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Excellence, clear set of moral values vital in civil service

Felix Abisheganaden

OUR Prime Minister has done it one more time. He has delivered yet another inspiring appeal to civil servants to avoid corruption and to ensure professionalism in the public sector.

Addressing them recently, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke of the exciting challenges and rewarding prospects awaiting them.

His remarks clearly call for the development of the human factor. For higher ethical standards all round. Qualities that can be acquired by accessing the powers of the mind, following the dictates of the heart and not forgetting one's own gut feelings.

The good doctor diagnosed "professionalism" as "giving non-partisan service" and "not taking sides while dutifully carrying out one's responsibilities". He cited the Armed Forces - where discipline is spelt with a capital "D".

Frankly, had it not been a formal occasion, the Prime Minister who is not known to pull punches would, I believe, have put it this way: "Come on, chaps; you cannot expect to do first-class things if you are third-class persons."

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of complacency. Many people I have talked with, including some corporate executives, put a low priority on excellence in government. They appear not to understand the significant role they can play in achieving this excellence.

Some even question the very concept of excellence in government and in public service. As one rather brash get-rich-quick operator told me: "Thank God for corruption; otherwise nothing will work." How pathetic.

Actually, the question of civil service reform is an on-going issue engaging the attention of governments the world over. Some in the private sector believe the Government should be content with hiring competent people - not the best and most talented people.

A good case, they say, can be made that those bright sparks are needed in the private sector where wealth is produced rather than consumed. They maintain that the Government does not need top graduates, administrative offices staffed with MBA holders, or policy shops full of the best and brightest.

One foreign businessman I spoke to is convinced that the Government's goal should not be employee excellence, but employee sufficiency. He is adamantly opposed to the concept of excellence in government.

"The very idea is terrifying," he says, adding that "imagine what life would be like if you had a highly motivated Income Tax Department, an aggressive Department of Environment, Ministry of Health and Road Transport Authority."

"Any day I'll go for a government that is disorganised, lethargic and low-performing. It's the people's best hope for the preservation of liberty."

Preservation of Liberty?

What liberty would there be had we not had top brains in the Government to implement strategies to get us out of the economic recession without IMF intervention?

What liberty would there be if the public service lacked strategists in order to promote regional peace and security?

Also, what liberty would there be if we do not have civil servants capable of drawing up and implementing blueprints to improve the lot of

the have-nots?

Mere employee self-sufficiency in the Government will never be enough. Excellence is essential.

Then the need to be "non-partisan". This is a position requiring a high degree of self-discipline. As we know it, self-discipline means following one's intellectual conclusions even when emotions are running high. It means adherence to the principle of doing what is correct rather than the instinctive thing.

President Charles de Gaulle once said: "I am often wrong in what I do but barely wrong in what I predict." In other words his intellect usually gave him the right insight into what to do. But his emotions or instinctive desires often ruled the day.

Unfortunately, for many of us, instinctive desires tend to be oriented towards immediate gratification which could be detrimental to our long-term progress.

The experts say that self-discipline is a learnt art rather than inborn talent. The key is to be convinced of the long-term negative consequences of an action or inaction.

Next, the question of ethics. Firstly, let's look at three false views of ethics.

First, ethics are not merely what's enforceable. Those who rely on the law as their standard forget that laws change. Laws can be bent, dodged and misinterpreted.

Besides, because they are made by imperfect people, laws cannot possibly be perfect in all situations or at all times.

Merely observing a rule of law doesn't necessarily make one ethical. Remember, segregation laws (in the US) were once legal but most certainly obeying them did not make a person ethical. More than 90 per cent of the Fortune 500 companies require employees to subscribe to a code of ethics.

Second, ethics are not always what's expedient. We live in a society that places a premium on personal freedom. And while this has made us the envy of many, it has made us a society of cheats.

We jump queues; play golf during office hours; don't say a word if under-charged for groceries; and cheat huge sums of money off employers by arriving late, scooting off early and misusing time on the job. It's an endless list.

Why do we do this? Because the odds of getting away with them are so good. That's why ethics are not merely what's enforceable.

Third, ethics are not always what's excusable. The ability to justify a wrong or to rationalise a deed after it's been done does not make it ethical.

The sad fact today is that nothing seems to be wrong any more. In this age of situational ethics we have chosen not to change our ways but to come up with alternative names for wrong.

What used to be wrong (when I was a teenager and got walloped for by my dad) is not really wrong today, but "stupid". This means you can be excused for doing something unethical because you did a "dumb thing".

Next, if an action is legally permissible, then it must be morally acceptable, and perhaps, even good.

Thirdly, what's wrong is not really wrong anymore but "sick". Wrong deeds are done not intentionally, but because the culprit is not well!

What's wrong is not really wrong any more ... "But only to be expected". This means an act can be justified because of mitigating circumstances.

Having listed three false concepts of ethics, I would like to state the lay person's definition of the word. It is simply this: "Ethics is the moral strength to do what we know is right and not to do what we know is wrong!"

Again the human factor comes very much to the fore. What each and everyone of us - whether in or out of the Government - needs is a clear set of values that determine our day to day behaviour. We need to know what we believe in, in order to understand why we should do things in a certain way.

Somebody once said: "What you believe is right. What you believe is wrong. What you believe is good. What you believe is evil." We need to know what we believe in, in order to avoid basing our actions on whims or emotions - or short-term gratification.

Yet, another dimension to the debate on ethics is the number of times we have allowed "logic" to overrule our gut reaction to people or situations - much to our regret.

And you know what? I recently learned that our intestine is lined with the tissue identical to that which encases our brain. This may explain why our gut also seems to "think and talk" to us.

Some time ago I read in Time that Nick Leeson, the rogue trader who brought down Barings, had earlier been sought by another bank until the "head-hunter" who meet him said in his report: "He looks good on paper but there's something about him I don't trust."

Finally, have you ever known someone who practises something called situational ethics? Who changes his ethical standards to fit each new situation?

This kind of person is not immoral. He is amoral. He doesn't have a standard of right or wrong. Right is simply in his best interest at any given moment.

Situational ethics or amorality doesn't work. It is imperative that we decide on a clear, concise set of moral values while our intellect is in control.

Then, when that money is on the table - sorry, under it - we would be more likely to act in accordance with the moral standards we have decided in advance to live by, aided, of course, by that feeling around the midriff.

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