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Developing countries must make use of technological advances

Patvinder Singh

MODERN communications have opened up different and sometimes conflicting ethical standards in all countries especially where the influence of home and religion are less strong.

This is a view expressed by Lord Michael Nolan, First Chairman of the Standing Committee on Standards in Public Life, United Kingdom.

And a fairly similar one to that of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who said in the State-of-Governance Address at the second Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) Biennial Conference on Sept 8 in Bangi, Selangor:

"The law of the jungle does not fit into the framework of good governance. Therefore, the architecture of governance will have to be re-examined so that technological progress and the accompanying new value systems will not result in the collapse of governments and governance."

According to Nolan, the influence of the media is now much greater, especially with film, television, newspapers and magazines more concerned with commercial success than maintenance of standards.

Arts, drama and fiction often ignore and sometimes even ridicule traditional moral and ethical codes.

As such, it perhaps cannot even be assumed anymore that everyone knows what is right.

Nolan said there was a time not long ago when each country had its own clear ethical and moral traditions, and when those who reached high levels in public service were instilled with ethical principles by their parents which were reinforced by the educational system and religious beliefs.

"Thus when people entered public office they knew what was expected of them. That is not to say that people holding public office never engaged in wrongdoing. But when they did, they knew it was wrong," Nolan said.

Many delegates shared the view that technological advances must be taken advantage of if public administration and management were to become more efficient and provision of public services made faster.

One main issue was how the developing countries can capitalise on technology. Unless they have the opportunity to use technology to improve their public service, they will fall further behind developed countries who are moving forward very rapidly.

One very real challenge is for them to gain access to the technology and to train their people to use it or as someone put it: to be able to leapfrog into the 21st century.

"Technology can be used to create new partnerships. It can get different levels of government to work together. Ministries who should be working together but do not can use that technology to link up," said Art Stevenson, CAPAM executive director.

He said CAPAM could provide the contact to places where innovative changes had taken place, provide opportunities and contact with international agencies who could provide financial support to the developing countries.

Towards this end, the experiences, both good and bad, of developed countries in governance needs to be shared with developing Commonwealth nations to enable them to improve their own public sectors and to avoid making the same mistakes.

Said Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku: "The Commonwealth provides a uniquely positive environment for collaboration,

innovation and learning from successful experiences at a time when all nations are finding that they need to reform public administration to meet the challenges of the next millennium."

The CAPAM conference with the theme, "The New Public Administration: Moving into the 21st Century", was attended by 265 delegates from 45 Commonwealth countries, seven Commonwealth associated states and 17 non-Commonwealth countries.

The inaugural CAPAM conference was held in Canada while the first biennial conference was in Malta.

A conference report would be produced which will identify the innovative practices in public administration in Commonwealth countries. It will touch on relations between politicians and government officials, the partnerships taking place with the private sector and with non-governmental organisations, and the use of information to supply faster and more efficient services to the public.

The report will be distributed to the prime ministers of the 54 Commonwealth countries.

It is hoped CAPAM will continue to report objectively and impartially on the changes in governance across the Commonwealth. CAPAM is about creating collaboration and networks where people can learn better practices both in developed countries and in developing countries in all their different stages of development.

The next conference will be held in South Africa in the year 2000 and one area which will be emphasised very strongly is how CAPAM can assist developing countries to achieve some of the innovations available to developed countries.

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