the talk. When ministries approached the Public Service Department, or JPA – the Malay acronym – for the creation of new posts or divisions, he would invariably ask them how their request would further the strategic direction of their ministries. That would get them thinking of the big picture about how their request would fit into the larger vision and purpose of their ministries.

This nugget of wisdom of seeing the big picture is also the central theme of the Kim Chan's and Renee Mauborgne's 2017 book *Blue Ocean Shift*. There, as in their previous path-breaking 2005 book *Blue Ocean Strategy*, they exhort businesses to be single-minded about the big picture. Businesses should not focus on operational issues and accounting figures if they want to seek out uncontested markets without competitors.

A similar resonance of appreciating the big picture is evident in Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's 2012 insightful book, *Why Nations Fail*.

Acemoglu and Robinson argue that inclusive and pro-growth political and economic institutions and the rule of law are prerequisites for a nation's socio-economic progress. Countries are more likely to develop the right institutions when they have a pluralistic political system with competition for political office. There must also be an openness to their



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newly-elected political leaders, giving them space to realise their big picture.

Powerful people everywhere have always sought to rig the rules to seize control over government. In the process they weaken institutions. And, it is effective democracy that keeps these power-hungry gluttons in check.

Against this big canvass of economic development, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that contingent policies – the "trees" – however sensible, are often bereft of impact without the big picture of institutional change. Poor countries are poor simply because their leaders do not know which policies to pursue to prosper their citizens.

The new government came into power with such a big picture. At the hustings, Pakatan Harapan advocated stanching the rise in cost of living. The Goods and Services Tax and escalating petroleum prices were in the cross-hairs. Upon assuming office, the new government has mowed down these causes of inflation.

The bigger picture of restoring the fiscal position has seen the government committing to shrinking the public debt and deferring or paring down the price-tag of big-ticket projects.

To restore public trust, the new government has promised to restore the supremacy of the constitution. It wants the rule of law to be omnipresent in all its deal-

ings. Relatedly, the government wants to revive the integrity of all three branches of government – parliament, judiciary and executive.

A start on these big pictures has been made. There are many more big pictures looming on the horizon. One such big picture is education reform. Here, the big picture is how the education system can be revamped to produce employable school-leavers and graduates. This has to be done without compromising the high ideals of the higher-education system to extend the frontiers of knowledge and make students better leaders of tomorrow.

Such a big picture should not be stained by an obsessive preoccupation on issues such as the weight of school bags or the colour of school shoes. While these may be pertinent issues, they tend to generate controversies. Such controversies are unnecessary distractions from the pursuit of the bigger vision.

As Assegid Habtewold, the author of *9 Cardinal Building Blocks for Continued Success*, says: "Having the big picture in mind enables us to overcome the routines that distract us from pursuing our dream."

Similarly, the nation's human resource management should not be mired by issues of who gets to cook in our restaurants. Rather, the big picture focus should be on elevating our vocational education to the level of

excellence that the German and Swiss vocational education exemplifies. The relevant ministry should focus on the bigger sketch of how talent can be attracted, developed and retained.

Putting out the small fires should not be ignored either lest they conflagrate into bigger ones. Notwithstanding, a proper perspective between "the forest" and "the trees" should prevail.

The political leadership has shown by example that we should not sweat the small stuff. It is our turn, as citizens, to emulate this good example. What is important for us today is that we must be mindful that irrespective of race or creed we are all Malaysians. It behoves therefore for all of us to honour that identity and treat one another as belonging to that big family.

It takes courage to refuse to allow people or circumstances to force us into doing things that will damage this fabric of national identity. We see what we want to see. As good and responsible citizens we need to put ourselves in each other's shoes and see the big picture. We need to only look at the composition of the winning French football team to know the true significance of a national identity regardless of ethnicity.

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