

21/07/2001

Gelang Patah MP's query over Tenaga surcharge draws swift response

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IF a popularity poll is to be carried out now among electricity users of their favourite MP, Chang See Ten (BN-Gelang Patah) would most likely win hands down.

His query on Monday on the legality of surcharges imposed by Tenaga Nasional Bhd against defaulters has compelled the utility company to conduct a review on the matter.

Chang must have hit the right chord for response from Tenaga Nasional was swift. Its chairman Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis told reporters a day later a review on the one per cent surcharge was underway.

Since questions have been raised, it was appropriate the matter be reviewed, reasoned Jamaluddin, who is also Rompin MP.

The review would also look into grouses that the increase in reconnection fees, from between RM3 and RM10 to RM80 now, was too steep.

As the imposition of the surcharge has been deemed unlawful, there is now a possibility it would be suspended and users refunded, although Jamaluddin chose to be non-committal on the matter.

For the record, since last September, the company has billed users some RM24 million in surcharges. It is not known how much has been collected.

Debating the Electricity Supply (Amendment) Bill 2000, which would give the utility company the right to impose the surcharge, Chang expressed surprise how Tenaga Nasional could have penalised users since July last year when the law giving it the right to do so had yet to be passed by Parliament.

"How can this happen? The Bill has just been tabled for second reading but I understand Tenaga Nasional has imposed the surcharge since July last year."

He felt a refund, including on the accrued interest, was in order if Tenaga Nasional had jumped the gun in imposing the surcharge.

The House later passed the Bill but it has to be endorsed by Dewan Negara, obtain royal assent and be gazetted before it becomes law, a process which will take a few more months.

Energy, Communications and Multimedia Deputy Minister Datuk Tan Chai Ho gave a not-so-convincing reply when asked to clarify the anomaly.

Tenaga Nasional, he said, had obtained permission from the Ministry to impose the surcharge but he could not shed any light on why the go-ahead was given before the related law was passed by Parliament.

Tan said the utility company had complied with the procedures and administrative requirements before billing users the surcharge.

This involved submitting an application to the committee on electricity supply and tariff. The committee recommended in favour of Tenaga Nasional and the Ministry brought the matter up to the Cabinet, which gave its approval.

The Deputy Minister felt it was not fair for the public to "turn the heat" on Tenaga Nasional over the surcharge.

"You have to be fair ... Do you know that it has been paying interest on electricity deposits since 1996 although the provision requiring it to do so was only included in the same Bill passed by the Dewan Rakyat on Monday."

However, Tan could consider himself lucky as the Opposition seemed not to be interested in the apparent slip-up.

He had a relatively easy passage during winding up with few

interruptions or demands for explanation from MPs.

Usually, when it comes to blunders, what more those committed by the Government, the Opposition will have a field day running down the administration.

"I have been busy. Wasn't the other Opposition MPs around?" said Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) when one reporter jokingly asked him whether the Opposition had become toothless and listless.

Kerk agreed the Ministry should not have given Tenaga Nasional permission to impose the surcharge, especially when Parliament had yet to pass the relevant legislation.

The only time the Opposition "sprang to life" in the four days of sitting, stirring some excitement among those in the visitors' gallery, was when the House rejected Fadzil Noor's (Pas-Pendang) motion to debate on what he claimed was unjust police action in breaking up Pas ceramah nationwide.

Pas MPs tried to convince Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir to reconsider his decision but failed. What they succeeded was to irk the backbenchers, resulting in a brief heated exchange between both sides.

But the Opposition's luck changed on Thursday when Mohamed Zahir agreed to adjourn the House to debate a private motion moved by Pokok Sena MP, Mahfuz Omar.

His request for the House to discuss the detention of two university students under the Internal Security Act was allowed by the Speaker, who ruled that the matter was specific, of public interest and urgent.

He allotted one hour for the debate, with three speakers from the Opposition and Government.

An air of excitement and suspense could be sensed as the debate, what more with ISA being the topic on hand, set the stage for a possible fiery encounter between backbenchers and the opposition bench.

The excitement was understandable as it is not often that motions to adjourn the House is accepted. Some do not even manage to get past the Speaker's Chambers as the case with Fadzil's motion on unjust police action.

(MPs wishing to move a motion has to notify the House at least one day in advance. The Speaker will study the merits and has the power to reject them in chambers.)

As expected, the Opposition lambasted the use of the Act, describing it as draconian and a colonial relic that should have been repealed.

In his trademark fiery speech, Mahfuz charged the ISA had been abused by the Government to silence its critics and lawful dissent.

This was against the promise made by former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to the nation and Parliament when the Act was first formulated.

Knowing that Deputy Home Minister Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin would be replying on behalf of the Government, Mahfuz took a shot at him, reminding the Deputy Minister that he had been a vocal opponent of the Act when he was with the Opposition a few years ago.

(Zainal Abidin was vice-president of the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46).

Taking up the floor after Mahfuz, Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong) said ISA was drawn up to combat communist terrorists but such threat did not exist anymore as the last terrorists surrendered 12 years ago.

Abdul Rahman Yusuf (Keadilan-Kemaman) said the Government resorted to using the ISA each time there was an economic recession, aimed at drawing away attention from the real issues.

Winding-up, it was Zainal's turn to return the salvo.

"It is true communist terrorists have been defeated. But communist practices like instigating the people to topple the Government, sowing

hatred, destabilising the nation and advocating anarchism are still there. This is why ISA is still needed."

He dismissed Mahfuz's allegation that the Government was now going after university students.

To back up his argument, he said: "There are more than 250,000 students in our public and private universities but so far, we have arrested only two of them." There was loud table-thumping from backbenchers.

More excitement is expected in the Dewan Rakyat next week. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to reply to some oral questions on Monday.