

20/07/1998

How to go about improving image of civil servants

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WHEN releasing the Public Complaints Bureau's 1997 annual recently, Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali disclosed that more than 60 per cent of public complaints received by the bureau were about government officers' delays in discharging their duties. (The PCB received 3,697 complaints in 1997).

Concerned over this problem, the Government has issued directives to all departments and agencies to speed up the processing of applications, cut off red tape and expedite approvals.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself has pointed out the need to revamp the civil service and cut red tape.

The Prime Minister's statement is most appropriate considering the fact that bureaucratic red tape has been a perennial problem in our civil service.

In view of our present economic downturn, red tape can delay the approval of applications urgently needed to revive the economy.

Therefore, the processes, practices and conduct of our civil servants must be constantly reviewed and steps taken to ensure that they are able to serve efficiently to give meaningful expression to the Government slogan of the eighties - "clean, efficient and trustworthy".

One important aspect concerning efficiency of the civil service is the Clients' Charter which has been introduced by numerous departments and agencies.

As one who has been advocating that the implementation of the Clients' Charter by departments and agencies should be reviewed in the light of public complaints about their effectiveness, I welcome the Chief Secretary's latest statement that departments and agencies must revise their charters periodically to reflect more realistic goals if they cannot meet the specific targets and standards set out in the document.

Although our civil service is one of the best in the region, it cannot be denied there are still weaknesses which can be rectified.

The civil service is the backbone of the nation as civil servants are responsible for implementing policies decided and laid down by Parliament and the ruling Government.

The development of an efficient, disciplined, high-quality and productive civil service is vital to ensure the success of various development programmes undertaken by both the public and private sectors.

Heads of departments must always view with utmost concern the observations of the Auditor-General in his annual reports, the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament and the Cabinet Committee on government operations as well as genuine public complaints in newspapers.

All government departments dealing directly with the public should take initiatives to collect and assess feedback on services rendered to the public.

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