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### Discarding a bad habit

IMPERFECTION is an inherent human condition. But it is a poor excuse for the littering habit of Malaysians. The rubbish that greeted visiting Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif along Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur had provoked the ire of our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. And justifiably so. A nation, wrecked by filthy urban environment, growing pollution and decrepit public services is, by definition, unsuccessful no matter how high its Gross Domestic Product per head may be.

A nation's vibrant, prosperous and successful economy seems irrelevant when its cities are characterised by filth and piles of garbage. A disturbing conclusion that can be drawn from the rubbish strewn along our roads and elsewhere is the public's lack of consciousness about cleanliness. Littering seems to be a "hide-and-seek" disease that vanished momentarily due to rebukes from the authorities and to the occasional enforcement blitz before making its ugly presence again.

Discarding this litterbug culture will not be as simple as decorating the road-sides with garbage bins. Only the most blinkered of moralists can sincerely believe that legislation is the sole answer. No amount of legislative action can dismantle a mentality. Tougher enforcement is only a deterrent measure - at least for a certain length of time and only when there are enough uniform-clad officers in every nook and cranny of the country - but it will not obliterate an ingrained habit.

And it would be a sad state of governance if much political energy must flow into devising attractive ways and means to persuade people to be civic conscious. As it is, the litterbugs seem inured to the breadth of despair and the depth of anger displayed by the authorities over their littering habits. The media itself has tirelessly published ugly news and unsightly pictures of the decaying city environment and it continues to serve as a forum for the litany of complaints about uncollected rubbish from concerned members of the public. However, the habit persists.

Moral exhortation alone is insufficient. That would be the counsel of despair. Voluntary action by individuals, buttressed by the appropriate use of public power, may prove potent in remedying this national malady. Regretfully, those in the seat of public authority do not seem to display an appropriate degree of contrition for uncollected rubbish and unattended complaints. The charmless roboticism of City Hall and the municipalities, and one suspects the impersonality that masquerades as efficiency, in addressing this issue cast aspersions on their commitment to the public service ethic of serving the people's needs promptly and efficiently. They should not wait for the Prime Minister to show such ire to keep the city clean.

Perhaps more worrying and difficult to tackle than penalising offenders - of which majority are young - for littering, is resolving the younger generation's blatant disregard for civic duty. Their self-centred individualistic values appear to inhibit them from showing civic consciousness. The restoration of civic virtue in this disenfranchised lot and the public in general should be a prime agenda in the pursuit of national wealth. Patriotism should include civic virtue. Yes, to borrow the Prime Minister's phrase, "we are no more little brown men at the feet of great white masters" but if the litterbug culture prevails, we become our own coolies, at the feet of irresponsible fellow citizens.

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