

Insight

Can we disagree without being disagreeable?

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908 words

26 October 2007

[Straits Times](#)

English

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A JUNIOR college classmate I had not heard from in over a decade e-mailed me this week. She had long wanted to 'rag' me for becoming a Nominated MP, knowing my pretentious adolescent infatuation with nihilism and libertarianism. Instead, she was glad I had spoken in Parliament in support of retaining Section 377A.

Like many others, she urged me to continue to do the right thing in the face of nasty insults and threats. Life beyond the ivory tower requires greater epidermal density.

Aside from the crass and childish, the e-mail messages I received after the 377A parliamentary debates were overwhelmingly warm and supportive.

Friends and strangers thanked me for articulating reasoned views and highlighting the radical nature of the homosexual social agenda. One person thought the local press implicitly supported the gay movement in apparently assuming homosexuality is inborn or that gay 'rights' were somehow being violated.

Why, in the interests of objectivity, had the 'ex-gay' phenomenon not been investigated?

Others chuckled at my observation that those who smear their opponents as intolerant bigots demonstrate their own intolerant bigotry.

Together with other elected MPs, I had apparently given voice to many in the 'silent majority'.

The spirited debate over 377A flows from a policy shift the Prime Minister announced in his 2004 Harvard Club speech, that the Government would pull back from 'being all things to all citizens' and be 'increasingly guided' by community consensus 'on questions of public morality and decency'.

What if consensus is fractured? Even Western societies remain polarised over issues like whether to endorse homosexuality as an 'alternative lifestyle'.

There are no neutral perspectives on morally controversial issues, which evoke strong emotions. This is no excuse for jettisoning critical thought, in the interests of our broader shared commitment to democracy and informed public debate.

To say the law should ignore moral questions is to impose a 'hidden' morality by default. Hedonism, a recipe for societal suicide, is the philosophy underlying the argument that law should not interfere with private consensual sexual behaviour. As philosophy affects law, and law affects popular mindsets, we need wisdom to know what the law should encourage or hinder.

The public debate over 377A demonstrates a new brand of Singapore politics beyond the dominant government, Lilliputian opposition and apathetic citizenry model. We witnessed a galvanisation of citizens on both sides of the fence, through letters to the press and MPs, meet-the-people sessions, cyber discussions, online hissy fits and petitions. PM Lee Hsien Loong observed that 'both sides' had mobilised 'very well organised campaigns' to promote their causes. This is one way of providing feedback integral to a responsive and representative Government.

Ultimately, the Government has to make a decision. Unlike lawyers who speak of resolving issues, politicians deploy the language of 'accommodation' and 'balance' to facilitate some sort of rapprochement. It is a useful device for politicians to paint a picture of two extreme views, and occupy the middle ground.

While acknowledging 'space' for homosexuals to live quiet lives, PM Lee firmly stated that homosexuality was not to be mainstreamed, and that heterosexuals should set the tone of society. If homosexual activists 'push this agenda', that would elicit 'push-back' from the morally conservative majority. In other words, don't aggressively push the bedroom into the public square.

Where do we go from here, with some citizens locked into intransigent stances over controversial public issues?

I hope Singapore will not end up with an uncivil civil society by allowing public debate to degenerate into fruitless name-calling and distorting issues by speaking misleading half-truths. A central goal of debate must be to lend clarity to the issue, as where PM Lee stated that Singapore law recognises only racial and religious minorities. Thus, the politicised term 'sexual minorities' is legally vacuous.

Furthermore, specific issues should be debated, rather than making emotional and vague appeals to 'fairness', 'equality', 'inclusivity' and 'tolerance'. The concrete issue is: What should we exclude or include? What should we not tolerate? 'Tolerance' must not become the refuge of a person without convictions. Terms like 'dignity' and 'tolerance' are empty apart from a theory of human nature, human good and community. To go beyond sound-bites to substance, we must not gloss over the real issue.

Democratic pluralism welcomes every view in public discussion, but does not commit the intellectual fallacy of saying every view is right. The goal is to ascertain the right view for the circumstances.

We should debate with civility and learn to disagree without being disagreeable. This is a facet of character, which no government-imposed law or 'OB marker' can elicit. To approach morally controversial debate with maturity, the solution is not more government, but self-government. The civic virtue of self-control, rather than a culture of anger which celebrates expressions of hate and vulgarity, should be embraced. Indeed, arguments which merely seek to vilify opponents are suspect.

John Milton noted: 'Let Truth and Falsehood grapple: Who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?'

Aside from truth, free speech serves a commitment to rational democratic debate over matters affecting our common good. Civil and civilised debate sustains the possibility that we may be able to persuade fellow citizens that our views are sound. You cannot converse with a shouting person.

The views expressed here are Dr Thio's own.