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Vital not to lose sight of responsibility

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PUBLIC administration in a modern State like Malaysia is a very complex affair. Policy and project approval decisions are made by the Cabinet at its weekly meeting on Wednesdays.

The Minister responsible for the particular matter has the responsibility to carry out the policy decision or implement the project. He does this by directing the Secretary-General of the Ministry to execute the Cabinet decision.

The Secretary-General in turn directs the head of the department concerned in the Ministry to implement the Cabinet decision. The head of department in turn will direct the appropriate officer to do the job.

In this scenario power will be delegated from one official to another. The Secretary-General coordinates the work of the several departments of the Ministry and is the linkman between the Minister and the department that actually implements government policy and directives.

Throughout however the Minister bears full responsibility for all work carried out by the Ministry simply because the law has conferred on him such responsibility.

Such sense of ministerial responsibility is sometimes illustrated politically in some countries by a Minister tendering his resignation when an accident occurs like an aeroplane crash or a train derailment merely because he is the Transport Minister although he did not personally cause the mishap.

That is why also, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is chairman of the National Economic Action Council because he is ultimately responsible for the economic health of the country.

In a system where power is being delegated from one official to several others down the line but responsibility remaining with the Minister, it becomes necessary to install a monitoring and supervisory mechanism. This is particularly so in relation to infrastructure projects involving public funds.

The late Tun Abdul Razak devised the operations room concept at Federal, State and District levels to project sites.

He had the knack of being fully briefed before each surprise visit. He did this by checking on the development projects of the district as it appeared on the charts in the Federal operations room before leaving Kuala Lumpur and after being briefed in the District operations room, he would announce his surprise that he wanted to visit a particular project site.

On one occasion the charts in Kuala Lumpur, the State capital and the District operations room all showed in colour a project had been completed. Upon visiting the site however he found that the project had not even started!

As Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Razak played the role of Minister Co-ordinator of development projects and woe betide the Minister whose projects were behind schedule or inadequately supervised.

Needless to say, civil servants shivered in their pants at the prospect of a visit by the then Deputy Prime Minister!

The success of many five-year development plans owes much to Tun Razak's system of monitoring and supervision of development projects.

Recent events seem to indicate however that the completion of development projects leaves much to be desired.

Several projects are still behind schedule. Projects which should have

been completed by now have not even been started.

Shoddy work of so-called completed projects are becoming an increasingly frequent occurrence.

Perhaps the recent `discovery' of the sad state of affairs of the Royal Malaysian Navy training centre project in Tanjung Pengelih in Johor highlights the problem.

This RM195 million project which commenced in 1995 was found to be unfit for occupation by a Minister 16 months ago yet nothing was done until another Minister visited the project recently. Worse, how come the project was not supervised for more than three years?

It seems obvious that the bureaucracy has lapsed into the attitude of delegating and forgetting.

Is this because there are too many projects to monitor and supervise due to lack of manpower at Government-level or over-reliance on private consultants employed for the projects?

Whatever be the reason there is no excuse for abdicating responsibility by the department concerned of the progress of projects so that any problems that may arise is attended to promptly before the situation gets out of hand. We just cannot afford to see public funds go to waste.

It is therefore a welcome relief that the Government convened the Conference of District Officers this week for feedback on the cause of delays in the implementation of development projects.

Although the purpose of the conference is to find ways and means as part of the economic recovery exercise, the opportunity should be taken to put in place new work ethics and procedures in the implementation of development projects involving public funds.

In the complex system of public administration, delegation of power is inevitable but one should never lose sight of responsibility.

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