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The die is cast against corruption

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THE battle cry has been sounded. Politicians and Government servants must not only be clean but be seen to be clean, said the Prime Minister. Corruption must be eradicated from top to bottom, starting from the top, said the Acting Prime Minister.

Both statements have far-reaching consequences giving rise to great expectations that the era of giving advice, warnings and polite suggestions to retire from positions of power has come to an end. The era of resolute and positive action to stamp out corruption has begun.

Not that the country is now riddled with corruption at all levels of Government, but the disclosure that corruption has been on the increase during the last 20 years is certainly cause for great concern. The PM said corrupt transactions under the counter must stop before it reaches the stage of over the counter. This probably explains why the Government is increasing the powers of the Anti-Corruption Agency and its budget allocations.

Recent court cases seem to indicate that we have either reached the precipice or commenced the fall into the abyss and quagmire of corruption.

A Road Transport Department official was recently convicted of receiving a bribe of RM200 for not weighing four lorries to determine their laden weight. He pleaded guilty. Two things stand out from this case. The demand of RM50 bribe per lorry was made openly and paid over the counter. And the functionary was only 22 years old!

Nor are bribes, it seems nowadays, paid to secret bank accounts overseas or to nominees. Even gifts in kind are given directly and blatantly. The ACA should have no difficulty investigating such cases.

The ACA's difficult job is how to ensure that politicians and Government servants are seen to be clean. To achieve such an objective they must not wait for official reports of alleged acts of corruption, but take the initiative to investigate into signs of corrupt practices. It has to have its ears and eyes on the ground. In short, it has to double its role of an investigative agency with that of an intelligence agency and, if need be, as some sort of secret police.

The public perceives corruption as much more than just the giving and taking of bribes. If a karaoke lounge is operating without a licence, then the conclusion is that bribes have been paid and not a case of ineffective or inefficient law enforcement. So, too, with unauthorised building construction or illegal hawking. If Calcutta, a city with a population of 11 million, can clean its streets and five-footways of hawkers and illegal traders, why cannot our local authorities do the same?

What about politicians and Government officers owning multi-million ringgit bungalows? Where did the money come from? On an overseas visit, I was given an official car with a driver by the host country. On one free afternoon, I asked the driver to take me to parts of the capital city I had not visited. He took me to a very posh residential area and said: "These bungalows belong to our corrupt Ministers! The public knows."

Some Government servants own and drive expensive cars. At their level of salaries, position and the amount of loan they can borrow from the Government to buy a car, the majority of Government servants can only afford to buy cars in the Proton and Perodua ranges.

Even if the expensive cars were bought second hand at a used-car mart, the public will brand the Government servants as corrupt. Such Government

servants should refrain from using such cars to uphold the Government's image of a clean, civil service.

Conspicuous consumption is a fertile area for the ACA to start asking questions of politicians and Government servants without further ado.

And what about retiring civil servants appointed to directorships of companies they dealt with before retiring from office? Or congratulatory messages from the private sector in newspapers when conferred a Datukship or Tan Sri. The same goes for politicians. It is embarrassing, really.

In some countries the penalty for corruption is death. A million-ringgit maximum fine and forfeiture of ill-gotten gains will do just as nicely here.

The die has been cast by the PM and the DPM. At stake is the Government's creditability. Indeed the ACA is on trial!

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