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PM's response indicative of desire to enhance accountability

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I REFER to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reaction to allegations that members of the Cabinet maintained numbered accounts in Swiss banks (NST, Jan 28), and wish to congratulate him for allowing the banks to reveal the names of the account holders.

It is debatable whether Swiss bankers would comply with such a request unless criminal proceedings have been instituted against a named individual or individuals.

In any case, the offer is a little misplaced as to the overwhelming majority, nothing can be further from their experience of consciousness than the notion or idea of accounts, numbered or unnumbered in foreign parts.

This latest development is symptomatic of the current national mood, one grounded in deep cynicism and compounded by a sense of alienation brought about by political and economic malaise.

That the Government should become the object of ridicule and, often, unfair criticism, is to be expected in the circumstances. After all, as A. Kadir Jasin alluded to in Other Thots (New Sunday Times, Jan 24), there is a social contract between the Government and the governed.

The mandate and legitimacy of an elected government is derived entirely from an unspoken social contract which requires the Government not only to honour and defend the Constitution, but to subject its official behaviour to public scrutiny.

By implication, the mandate that the Government enjoys must be applied to achieving only one object - to put the interests of the many over those of the few. It goes without saying that the principle of trusteeship is central to the whole question of stewardship, both in the governance of the nation, and in the case of the private sector, the management of public companies.

I see the Prime Minister's response as a genuine desire to create a more transparent and accountable Government. And if further proof is needed, the appointment of an independent commission of inquiry into police brutality in the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim case should put to rest any lingering doubts about the seriousness with which the Prime Minister views this and other matters of national importance.

The Government will strengthen its moral legitimacy to govern by putting in train two initiatives:

\* Legislation requiring all Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers, political secretaries and private secretaries to Ministers, as well as senior public officials both in State and Federal Government services to declare their assets to an independent all-party parliamentary committee or an independent Anti-Corruption Commission; and,

\* Create an independent Anti-Corruption Commission along the lines of the highly successful Independent Commission Against Corruption, Hong Kong.

I believe that in this way the Government can silence any criticism that it is more interested in protecting the interests of the few over those of the many.