This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:

Campbell, James Kennedy 2010, Comment : Empathy is not just sentiment, New Straits times, pp. 1-1.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30031312

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Comment: Empathy is not just sentiment
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BROWSING through a bookstore the other day I chanced upon a book authored by one of Malaysia's great intellectuals and social activists. The book was by Professor Chandra Muzzafar titled A Plea for Empathy: The quest for Malaysian Unity. I picked it up and decided to buy it on a whim. Before long I was engrossed. Chandra's essential thesis is that one of the keys to understanding the continuance of conflict and misunderstanding, indeed misrepresentation, in Malaysia was fundamentally sourced in a lack of empathy between groups and individuals.

Empathy, it is said, is a critical, perhaps central characteristic of a well balanced and decent humanity.

Empathy, it is said, is the key expression of our humanity. This key idea is a hard one to forget and his book, a collection of essays written over the span of his intellectual career, is hard to put down.

Such a book written with eloquence forces you to think, perhaps rethink, your views on any number of issues.

From 1Malaysia and the vicissitudes of economic development and advancement found in the New Economic Model to the problems of higher educational reform found in complex initiatives such as Accelerated Programme for Excellence, the problem of empathy seems to suggest itself as the concept that everyone knows is critical to success but very few can truly bring to bear on the serious issues of national reform.

If we ask ourselves some simple questions perhaps we can get a taste of why empathy is so critical yet so overlooked in our understanding of public policy and social reform.

Consider the following: What kind of 1Malaysia can be achieved without empathy for others? What kind of economic growth and development can be acquired without empathy for those who miss out on the benefits of our growth? Finally, what kind of educational outcomes will we see if empathy for others is not part of our educational agenda?

As soon as we pose such questions the significance of empathy becomes apparent. Perhaps, a better illustration of the centrality and salience of empathy can be found in reference to a story I read in the New Straits Times (June 28).

The article by Teresa Yong is titled Girl Who Beat Bone Tumour Now Nursing Others. The words of the young girl, Noor Amira Rozahan, are deeply moving. She was quoted as saying, "I show empathy for patients as I had gone through what they would have to undergo in the course of their treatment." I can think of no better illustration of the principle of empathy and its significance.

Critics may say that this is all well and fine but surely serious public policy in areas of economics or higher education must be driven by harder, more measurable criteria. Empathy for these critics is not the stuff of serious policy making.
After all the market requires us to be tough, compete for advantage and create profit as an incentive to work harder and develop. Where is the room for empathy when our true mission is to seek advantage through competition and exploitation of our resources and our human capital?

For those critics let me refer to another philosopher: Adam Smith. He was the author of the often quoted and rarely read, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. He also wrote The Theory of the Moral Sentiments (1759). In this famous work Smith argued that "fellow feeling" was the glue that kept society together.

Smith wrote: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."

Smith recognised that all economies rest on deeper wellsprings of moral duty and sentiment, and that a denial of this was not simply a denial of human reality but would in fact undermine the foundations of economic growth and development.

In other words, the issue of moral sentiments is not for Smith a mere afterthought to serious thought on economics and public policy. The moral sentiments are of central concern.

Stripped of moral sentiments, stripped of "fellow feeling", all our advances seem hollow and shallow.

For without a sense of empathy and "other regarding" sentiment our advances are tenuous at best. Hard-headed thinkers know that all advances on the material level must be complemented by insight and reflection on the level of values.

Smith knew this and gives us a deeper rationale for economic growth. Chandra knows this and provides us with a sense of its centrality to unity and Noor Amira lives it, providing us with true inspiration.

From the insights and philosophical acumen of Chandra, through to the inspiring story of Noor Amira, it seems that empathy is one of the most useful and practical aptitudes we possess.

This is something worth being reminded of and it made my book browsing all the more productive.

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