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Help Halim ensure civil service meets people's expectations

K.H. Lim

IT was courageous of the country's top civil servant to admit last Saturday that the performance of the civil service still fell short of the expectations of the people.

In admitting this, Chief Secretary to the Government Datuk Abdul Halim Ali said his disappointment with the performance of the civil service followed the numerous complaints he and heads of department had received from the public.

Abdul Halim made his remarks with particular reference to certain anonymous letters complaining of poor and unsatisfactory service by government officers which he said the Government could not ignore.

Although it was difficult to follow up on the complaints due to the anonymous nature of the letters, he directed all heads of departments to monitor the performance of their staff to avoid more complaints.

"This should not be the case if the staff are aware and fulfil their duties and responsibilities. Quality service given without fear or favour would not have caused the dissatisfaction that has prompted some disgruntled parties to resort to writing poison pen letters," he had said.

As he has readily admitted the weaknesses, Malaysians must also be ready to give credit where credit is due.

There certainly are conscientious hard-working civil servants manning the offices and "holding the fort" in far-flung bureaucratic outposts.

Yet Abdul Halim is right: the civil service, by and large, still falls short of expectations of the rakyat. Especially when it has raised expectations with its declared objective of achieving ISO9002 standards for its quality management system.

Talking Point had previously touched on the shortcomings of counter services and sections dealing directly with the public. Except for one or two officials calling to get further feedback, there has been no action.

This column has also suggested that random checks be made on how government departments handle telephone enquiries and how the staff take telephone calls. It is still not known if this suggestion was taken up or even considered.

Abdul Halim also rightly linked service efficiency to corruption. It is common knowledge that if doing something the "straight" way means hours of waiting in queue or being pushed around from section to section, there is a chance that opportunists will offer "short-cuts" for a bribe.

As corruption is an insidious disease that can undermine confidence in the Government of the day and affect the investment climate, it is important that clear and effective steps be taken.

The vanguard of this all, the Anti-Corruption Agency, should be seen to be more pro-active and effective. It should be more receptive to approaches by the media following up on various high-profile cases referred to it.

As to the economic aspects, the damage is not only to businesses, be it local or foreign. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had often reminded civil servants, businesses pay 30 per cent corporate tax and as such, government officers should help businessmen as if the Government get 30 per cent profit-sharing.

This, after all, is central to the Malaysia Incorporated concept.

Talking Point: Now that Abdul Halim has raised the issue and issued his directive, only time will tell if senior officials down the line will take

up the cudgel and whip up sufficient momentum to get effective results. In this, Abdul Halim and his team deserve all the support they need.

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