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Adjournment speeches make a comeback

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THE Dewan Rakyat debated legislation at a leisurely pace this week as it geared itself towards a hectic and cramped four-day sitting next week before the session winds up next Thursday.

The House began the week with attempts by MPs from the Government and Opposition to table a motion to adjourn the House to debate the recent weapons heist and hostage-taking incident in north Perak.

Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail, however, rejected the motion tabled by Backbenchers' Club chairman and Rompin MP Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis and Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong), much to the disappointment of the MPs.

"While it may be of public interest and the subject is specific, it was not urgent to necessitate an adjournment," Zahir told the House, adding that there was no urgency as the episode was over, the weapons recovered and the robbers apprehended.

This session also saw the come-back of adjournment speeches, a device which allows important issues to be raised in the House by MPs at the tail end of the day's business.

During this time, the Minister responsible for an issue that was the subject for the MP's adjournment speech will also be given time to reply to the speech to clear the air.

One example was when Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Douglas Unggah Embas clarified on matters regarding the Anti-Corruption Agency's investigation of former Economic Planning Unit director-general Tan Sri Ali Abul Hassan Sulaiman.

Douglas, when commenting on points raised by Abdul Rahman Yusof (Keadilan-Kemaman) in his adjournment speech, said that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had never directed the ACA to stop its investigation of Ali.

"The investigations continued even after Datuk Ahmad Zaki Husin took over as the ACA director-general from Datuk Shafee Yahaya contrary to allegations made by many."

Before this, Pas president and Opposition leader Datuk Fadzil Nor had also tabled an emergency motion to discuss allegations that Dr Mahathir had directed the ACA to stop the investigations but this motion was denied by Zahir.

A lively Parliament is a good thing in any democratic country as this shows that elected representatives are committed to their responsibilities. But when the liveliness is the result of mere name-calling, we would be better without it.

It is essential also that the arguments be based on facts as mere accusations do not go very far even when they are shouted across the floor from whichever side of the bench.

This session served well as a reminder to all MPs to be prepared with well-structured, valid comments and concrete suggestions if they want to participate effectively in parliamentary debates.

The week's Parliament sitting saw some hilarious moments when Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena) in his adjournment speech, proposed that the Dewan meeting be telecast live by RTM.

Mahfuz argued that live telecast of the Dewan Rakyat's proceedings would enable the public to better understand the working of the House and give the public a chance to see for themselves what their elected representatives do in the Dewan.

However, his hope of appearing on television was shattered when Deputy Information Minister Datuk Mohd Khalid Yunus said the current coverage was more than adequate as all news bulletins on television and radio have slots for Dewan Rakyat proceedings.

Four days have passed since the second session of the Dewan Rakat began on Monday.

During the week, the House debated and approved four Bills - the Sale of Drugs (Amendment Bill) 2000, the Employment (Amendment) Bill 2000, the Destruction of Disease-bearing Insects (Amendment) Bill 2000 and Optical Licensing Disc 2000.

Except for the Optical Licensing Bill 2000, which is a totally new law to address copyright infringement, the other three are, however, relatively minor Bills dealing with small changes, mostly amendments for stiffer penalties.

However, this did not deter the MPs from debating at length on the issues.

To play an effective role MPs must do their homework properly before engaging themselves in the any verbal thrust. To begin with, they must know their stuff.

One incident which needs to be pointed out was when one of the Deputy Ministers failed to give an answer to questions raised by the Opposition as he was not familiar with the issues at hand when winding up the Employment (Amendment) Bill 2000.

He was however saved by the Speaker who with his wide experience took the effort to explain the matter to the House.

This only shows that some are good when it comes to reading or referring to prepared material but do badly when answering supplementary questions or in giving off-the-cuff answers.

Another clear example of this, was when MPs debated on the Sale of Drugs (Amendment Bill) 2000.

The Bill also saw some MPs going off on a tangent as they were obviously not well-versed with the facts. Instead of talking about control of the sale of drugs used in animal husbandry, many went on about dadah abuse and how it was destroying Malaysia.

A few made silly jokes, giggled often or passed immature remarks during the sitting.

The ensuing debate saw widespread interest on the subject by the members, to name a few, Datuk Mohamad Aziz (BN-Sri Gading), Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (BN-Batang Lupar), and also Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong), one of the vociferous MPs in the House who speaks fluent Bahasa Malaysia.

Jamaluddin, who is always capable of making humorous remarks and goading the Opposition, never failed to join the fray and in many instances crossed swords with the Opposition before deciding to call it a day and in return got a lambasting from the Opposition MPs.

Another maiden speech of note was the one made by S. Sothinathan, the newly-appointed Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary.

He was involved in several verbal clashes with the Opposition MPs who were apparently testing the new "kid on the block".

Sothi was equally good and fluent when answering supplementary questions and although new he proved his mettle by hitting out at the Opposition.

Another point to note was the fact that the bell was rarely used to summon MPs to muster a quorum so far at the current session as the sittings have been well attended.

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