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Of political sleaze in the Commons

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MET Mohamad al-Fayed the other day. A lightning chance meeting seized upon with glee.

"I am a Haj... went seven times," said the Egyptian-born owner of the famous London store, Harrods, with aplomb, when he showed up during the visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the research centre of Frazer-Nash, 56km from London.

There was an air of benign authority about the man who caused much harm to the Conservative Party through the cash-for-questions affair.

Charges of sleaze against Tory politicians have had notable casualties.

A former minister, Tim Smith, stood down before the May 1 election, after admitting to accepting up to STG25,000 (RM100,000) from al-Fayed, to lobby on his behalf in Parliament. Another, Neil Hamilton, lost his Tatton seat, used to be the fifth safest Tory seat.

There was some debate on the role of al-Fayed in the run-up to the election. Christopher Graffius, from People's Trust, a campaign to end political sleaze, said: "There are many other corporate interests paying MPs, but only al-Fayed had been honest enough to admit it. It is entirely because of this public admission and his willingness to testify that we have had the parliamentary committee on sleaze, the Nolan Report and the appointment of a Parliamentary Ombudsman." Graffius wrote this in the Daily Telegraph on March 27.

Alas, al-Fayed will be part of the already colourful history of parliamentary traditions.

The post-election parliamentary sitting now coincides with the peak tourist season, a time when London is deluged with cameras. Some of the favourite spots for "photo-opportunities" are around the 1,100-room Palace of Westminster, where the Houses of Commons and Lords are, ideally with the Big Ben as the background.

Daily, people peer towards the steps into the elegant interior outside the St Stephen's entrance where MPs can be seen trooping in. Although the building is a superior attraction, spotting a politician one know is a bonus. "You wouldn't see any MPs today," a policeman on guard was heard telling a tourist on Friday.

The Commons largely sits on Monday to Thursday, starting 2.30pm. There have been sessions which lasted up to 10pm or more. The Friday sitting starts at 9.30am and ends sooner. On Sept 3, 1939, around the time when World War II broke out, was the only Sunday sitting this century.

With the question concerning attendance of our MPs in the Dewan Rakyat raised from time to time, here, at times, very few MPs attend Commons proceedings. "I have seen only three MPs in the chambers," said a Commons staffer. "Probably all they need is one MP to speak, and one to listen."

The quorum is 40 MPs in the 659-member Commons, and no decision can be taken if any member draws the attention of the House to the lack of quorum.

Quorum or no quorum, proceedings at the Commons rarely dull, with thinly veiled attacks against the "party opposite" in questions or debates. The much-weakened Tories are now on the receiving end. "If the party opposite had given due attention to getting people off welfare and into jobs, they would not have been left with few jobs," a Labour backbencher gloated the other day.

The Commons becomes most rumbustious during the Prime Minister's

Question Time. The previously two 15-minute session on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a bane in John Major's difficult career as PM, has been made into a single, 30-min session on Wednesdays.

Speaker Betty Boothroyd comes down hard on barracking, or MPs straying from topics of the moment.

"The Prime Minister can only be asked matters which are his responsibility.... I am tolerant with new MPs," she told former Guardian journalist Martin Linton (Labour-Battersea).

Linton had, during Wednesday's question time, said the frontrunner in Tory leadership contest, Kenneth Clarke, secured 49 votes in the first ballot. When Tony Blair was elected leader of his party, Linton said, he had 508,000 votes (Blair was directly elected by party members. The Tory leader is elected by fellow MPs), which Linton said were 10,000 times more than Clarke's.

The Speaker, then turned to Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats: "I'm sure Paddy Ashdown has an important question" to which Ashdown replied: "As always Madam Speaker, as always."

While MPs refer to fellow MPs as "my honourable friend..." or "my honourable gentleman...", at the House of Lords, members call each other "the noble Lord, Lord..." or "the noble Baroness, Baroness..."

Votes feature "ayes" and "noes" in the Commons, and "contents" and "not contents" in the Lords. Proposals to do away with the House of Lords or at least abolish hereditary peers, are not new. But many have their respect for the non-elected peers, who are free from party pressure.

During the debate on the future of 13 dependant territories last week, the peers proved to be very well-versed, and their contributions carefully researched. There were much niceties and non-pandering praises for each other, regardless of party line.

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