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Time factor holds up tabling of Bills

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THE third session of the Tenth Parliament was adjourned sine die yesterday after sitting for 28 days.

Although a number of Bills were passed, nine have to be carried forward due to lack of time. They will be re-tabled at the next sitting, scheduled for July.

This is not the first time Bills have been deferred. The Dewan Rakyat is always fighting for time to clear its business.

This is still happening even after sitting hours are extended.

Remember a few years ago when Parliament only met in the afternoons?

If the hours had not been extended, there would now be a mountain of Bills and motions waiting to be disposed of.

A Government official said it was frustrating when Bills failed to be passed. "In some cases, they have been brought before the House at two sittings, but have to be pulled back due to time constraints.

"Sometimes, their turns are taken by other Bills. This usually happens to legislations considered as 'less pressing'"

Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) said the House should stick to the orders of the day and not change it at one's whim and fancy.

"There should not be queue-jumping. But I guess the Government can do anything it likes," he lamented.

A case in point was on Thursday - the last day of sitting - when a dozen Bills and motions by the Finance Ministry were pushed forward. MPs stayed on until 8.30pm (the House is usually adjourned at 5.30pm) before business was concluded.

The Opposition has always been unhappy when the Government tries to settle so many things in a short time, arguing that Bills should not be "bulldozed" through.

Two solutions can be offered to clear the backlog. First, the days allocated should be increased to allow MPs more time to debate the Bills.

But some quarters might oppose this, arguing that if Parliament is in session all the time, nothing else could be done, like attending to party work.

Setting aside some time for the party and attending to their constituencies is important, or else MPs will be in danger of losing touch with their voters and grassroot supporters.

They said MPs could not serve their constituencies well if they have to be in the capital all year round attending Parliament. Distance would not pose much of a problem to the Yang Berhormat from Kuala Lumpur or Selangor but how about MPs from Sabah and Sarawak?

Going back to their kawasan is as equally important as being present in Parliament. For Barisan Nasional MPs, the Prime Minister might have warned that they would not be selected to contest in the general election if they ponteng Parliament.

But neglecting the constituencies is also politically suicidal as candidates who only make their rounds when elections are just round the corner are the ones often dumped by voters.

Second, time management should be inculcated among MPs.

For a start, some discipline is needed when debating. Too often, MPs stray from the topics being debated although the amendments sought under the Bills are specific.

Some tend to deliver political speeches whenever given the floor,

causing them to lose track of the subject being debated.

For instance, amendments to the Employees' Provident Fund Act does not mean that everything connected to EPF can be raised or questioned.

MPs have been reminded many times by the Chair on this but it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

They should also plan among themselves on issues to be raised. It will be a waste of time if they are to delve on the same points when debating.

Also, both the backbenchers and Opposition can determine who among them should speak. For example, the Opposition MPs have their own shadow Cabinet who should be given the task to debate on Bills related to their "portfolios".

On Wednesday, Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad addressed the House on the failure of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia top scorers to gain admission into local universities.

He had invoked Section 14 (1) of the Standing Orders which allows the Government to address the House on issues.

Reporters joked with him that it was unusual to see a Minister in Parliament on a Wednesday morning because the Cabinet was holding its weekly meeting then.

"Yes ... I have been excused for a while but I will be going back to the meeting after this," he said, obliging a request for a Press conference at the lobby.

An MP said he could not remember the last time the Government had invoked the section, adding it should be used more often as an avenue to provide information on issues before the Opposition had the chance to exploit them.

Concurred an Opposition MP who felt it was incumbent of the Government to provide Parliament with a proper explanation on issues.

"Parliament is the highest body in the country. It is difficult to say there is transparency if the Government does not want to come here and explain."

The highlights of this session, opened by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on March 19, were the tabling of the Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3) and the Eighth Malaysia Plan, both by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

A supplementary budget seeking RM5 billion aimed at stimulating the economy following the slowdown in the US was also presented to MPs, who later approved it.

Meanwhile, Kerk became the first MP to be thrown out of the House for failing to adhere to the Speaker's ruling. He was also suspended for three days.

A number of motions were tabled by MPs but all of them were rejected by the Chair, except one on the April 26 flash floods forwarded by Fong Kui Lun (DAP-Bukit Bintang).

The Speaker's decision caught many by surprise. Even DAP MPs were not pleased, arguing that if a motion on flash floods could be accepted, the Speaker should not have rejected earlier motions on the Kampung Medan clashes and public outcry on the failure of top students to gain admission into universities.

They claimed the motion was allowed to show that democracy was very much alive.

Besides the usual skirmishes between backbenchers and the Opposition, other highlights were the wearing of armbands and badges by the Opposition as a sign of protest against the arrest of 10 reformasi leaders under the Internal Security Act.

Attendance among the MPs is still low. There were occasions when the House lacked quorum but no one objected. However, many turned up when Dr

Mahathir tabled the OPP3 and Eighth Malaysia Plan.