

Putting Dewan sessions on the air

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Broadcast will enable the public to get full picture of parliamentary proceedings, says lobby group

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KUALA LUMPUR: Most Malaysians learn about what goes on in parliament from newspaper reports – generally concise versions of selected topics.

So when the nation found out that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has a closed-circuit TV in his office in Putrajaya that gives him live coverage of Dewan Rakyat sessions, the question arose whether parliamentary proceedings should be televised to the public as well.

Underlying this is the assumption that parliamentary discussions will affect the decisions of policy makers and, in the larger picture, the people.

Ideally then, the public has good reason to want to take more interest in the legislative process.

“Theoretically, people should take an interest in what goes on in

parliament,” said Prof P. Ramasamy, a political science lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

But, he doubts they are keen to follow the proceedings on TV be-

cause “the debates do not have enough substance and analysis”.

What viewers are more likely to come across instead is the usual scene of MPs from the Opposition and ruling government quibbling away, he added.

“What is actually happening in there puts people off and you cannot blame them for not wanting to take a keen interest in it.

“Ideally, what goes on in parliament is important and people should take it seriously. Debates are supposed to determine the bills that will be passed and these laws affect the people.

“But when they think that laws are passed with a rubber stamp, whether or not there are debates, they become cynical.

“They fail to appreciate the importance of parliament because the quality of debates leaves a lot to be desired.”

Even so, he believes parliamentary proceedings should be made more accessible to the pub-

lic and reports currently carried by the dailies are not sufficient.

Wong Chin Huat, executive secretary of the Malaysian Chinese Organisations Election Appeals Committee - or Suqiu - shares the same view.

"The readers cannot get the full picture of how parliament runs its business. What are the bills tabled, being debated and scrutinised, and passed? Who asked what at question time?"

"Out of a six-hour session per day, perhaps only a little part is covered, of which might be more eye-catching acts or rhetoric than substantial issues," he said.

Wong has recently started attending parliament, collecting Hansard reports and sending out extracts to subscribers of Suqiu's e-group discussions. It is a big task, he admits, and says the lobby group is trying to provide such service whenever it can.

"There is a lot of vital information revealed by the executive to the MPs at question time or during the debate round-up. It is also important to see how MPs debate bills, especially bills with far-reaching effects such as the Child Bill 2000," said Wong.

Other than the dailies and the parliament website (www.parliament.gov.my), the public can also attend parliamentary discussions at the Dewan Rakyat. But this might not be convenient for many people.

The idea of broadcasting parliament on public television and radio offers a possible solution. Some countries have introduced it and see it as a vital part of the process of involving public participation - no matter how indirect it is - in the legislature.

The broadcasting of the Canadian House of Commons gives the people a chance to see their elected representatives at work. Knowing that they are watched has also made MPs more accountable to their constituents. A similar situation is seen in the United States and Britain.

"I think it is a good idea to broadcast live proceedings of parliament via TV. MPs are elected representatives of the people, and they are, hence, responsible for bringing the public's grievances to parliament.

"It is, therefore, appropriate that the people who took the trouble to vote for them be able to see for themselves how their MPs perform and represent voters in the highest forum of the land, and whether they are actually doing the job for which they are paid," said Datuk Dr S. Vijayarajam, vice-president of Parti

Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia.

"The MPs, knowing very well that the public eye is on them via the live telecast, will also make an attempt to speak and behave with decorum, and not just engage in purposeless arguing and shouting. As seen in recent sessions, sometimes their behaviour is most unbecoming as members of that august House.

"It will also serve as a deterrent for absenteeism, as the people can actually see who is playing truant. After all, if the people are allowed to attend parliament in the public gallery, there is no reason why proceedings cannot be telecast to a wider audience."

However, Umno MP for Tambun Datuk Husni Hanadzlah does not think such a thing is feasible.

First, there is the high cost to consider, he said, adding that another problem is that few people will actually watch such a programme.

"I have had a chance to talk to some parliamentarians in Russia. They used to broadcast it but stopped after a while because the public did not want to watch."

Husni reckons Malaysians will be no different: "People are at work during the day. Who is going to watch if we broadcast parliamentary discussions? Are we going to encourage them to take time off work to watch? Would this not affect their productivity at work? These factors should be considered."

Husni said the idea of democracy is to have MPs represent the people's interests in parliament.

While active participation is in the hands of these elected representatives, the people can also convey their views or grievances through non-governmental organisations.

However, Vijayarajam said the cost factor is secondary and viewers who want to watch something else can always switch to other channels.

"RTM should shoulder the task, as a government channel, to provide this valuable service. No doubt there will only be a certain sector of the population interested, but that should not be taken into consideration. Not everyone watches all programmes all the time," he said.

He argued that newspapers, TV and radio news reports will not be able to give coverage of everything that goes on in parliament. "Live and continuous telecast will enable viewers to get exactly what they want, including replies from ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries."