

29/10/1998

It's all about caring for society

Harun Hashim

THE 1999 Budget announced last week at last gave a ray of hope to government servants over a matter which had exercised their minds for years. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his capacity as the First Finance Minister in his Budget speech, proposed that "one Saturday per month be declared as a holiday for the public sector. The private sector is encouraged to take a similar step".

The proposal was made in the context of promoting domestic tourism in line with efforts to revive the economy.

Although much appreciated the general view, however, was that the Government should have proposed a total five-day week. Many private firms have long since observed a five-day work week. Moreover, a weekly two-day weekend will provide for a better over spread of transport and accommodation facilities in promoting domestic tourism.

Government servants have been asking for a five-day work week ever since Merdeka. It was first refused on the ground that it would increase the overtime payment bill. Later, it was refused on the ground that the five-day work week was a luxury which the country cannot afford at a time of rapid economic development.

The Royal Commission on the Salaries and Conditions of Service of Employees in Statutory Bodies and Local Authorities, 1971 recommended a five-day work week. It also recommended a common weekend for all States. After consulting all religious bodies and obtaining their consent and Bank Negara on the effects of foreign exchange and trade, the commission recommended a common weekend of Friday and Saturday. So far only Kelantan has implemented these recommendations.

Over the years, times have truly changed. When I first entered government service more than 50 years ago, nearly all government office workers were men. The women were largely employed as school teachers and nurses in hospitals. Wives were content to stay at home to look after the children, cook and attend to the many chores of house-keeping. Mother was always at home ready with a hot meal when the children returned home from school. There was much love in the family and parental control.

Nowadays both parents are at work, leaving the children to their own devices after school leading to lepak, bohsia, drug-taking and an increase in juvenile delinquency. A five-day work week would at least reduce present-day social ills and promote a caring society. So that children will have more quality time with their parents, schools should also observe a five-day week, if necessary by reducing the number of long school holidays.

The five-day week does not mean government servants will work less. They have to work longer hours each working day to make up for lost Saturdays or Thursdays as Kelantan has done. In addition, the Government will make significant saving in operating costs like reduced electricity bills by closing on half-days. As a "trade-off" I would humbly suggest that non-religious public holidays like Workers Day, the birthdays of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the Rulers should be celebrated on Saturdays without being replaced by a public holiday on the following working day.

For the last 17 years, residents of Peninsular Malaysia have had to put up with an unnatural clock of GMT plus 8. Most religions observe prayers at sun-set but social invitations to dinners and weddings are still for 7.30pm or 8pm. Many Muslim schoolchildren and workers have to miss subuh

prayers in order to be in school at 7.30am or at work by 8am. We should revert to GMT plus 7 by Jan 1, 1999. Malaysia will still be a united nation in spite of separate time zones for Sabah and Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia.

Finally, the Prime Minister also announced that there will be no bonus for government servants because of the economic downturn. In government service the word "bonus" is a misnomer because it is profit-oriented. The lower-paid government servants in particular look forward to the so-called bonus as a necessity to pay for school books and uniforms of their children at the end of each year.

The solution is to fix government salaries on an annual basis, namely the salary of an official is so much per annum rather than the present practice of so much per month. To effect the change, the existing monthly salary is multiplied by 12 to determine the annual salary. The annual salary is then divided by 52 to determine the weekly salary. Multiply the weekly salary by four for the monthly salary payment which will in effect equal to 48 weeks per year.

The balance of four weeks salary is the "bonus" or more correctly "deferred salary payment" which can be paid out in full at the end of each year or half of it at the option of the employee for Hari Raya Puasa, Chinese New Year, Deepavali or Christmas and the other half at the end of the year. When times are better the annual salary or the weekly rate can be revised upwards.

The 1999 Budget is about a caring society. Let us make it really so.

(END)