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The litterbug in you and me

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IF we are at all an honest nation, there should have been many red faces last week when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed his disgust at the litter along Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur.

While we enter the Info Age, another age is rapidly on the rise and that is garbage.

Somewhere on the way to progress, we seem to have bypassed civic-mindedness, and only realised this when the Prime Minister told us so.

So pervasive is this culture of rubbish that litterbugs are not a separate group of people far removed from the centre of society. Litterbugs are, in all likelihood, you and me.

A commonsense defence is that development leads to higher consumption, so there is an increased generation of waste, especially in urbanised areas.

While the move towards industrialisation proceeds ferociously, similar social progress has yet to be achieved, and the transition from the rural landscape is rocky.

"There is the notion among many that the kampung is much cleaner," says Norani Othman, a Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia sociologist and research fellow at Ikmas.

If so, she says, it is because there is a strong, palpable sense of ownership in the village. Smaller, more cohesive surroundings are easier to identify with and so responsibility for keeping it clean is willingly undertaken.

A town or city on the other hand is big and sparse, and generates a feeling of anonymity. This sense of diminished significance makes the individual feel that public places belong to nobody, instead of to everybody. Hence, there is no obligation to keep it clean.

"We are still operating in pre-modern mode - we have yet to realise that even in a place as big and seemingly impersonal as a town or city, there is a greater level of interdependency," says Norani. In other words, what we do matters as much, if not more.

To the average city-dweller, beautiful places are still couched in terms of lush greenery and clear sparkling waters. At the rate we're going, the only sparkle will come from carelessly disposed of tin cans.

In the West, where civic-consciousness is greater, apathy is usually reflected by the residents of deprived inner-city areas.

Education is the familiar cry that rings out whenever public indifference is displayed, and of course, it is an essential ingredient to set any drastic change in motion.

But locally, littering is also perpetrated by members of the educated middle-class, who know enough to keep their own houses and compounds clean, but who have no trouble dropping tissue-paper on public footpaths.

One explanation for this could be class-consciousness. Wedged in a layer of society that employs labour to do menial chores, perhaps there is a notion that we are too good to clean up after ourselves, and that after all, someone else is being paid to do it.

But no matter who we are or what we do for a living, surely the point is that we are too good to live and wallow in filth?

And being a society that places high value on religion in general, cleanliness should all the more be a priority. The purity that is taught is not just spiritual; it is also material, we are after all, bodily

beings who are given stewardship of Creation.

Too often however, the main religions are compartmentalised from each other. This means that in a multiracial, multireligious society, there is little commonality between the respective members of each faith.

Consequently common goals are hard to reach.

Says Norani: "But religious leaders may be reluctant to do this, especially if they are brought up traditionally, because they will consider referring to other religions as undermining their own."

Moreover, in a multireligious society, atheism and agnosticism must be considered. Good values are universal and exist just as potently in the secular realm.

"It is crucial to find and employ shared values to combat something as global as preserving the environment," she says.

"We as Asians are more individualistic than we like to admit, and it is the most crass, crude form of individualism."

Harsh though this might sound, our behaviour certainly justifies it. Based on the amount of garbage that clutters roads, bus-stops, beaches and playgrounds, it is unlikely that we consider those who come after us.

In fact, so short is our vision that we forget we ourselves will pass through these places again.

"Of course, we have the gotong-royong concept, but it is carried out on an ad hoc basis and usually done to impress some politician," she says.

Sadly, our preservation instinct has not translated well into modern terms, and we seem to have forgotten how to defend the standard of our environment. A prime example is when somebody jumps a queue, and nobody is willing to speak out.

"We don't like playing an active role in any confrontation. This leads to a lack of social sanction when we fail to uphold basic standards.

"But as we go deeper into an urban complex society, sociability has to operate at a different level. It must go beyond the home into the public arena."

Surely the average Malaysian who willingly feeds and houses guests can extend that same hospitality and consideration by clearing up picnic litter.

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