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Civil service must buck up

GOVERNMENTS may come and go but the civil service remains the backbone of the country. It is the facilitator and implementator of the policies of the Government of the day. A lethargic civil service can mean the failure of any Government.

The importance of efficient execution of policies at all levels of Government cannot be overemphasised. The economic slowdown has brought home the perils of complacency and many flaws in our public administration. At a time when the nation is at a critical path of the economic recovery process, delays in carrying out crucial projects would deal a death blow to the one per cent growth target this year. The projection of a five per cent growth for next year would remain a pipe-dream.

The National Economic Action Council has identified implementation of development projects provided for in the Budget and the Seventh Malaysia Plan as a chief concern. Last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in tabling the Mid-Term Review of the plan asserted that effective implementation will be the clarion call for all government agencies, especially during the remaining plan period. With an additional RM22 billion allocation for public sector spending for this year and the next, the pace of implementation has clearly to be expedited.

It is no exaggeration to say that bureaucratic red tape remains a bane of our society, despite the political leaders' desire to reduce it to the barest minimum. Often, the good intentions to change do not materialise. While the examples of tardiness and sloth are too many to enumerate here, the apathetic attitude of many local authorities towards directives of the Housing and Local Government Ministry is a classic case. Whether it is a directive to keep the environment clean, the issuance of the certificate of fitness for dwellings and buildings or approval of a building plan, these instructions do not seem to be expeditiously carried out.

Nurturing a positive work culture is a priority. Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Mohd Ali has been steadfast in prodding the country's 850,000 civil servants to better performance. But if his resoluteness does not percolate down to every stratum of the bureaucracy, the aim to improve the service and curb wastage, excessive spending as well as corrupt practices remains a dream. Herein lies the pivotal role of Cuepacs to instil in our civil servants the value of accountability. Delivery of efficient service is part of the civil service's accountability. Cuepacs should not be too preoccupied with salaries.

The recent advice to the public not to bribe civil servants as such action will only increase corrupt practices among them is sound advice. But it is easier said than done. Time is money for the people, particularly the corporate sector. Perhaps, a foolproof way of stamping out such unhealthy practices is to have in place an effective system of monitoring the work performance of every level of the civil service. As far as possible, a time-frame should be given for responses from government departments and agencies. This improves transparency and promotes efficiency.

Recently, we have heard of a number of punitive measures against lackadaisical civil servants. Low-achievers and non-performers face the sack if they do not pull up their socks. There is a proposal, too, to penalise government officers who procrastinate in implementing projects

and do not pay contractors on time. Months back, Dr Mahathir himself told civil servants who delay approvals for applications from the private sector that they run the risk of pay cuts as delays may mean lower taxes.

These and many other measures aimed at accelerating projects and improving the quality of service should be effective if there is close supervision from the political masters and heads of departments. Prompt action against the recalcitrant will go a long way to show that the Government means business.

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