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Society will no longer accept lack of maintenance as an excuse

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THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the other day lamented at the lack of a maintenance culture in our society. His lament is not new.

In 1949, the Colombo Plan countries held a conference in Karachi specifically to address the problem of maintenance in developing countries.

It was noted that developing countries were constructing new roads, bridges and buildings but paid little attention to their maintenance.

It recommended that a maintenance unit should consist of an engineer, four technical assistants and 10 technicians.

This came to be known as the Karachi Formula for maintenance.

Newly independent countries, particularly, were catching up with lost time.

Infrastructure projects had to be completed fast to give meaning to their newly found political independence. But financial and human resources were limited and it was then a question of priorities.

Where there used to be road inspectors and drainage inspectors, these technical personnel were diverted to construction projects. With sustained development projects there really was nobody to look after maintenance.

Indeed even local authorities became development-oriented instead of remaining maintenance-oriented.

The result - pot-holed roads; clogged drains causing flash floods; government buildings in a sorry state of disrepair; and, most regrettably, the perennial problem of dirty public toilets.

The times have much to do with a sustainable maintenance culture.

In the old days, things were made to last. Car owners proudly boasted that their 10-year-old vehicles were still looking new and in good working condition.

Grandmothers passed down their Singer sewing machines to their daughters and granddaughters.

Sons proudly rode Raleigh bicycles first bought for their father's use.

Many old buildings stand proud and are now declared part of the country's heritage.

The Sultan Abdul Samad building for instance is more than 100 years old. The walls are about 30cm thick.

When it was being renovated for the courts, the size of the courtrooms were restricted to existing walls because the walls could not be demolished without causing a collapse of the entire structure.

Nowadays, buildings are constructed with the concrete pillars and beams making a frame. The walls are mere fillers which can be knocked down at any time.

And of course, economically, it is cheaper to demolish an old building and construct a new one rather than renovate an old building.

Economics has much to do with the change in social attitudes. As the manufacturing industries reach saturation point in the sale of their products, it becomes necessary to maintain production and increase output.

The solution was to make things not to last longer than three years to create an everlasting consumer market.

So when refrigerators, washing machines, toasters and other household equipment break down, one is told that there are no spare parts and it is better to replace it with a new one.

Even cars now are considered old after five years. And periodic cosmetic changes of the product always boost sales.

The mindset is then made up - forget about maintenance and replace old things with new.

The trouble, of course, is that certain things cannot just be discarded and changed at will, like roads, bridges and irrigation canals. These have to be regularly maintained.

Society will no longer accept a lack of maintenance as an excuse. The highway authorities should be warned of likely suits for misfeasance and nonfeasance.

Stage buses and express buses frequently break down all over the place. Some taxis are fit for the scrap yard.

Such incidents display a lack of supervision and maintenance by the management and the licensing authority.

It reflects on society as a whole that our public transport system is dirty and unreliable.

The public authorities should appoint maintenance inspectors to activate a maintenance culture.

At home and in school, children have to be taught as a matter of discipline that cleanliness of one's habits and surroundings are the attributes of a cultured person and society.

But must we wait for the Prime Minister to tell us that we are less than cultured?

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