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Cracking the whip

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CIVIL servants seem to be very much in the news these days. The issues are varied, ranging from annual bonuses, a revised remuneration scheme, corruption, the retirement age and even the sacred tea-break.

These issues are not really new. Most of them keep cropping up year in year out. But now, there seems to be more calls for civil servants to be accountable. Who would have thought, for example, that the common tea-break could have erupted into a national debate.

Is it really the issue of tea-breaks that is bugging the rakyat or is it the overall level of efficiency they are subjected to at Government departments? From the feedback in newspapers, it seems that what the people want is quick response to their woes.

On its part, the Government has taken many measures to ensure civil servants improve their act. They include the introduction of a clock-in system, the implementation of a Clients Charter and even forcing them to sign an agreement of good conduct earlier this year.

In terms of remuneration, they are not too bad off. In January, they were given a bonus and a 10 per cent salary increase. From Nov 1, the new Malaysian Remuneration System (MRS) will increase their salaries, benefits and promotional prospects.

Can taxpayers, who are funding all these, expect improved service?

Whatever ails Government departments is certainly not due to the lack of rules or regulations. Rather, the problem lies in the implementation and monitoring process. Is enough being done in this area by the respective heads of departments?

Perhaps not. Sometimes, department heads are so oblivious to what is happening in their departments that they do not even bother to respond to complaints published in newspapers. Only a subsequent intervention by a minister or the Prime Minister himself wakes them up from their slumber.

Interestingly, our civil servants are not exactly overworked. A National Economic Action Council (NEAC) survey says Malaysians put in an average of 1,912 hours a year (see table). Our public holidays are also more generous.

Often, the woes of taxpayers are attributed to the web of bureaucracy - something not so prevalent in the private sector. To be sure, the rules and regulations that add to the red tape are there to prevent the abuse of power and corruption. Over the years, however, they have become an obstacle to the smooth functioning of Government departments.

It is no wonder then that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pushed for privatisation of as many Government agencies as possible in the hope that they will become more efficient. Even then, there are employees of privatised agencies who have yet to change their mindset.

It is not necessary to wait until corporatisation or privatisation to achieve a higher level of efficiency. We can undertake an audit of procedures of individual departments and see where we can cut down on red tape without compromising on ethics.

Meanwhile, the debate goes on about tea-breaks. A startling discovery is that such breaks are not provided for in the General Orders. Neither has the Public Services Department issued any clear guidelines on such an entitlement.

Wouldn't it be interesting to find out how the tea-break culture came about in our civil service? It might also shed some light on why, perhaps,

many other things are taken for granted in Government departments.