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Call to telecast Parliament sittings a wise move to improve attendance

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THE suggestion made by some MPs to telecast the Parliament sitting live over RTM might prove to be worthwhile and even entertaining.

The way the Speaker handles bickering between MPs, ridiculous suggestions and flimsy excuses as well as rhetorics, might provide a good laugh for all.

Maybe watching the sitting might be better than watching P. Ramlee movies because the sitting, until today, never lacked drama.

The final week of the Dewan Rakyat sitting was never without its lighter side.

One to be noted was the reply by Finance Ministry parliamentary secretary Hashim Ismail to points raised by MPs regarding the relocation of the Jalan Sungai Besi burial ground.

The winding up debate saw Hashim come under heavy fire when he told the House that the spirits of those buried there would be more peaceful when the cemetery is relocated to a new site at Semenyih.

The reason given was that the current site is "busy and unsuitable for them".

This had caused an uproar among Opposition MPs who shouted back to him saying: "How do you know that they will be more peaceful there?"

This incident clearly showed that Hashim did not do his homework properly nor took the time to understand his stuff.

Said a senior government servant: "I felt ashamed with the answer. What more, we are forced to endure this humiliating incident from a member of the ruling party. He came unprepared and his answers were so weak."

Suffice to say, he added, the whole scenario could damage the BN's reputation.

An MP said, knowing the sensitivities involving the issue, the parliamentary secretary should have tried to tackle the matter wisely, but instead he made a mockery out of it.

The relocation issue was front-paged in the vernacular Press. Many MPs from both sides of the fence urged the Government to reconsider the plan as it was a matter of "grave" concern.

While some felt that moving the cemetery would boost development, others especially those who had ancestors buried there, were against the idea because bad luck may befall them.

A former MP when asked about the unsatisfactory answer said: Hashim should ask himself whether his action in the House reflects the importance of his task and more importantly, whether he had done enough to earn his position and his keep.

In a situation like this, one Government backbencher who was miffed with the whole incident said Hashim should just ignore attempts by the Opposition to make a mountain out of a molehill.

However, here, in the Dewan Rakyat this has become such a regular feature that it is felt too much time is spent in name calling rather than in debating the important Bills.

Another incident in the House was the verbal battle between BN MPs and DAP secretary-general and MP for Kota Melaka Kerk Kim Hock when he uttered the word bodoh (stupid) to answers provided by the Prime Minister's department's parliamentary secretary Khamsiyah Yeop.

It started when Kerk chided Khamsiyah over her remarks that medal of honours and awards by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong were conferred only to

citizens who had shown undivided loyalty (ta'at dan setia).

Upon hearing the word uttered by Kerk, the BN MPs urged the Chair to force Kerk to withdraw the word.

However, Kerk refused to retract his words, resulting in the proceedings being held up for more than 10 minutes when both sides got embroiled extensively in the argument.

How such commotion over an "unparliamentary word" managed to halt the proceeding of the Dewan Rakyat is indeed remarkable.

Even more baffling is the seriousness given to the issue by MPs from both sides of the bench, including Cabinet Ministers.

MPs should realise that there are other more important things affecting the country than fighting over something so trivial.

Probably, the MPs could take up problems of insufficient infrastructure and inadequate facilities in schools in the interior areas with as much vigour as that shown in their bickerings.

Such problems had been repeatedly raised by MPs who came from Sabah and Sarawak.

MP for Sipitang, Datuk Yusof Yaakob, for example, who comes from a family made up of fishermen and farmers, has a good understanding of the problems affecting rural folks.

"There must be a change of mindset among Government officials.

"Bringing development to an area is not merely improving infrastructure.

"It must also mean explaining to the people the benefits of the projects to ensure they can participate.

In a previous sitting, Yusof had also spoken of the plans by the Government to enable people in rural areas to have access to computers, but these efforts were retarded when the country was hit by the economic downturn.

Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar from Batang Lupar said motivation was a problem among students and teachers from the rural areas and understandably so as it was tough to cope with living in isolation and with a shortage of amenities.

Added to these are shortcomings in the school infrastructure itself.

"In some interior schools, three classes are conducted in one classroom simultaneously," he said.

The respective Ministries should also take note and ponder over points raised by MPs that until today, some people living in the hinterland are totally without electricity supply.

This week also saw Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, despite his heavy schedule, taking time out to join the other MPs and answer several questions posed to his department.

Other MPs should take the queue from him. During the last few days of the sitting, the quorum bell rang in the House a few times resulting in MPs having to scramble from the canteen and lobby to ensure the minimum 26 heads were present for the session to proceed.

However, as the session drew to an end, there were sometimes only 21 MPs present, five short of the required quorum.

"We now have 193 MPs in the Dewan Rakyat. At times it drops to as low as 27.

"This is indeed a sad state of affairs and does not augur well for a house of representatives whose members were elected just a few months ago," grumbled a staff at Parliament house.

These issues give rise to questions such as where are they? Aren't MPs duty-bound to attend sittings?

We know that Cabinet Ministers cannot attend the session regularly due to their executive duties.

Whenever they are absent, they normally delegate their parliamentary

duties to their deputies or parliamentary secretaries.

Sometimes, in between engagements, they do pop in, although it is only for a short time.

As for the other MPs, one is at a loss as to what would possibly keep them away from the sittings.

Could it be that to these MPs, parliamentary sittings are a light matter and of low priority.

It must be pointed out that Parliament does not sit for 365 days of the year - only for a specific period and for specific days in the week.

The rows of empty seats present a dismal picture of the House and tends to dampen the spirit of the other MPs who can be deemed more dedicated.

In all fairness, maybe it is time to allow live telecast of proceedings.

For one, surely the MPs would want to be present and not be caught playing truant.

Then, everyone will be more careful and come prepared if they wanted to join in the debates.

Surely, none of them would want to look stupid.

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