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## Time for Majlis Profesor Negara to step in

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Comment

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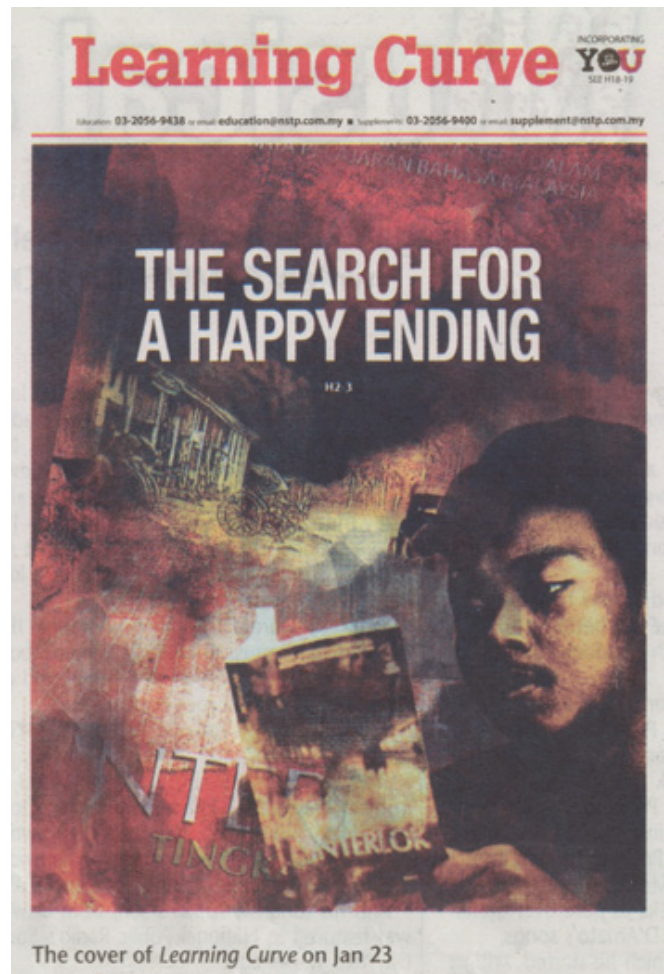
THE *Interlok* saga which hogged headlines for weeks has been resolved. The novel by Datuk Abdullah Hussain will be retained as a literature component of Bahasa Malaysia for fifth-formers in schools.

However, sections deemed sensitive to the Indian community will be amended.

That members of the Cabinet are involved in offering a solution to the quandary is rather unusual, since the issue is academic-cum-literary in nature.

The last time the Cabinet was in this predicament was when a similar incident flared up, which led to it acting as an editorial board of sorts, directing a group of academics on how to write a book about race relations in Malaysia.

The draft was allegedly vetted at least six times before the Cabinet gave its seal of approval. This move was unheard of before, and many hoped that this would not be repeated, especially when it has been pronounced that "the days that the government knows best are over."



In matters of the academe, it is safe to conclude that the academics know better, if not best! Even then, not all are eager to claim as such when they are not specialists or trained in the area concerned. In the case of Literature, no chemist, mathematician or surveyor or even a political scientist will want to be involved. Each may have an opinion but to insist on it as expert view is rather ludicrous!

On the contrary, experts use their objective intellectual assessment to make a judgement about an issue. And it is best to listen to and learn from what they have to say. You can seek clarifications as part of an intellectual discourse, but not with the intention of politicising it in any way, or confuse it further with uninformed views.

In the case of *Interlok*, we have heard many expert opinions of senior and experienced academics from various disciplines including sociolinguists, novelists, literary specialists, historians and sociologists. We have learnt from them why things are done or written the way they are some 40 years ago and did not raise any eyebrows. That the author is a National Laureate is an indication that this work is more than a paperback fiction.

Any modifications to his work must be an affront to him and mar the prestige of the Award!

He took the trouble to consult a scholar in a relevant department of University of Malaya while doing research into his work. *Interlok* is "faction" -- fiction based on historical facts, and not just a figment of one's imagination. Far from intending to cause divisiveness and hatred, the plot captured the experiences of past history, presumably in the early 20th century, highlighting the theme of "unity".

The first letter of the so-called offensive word (which appeared twice in the students' edition) is in the upper case so as to place it in the proper context. One eminent sociolinguist even made the distinction that the word refers to a particular group of people and is not intended as a generalisation. At some point, one of the protagonists was even addressed as "Tuan" as a sign of respect.

Such comments helped to increase our appreciation of the issue at hand because they came from those who are not only well read and knowledgeable about Literature but also represent a varied ethnocultural background.

While their views are academically independent, their assessments dovetailed with one another to the extent that *Interlok* is "not" deemed a "threat and demeaning". Taken in the appropriate context, it is suitable as a text for Literature.

To disregard expert opinions on the matter has raised suspicions as to the ultimate purpose. Viewed even casually, the political posturing is becoming more obvious by the day, what with a potential by-election in the air. Introducing "censorship" at this point is a direct contradiction to the democratic spirit.

Majlis Profesor Negara needs to break its silence on the issue. The council was formed last year as an independent body to give expert opinions on matters of national interest that have a bearing on the nation's well-being.

This must happen before academia is further defiled by more political manoeuvring, which has long fragmented academic development locally.

It is a pity that the Council is being bypassed in favour of another independent body.

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