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To serve with a smile

THERE is an imperative consideration in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for government agencies to render friendly services. Not only would such services enhance the image of the country, which has been unfairly battered by news manufacturers such as the BBC, CNN and CNBC, but they would also help to revive the economy.

The underlying message, which has been tirelessly reiterated by our national leaders, is clear: The public sector, particularly frontline agencies, plays a leading role in the country's economic recovery efforts. They are responsible for implementing the prescriptions to restore monetary and fiscal health. As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, the Government has put into place well-formulated policies to haul the country out from the economic morass.

These have been deemed as extraordinary and even unconventional measures to revive growth. The soundness of these measures is indisputable. We need not look far for the evidence. Going by the stable business climate brought about by the currency exchange rate controls, there is a reasonably strong prognosis that the period ahead will see recovery. But there is a caveat - the success of the policies depends on the rate and speed of their implementation by government departments and agencies.

The fact remains that sound policies alone do not necessarily yield a good harvest. The way in which the frontline agencies dispense services, be it to entertain queries or process applications for permits or licences, will have a bearing on the recovery process. Any dithering by the agencies will weaken the efforts and, therefore, delay the prospect of full-fledged recovery. That much is plain.

The harder question is whether all the departments and agencies pay heed to the need to serve speedily and pleasantly. Most have long awakened to the fact that courtesy, efficiency and accountability are essential and that people are no longer willing to being ladled out with the usual opiate of "Your query is under consideration" or "Your application is being processed" for months and years. In the case of the Immigration Department, for example, this awareness has been vigorously translated into action. Its 'Service With A Smile' campaign does not stand by itself. There have been efforts to reduce lengthy queues and waiting time, simplify procedures and do away with unnecessary paperwork. These have made certain dealings with the department painless. To its credit, there is no end to such efforts. All its offices will go on-line this year to enable employers to apply for employment passes and expatriate identification cards at any of its offices. Its proposed drive-in service for employers to renew the work permits of maids indicates its resolve in providing efficient services.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for some agencies. The construction industry has pointed out the need for the local authorities to expedite their approval process by reducing red tape and standardising approval requirements. Bureaucratic hurdles translate into higher holding costs and tighter cash flows for producers and consequently, higher prices for consumers. Even Dr Mahathir has emphasised the importance of cutting red tape on numerous occasions.

Image inevitably rests on how the services are provided. Smiles, greetings and exchange of pleasantries are more meaningful if they come as an integral part of speedy and efficient services.

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