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Narrow the income gap to spread out talented people

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THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the other day made a very significant statement. He said, if you want to be rich do not become a politician or a government servant.

These positions he said call for dedication in the service of the country above considerations of financial rewards.

To illustrate the point he was making, he said his monthly salary as Prime Minister is RM16,000 whereas some heads of corporations under his ministry were paid much more than that. The Prime Minister's statement is in fact reflective of the changes in our social order that have taken place since independence.

Before independence government servants were considered the elite of society because of the power and prestige they held in public life.

Senior officers of the civil service held positions of Chief Minister, State Secretary and District Officer which wielded considerable political power.

In States with hereditary Rulers who were sovereign and exercised absolute power, these officials were directly linked to the palace. All official acts were expressed in the name of the Ruler, hence the Malay word *kerajaan* for government.

In Johor, for example, government funds were referred to as *Duit Raja*.

Government servants then were truly dedicated. Many were the sons and grandsons of people who were themselves government servants. There was family tradition and honour to uphold.

Added to this was job security and the life-time pension to look forward to.

Indeed they enjoyed a lifestyle way above that of most ordinary people on their government salaries. Hence corruption was practically unheard of and the standard of integrity in public life was high.

The social order and environment of the time attracted and retained the best qualified people in government service.

Businessmen were regarded as belonging to a lower strata of society.

After independence, there was a perceptible shift of the best people into politics because political power had now passed from the civil servant to the politician elected by the people.

Many civil servants resigned and entered politics. Indeed all our Prime Ministers so far were initially in government service.

So also were a number of Cabinet Ministers until the late 1970s.

They carried with them the same standard of integrity in political life as they did when in government service. In addition they had played an active part in the fight for independence from colonial rule.

They were truly dedicated in the service of the country and the people. Led by example, the public service as a whole was still largely clean and free from corruption.

The next major shift of the best people began to occur in the aftermath of the racial riots of May 13, 1969 which gave birth to the New Economic Policy. Thousands of school-leavers were sent abroad to acquire higher academic and professional qualifications.

On their return they began their careers in the private sector. Within two decades they had risen to be captains of industry.

The corporate world has attracted the most brilliant of our university graduates.

They are not interested in joining government service or even entering politics. In their mindset, government servants and politicians are there to serve their business interests.

They are now the elite of society with their luxurious homes, cars, yachts and private jets. It is the era of the rich and the famous. They receive enormous salaries, fees and allowances.

In addition, they are not exposed to the regulated and transparent life of a government servant or politician who are often blamed when things go wrong and seldom acknowledged when things are right.

Government servants and politicians are not exactly poor. The huge and widening disparity in incomes between the public and private sectors, especially between people with similar qualifications in the higher levels of both sectors, however is cause for national concern not the least of which it creates a fertile ground to sow the seeds of corruption.

There is obvious disenchantment and frustration in the public service. Many highly qualified civil servants are still in government service only because they have to serve out their bonded period in government under their scholarship contracts.

They are waiting for the time to get out even with the loss of pension rights. With such people, dedication in the service of the country is furthest from their minds.

If the present trend continues unabated, we will end up with a mediocre civil service and puppet politicians by the year 2020.

To be sure the country needs talented people in government service, politics and the private sector. Some sort of balanced distribution of talented human resource has to be achieved and maintained.

It seems that the only practical way is to narrow the gap in incomes between the public and private sectors. Of course this will cost the taxpayers more but quality does not come cheap. It is not too high a price to pay for a corruption-free public service which we once had because our government servants and Ministers were the best paid in the region.

It must be remembered that without dedicated government servants and politicians, businessmen will not achieve fame and fortune. It is only fair and just that incomes be equitably distributed.

Dedication yes but often times, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak!

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