

# Bread-and-butter issues should take **priority**

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**W**HEN the Members of Parliament took part in the Budget debate, one would have thought our elected representatives would spend their time talking on the finer points of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech.

The Budget and Economic Report are very detailed and the MPs who followed the Prime Minister's speech would not likely be able to grasp everything on the spot.

They may have little problem understanding the gist of his speech, especially the highlights, but to have a deeper understanding of the more complicated issues, they would probably need to discuss the decisions with experts.

Not all our MPs are economists or bankers. No one will blame them if they cannot fully digest the entire speech. But as politicians, they should be able to feel the pulse of the ordinary people better.

From reports of the proceedings, though, it was obvious that our MPs were not very keen to discuss difficult issues. Instead, they were more preoccupied with the "Islamic state" controversy.

The issue probably made better news copy - even better political sense - but there is a recession looming. Ordinary people are more concerned with the cost of living or the possibility of losing their jobs.

As politicians, a dose of politicking is expected and may even contribute to livelier Dewan proceedings. But handling the country's economy is not just the job of Dr Mahathir and Bank Negara.

Malaysians, of course, expect their representatives to raise their concerns responsibly and debate the Bills seriously and intelligently. But parliament debates aren't what they used to be.

The speeches of MPs then were better researched and more humorous. Not only did the politicians then have more finesse, they were also more colourful in character.

Perhaps, the politicians of that era were more committed to their cause. If they did not hold government positions, their only concern was their constituents.

MPs now, especially the backbenchers, are better off financially; many hold positions as chairmen of various government agencies and directors in private companies.

Previously, the lack of quorum was a rarity. Coming from all over the country, many of these full-time politicians looked forward to



debates. Whenever there was a verbal clash inside, those taking a break at the lounge or lobby would rush into the Dewan.

We cannot expect MPs, especially the ministers and their deputies, to sit inside the Dewan for the entire proceedings because they have other equally important tasks to perform.

Parliamentary secretaries are appointed to ease the workload of ministers but when it comes to policy matters and more difficult questions, the ministers should be present with the answers.

The malaise seems to have affected both Barisan Nasional and the Opposition. There is no shortage of rabble-rousers in the Opposition but, except for religious matters, PAS

MPs have been somewhat lacklustre in their participation of debates.

Still, for all their complaints of insufficient news coverage, the opposition MPs (45 out of 193 representatives) have received their fair share of the limelight.

The Government should seriously consider TV coverage of parliament proceedings. For a start, it need not have to be telecast "live" but we should be bold enough to air the recorded version.

The Government is understandably apprehensive of such a proposal for fear that the Opposition would play to the gallery by creating a ruckus and disrupting proceedings. They, in fact, tried this previously when the Budget was tabled, knowing that it would be broadcast.

Many Malaysians are sure that attendance would improve if debates were broadcast on television. They would treat controversial issues with greater sensitivity, knowing that they are being watched by all segments of society.

The voters would also be able to find out whether their MPs are good only for village ceramahs or whether they can shine in the Dewan by speaking intelligently and constructively.