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Raising retirement age for reasons which seem quite compelling

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IN a Utopian world, retirement is synonymous with rest, freedom from work-related worries and maybe a daily game of golf or a good book - whatever your pleasure.

But for many civil servants who cross the age threshold of 55 each year, that world doesn't materialise. Retirement, they find, means having less money to pay the same bills.

A recent Public Service Department proposal to extend the retirement age to 58 therefore, may be cause for excitement. The proposal is expected to be submitted to the Cabinet for deliberation very soon.

The proposal however, if it comes into effect, would not be a blanket policy as it comes with a caveat: civil servants may only work until the age of 58 upon the recommendation of their heads of department.

This is already causing disgruntlement in some quarters, where there are fears that such a provision would be open to abuse.

"I don't think that's a very good idea," said a civil servant at Universiti Putra Malaysia. "How can we be sure that the heads of department would be fair? What if they recommend those they are close to?"

"The tendency of bias would be great, and this could have a demoralising and demotivating effect on civil servants.

"It is very difficult to judge a person. To be fair, it should be a blanket policy, because then the opportunity would be given to all."

The fact that such a proposal is being made by the Government years after calls for such a move began may at least be seen as progress.

For Cuepacs, the proposal is a vindication of at least a decade of persistent campaigning, although the umbrella body had originally asked for the mandatory retirement age to be upped to 60.

Over the years, the organisation has put forward a compelling argument in support of such an extension.

Contrary to popular perception, for example, people don't transform into doddering geriatrics when they turn 55.

As Cuepacs has repeatedly pointed out, workers at that age are a valuable repository of information and experience in whatever field they work in.

It is difficult to quantify in monetary terms the experience and knowledge that exit Government offices each year when civil servants retire. How, for example, do you put a price tag to the intellectual capital teachers develop over a lifetime of study?

This has been recognised by a number of countries around the world, who have upped the retirement age anywhere from 58 in India to 67 in several Scandinavian countries.

Lest we forget, even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who endures a punishing daily schedule by anybody's standards without showing signs of slowing down, is 73 years old.

The most recent World Population Report has put the average life expectancy for Malaysian men at 70 and women at 74, thanks to better quality of living and medical services.

That translates to an average post-retirement lifespan of 17 years, many of which could be put to good use in the service of the country.

The additional years of work would also be a boon for civil servants who still have loans to pay off and children to put through school. For retirees who must now make do with their pension payments in lieu of their

salaries, the bills may seem a heavier burden.

Another argument is that the provision of more years of work would mitigate the worker shortage in several public sectors, such as engineering and teaching.

All this makes for a sound case for increasing the mandatory retirement age, but the Government has related issues to worry about before it can come to any firm decision.

Work opportunities in the public sector must also be provided to school-leavers and fresh graduates, for example; opportunities which may be reduced if civil servants stay on the job longer.

The Government has in the past called upon the private sector to help by hiring civil servant retirees.

But the hard truth is that private companies may be loath to hire workers aged 55 and above, as younger employees would be better bets for a longer term of service.

The Government must give all these factors due consideration, but at the end of the day, it would be a shame to show so many civil servants the door when they are not only capable, but wholeheartedly willing, to continue in the service of their country.

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