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A duty to serve the public

THE silent majority within the electorate has decided it can no longer keep quiet and look the other way when elected representatives fail to show up for Dewan Rakyat proceedings. In no uncertain terms, it has issued an ultimatum for them not only to turn up, but to speak up or be booted out of office when their term ends.

Kudos to the public for being so forthright in expressing disgust and exasperation with those Members of Parliament who consistently play hookey when sessions are in progress. The truants would be foolish to laugh off this unambiguous message from the vox populi, with its clear concern over both the silence and absence of their representatives in Parliament. They no longer face the unsophisticated electorate of the past.

Voters took their democratic duty seriously enough to make a careful choice in last month's general election. That many wakil rakyat won their seats with slim majorities should be an indication of voter maturity and understanding of the power of the ballot. Their expectations are higher now, and their ability to act decisively should not be underestimated. MPs who renege on commitment will find few in a forgiving mood when the next election date rolls around.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is equally blunt about the future - or lack of it - of MPs whose attendance record and quality of debate does not come up to scratch. More than anyone else, he has read public opinion and gauged present voter sentiment with pinpoint accuracy. Hence, his warning that MPs will be closely monitored and called to account for every trick of the trade they employ to make the most of their position.

The wakil rakyat is not sent to Parliament to make up the numbers for either the ruling coalition or the opposition front. Neither is election a ticket to claim the trappings of office without reciprocal attention to duty and an obligation to serve the public. If the exalted social status of MPs inhibits their ability to empathise with the grassroots, they themselves should put an end to the kowtow-ing practised in their presence.

Suggestions for disciplinary action against absentee MPs by their own political parties are worthy of consideration. Every voter who is advised to "vote the party, not the (wo)man", is entitled to know that ineffective members will be hauled up. This is a simple matter of collective responsibility for the individual's negligence.

For a start, every party should set up a bureau to receive feedback or complaints about the performance of its MPs. Investigations and findings should be made public, as should periodic progress reports on the work of MPs on behalf of each constituency. The quality of service provided, and accessibility and visibility of MPs should be among the features tracked.

MPs cannot afford to vanish as soon as the votes have been counted in their favour, leaving constituents feeling manipulated and cheated. While some have yet to realise it, MPs make a social contract with constituents by pledging their services in return for a term as elected representative.

Public confidence in the electoral process - and therefore trust in democracy as an institution - relies heavily upon this contract being fulfilled. Anything less results in scepticism that is difficult to eradicate. When that happens, everyone loses.

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