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New wine in an old bottle

AT last, good sense prevails. It's no secret that the New Remuneration System, well-intentioned as it was, lacked transparency: an unfortunate feature that elevated those who perfected the art of sugar-coating the tongue, turned civil servants into disgruntled hyenas that whispered nastily behind each other's backs and replaced the slogan *Berkhidmat Untuk Negara* with *Berkidmat Untuk Boss*.

Doubtless, its replacement with the Malaysia Remuneration System (MRS) on Nov 1 will greatly cheer government employees. The crux of the old and new systems remains the same: civil servants' wages and promotions should be based on competency, achievement and excellence rather than seniority or the superior's whim and fancy. The difference between the two, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out, lies in the fact that the MRS does not depend entirely on the head of department's staff appraisal. Nor does it give room for arbitrary assessment by the bosses since job evaluation will be monitored by a newly-created entity within each department, the Human Resource Development Panel.

In determining career development and salary increments, the new system will be efficiency- and knowledge-oriented. Periodic knowledge tests and knowledge acquisition - the mandatory attendance of courses - will form the bulwark of the appraisal procedure. A competency ranking based on examinations and coursework will ensure that the annual appraisal reports and department heads' recommendations will not be taken in isolation.

Unlike in the past, there will be a larger scope for career progression and annual salary increments. The creation of career mobility is an added bonus to the existing advantage of work in the civil service whereby employees do not have to worry about pay cuts or retrenchments since their pay is entirely financed by taxes. As it is, the salary re-adjustment and restructuring within the MRS will cost the Government RM3.2 million this year and almost RM1 billion by 2006. Clearly, a large amount of taxpayers' money will go to the public servants.

Their grievances resolved, the civil servants should be inspired to increase their productivity and serve with cheerful dispositions and dedication. Dare we hope that complacency and inertia will be buried with the old system? Surely, the taxpayers should not be repaid with shoddy services.