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People should be allowed bigger role in protecting the environment

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HEADS of departments of the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry were expecting the usual briefing during Wednesday's post-Cabinet meeting the week before last. Instead, Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding unveiled his new five-year vision to improve the ministry.

His message was clear. Ministry employees must perform their duties to their best ability in order to meet the people's expectations and to serve them better.

This is indeed a noble aim, one which should have been the main thrust of public administration right from the start.

The next step, however, is to ensure the idea is not confined to paper alone, but is translated into action by the various departments and agencies under the ministry.

Plans and programmes should be drawn up to make them a reality. Since it is for the people's benefit, common sense will tell that the plans should be charted with the people's needs in mind.

"The ministry has to be close to the people, its target audience. The officials have to go down to the grassroots to get a better picture," said Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations president Professor Mohd Hamdan Adnan.

As far as the man in the street is concerned, words such as "proactive" and "focus-oriented" spelt out in the new vision do not make sense. He is more concerned about issues that are more apparent.

He wants to know if the green lung behind his house will be there tomorrow or if it will make way for a development project. He wants to know if his apartment sitting precariously on the hillslope will collapse during a downpour, or if his car will be swept under a torrent of mud while he is driving along the highway.

Gone are the days when the people's concerns were confined to whether they would have rice on their plates the next day. With economic progress, access to education and the advent of information technology come higher expectations and an increased awareness.

The people know they have the right to a clean environment. They are aware that safeguarding the environment means protecting themselves and the future generations.

They want the assurance that those entrusted with the task of protecting the environment are doing their job.

They want to know if these people are doing their best to ensure they do not breathe in filthy air or drink poisoned water.

The departments must be seen to be enforcing the laws and implementing the policies.

It is imperative for the departments and agencies to be transparent.

They have to keep the people informed about the current situation to assuage fears and erase suspicions that may arise from actions taken by the departments.

In return, the departments will gain the trust, confidence, understanding and co-operation of the people.

It is also crucial for the people to be allowed to play a part in the drawing up of policies. They must be consulted, especially when they will be affected by decisions or new policies adopted by the departments.

Hamdan said departments should be ready to accept criticism and suggestions instead of reacting to them with animosity. He said public

agencies had the tendency to think of criticism as something unacceptable.

Non-governmental organisations are one of the best sources for getting feedback and ideas as they, more often than not, have the expertise.

"They should avoid making use of NGOs for window-dressing. Some departments invite representatives from the NGOs to sit on their panels just for that purpose.

"They do not listen to the NGOs' views at all and we resent that," said Hamdan.

In his new vision, Law said the departments under his ministry would have to be focus-oriented. To do this, they must set targets and then come up with programmes to achieve these targets.

The Department of Environment has been doing this by coming up with emission and discharge standards for the various areas and industries, for instance.

These targets, however, must be continuously updated to meet the needs of the time.

In order to improve, all departments must re-evaluate their performances and must be willing to admit past mistakes and weaknesses.

They have to strengthen their capabilities and expertise to enhance their services.

This is especially important for the DOE which is entrusted to protect the environment, the Malaysian Meteorological Services which has to improve its weather forecasts, and the Science and Technology Division which is to help the country meet its vision of becoming an industrialised nation.

Law's new directive is in line with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's instructions to Cabinet members on Wednesday.

The Prime Minister had asked all the ministers to fulfil their promises, and understand and talk to the people to improve their quality of life. He had also urged the ministers to pay equal attention to the environment.

In this regard, Hamdan said all ministers should keep report cards to enable the people to judge their performances.

Perhaps this suggestion should also be extended to all departments and agencies.

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