

25/09/2003

A messed up mentality

MALAYSIANS are in deep trouble if they have to be persistently reminded by the country's leaders about their civic responsibilities and attitude. In one of his reprimands, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once lamented about the sub-standard maintenance of government buildings left with ponds and fountains cracked and dry. Five years hence, his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is still at it, twice this year admonishing the great Malaysian mismatch between our wonderful facilities and the awful mentality that fails to upkeep them.

It has truly become an embarrassing hallmark of Malaysian society and a malaise for which everyone must be accountable. It has required a national-level conference opened by no less than Abdullah himself to deal with what should, in the first place, be the natural thing to do, as expected of civilised and refined people aspiring to first-world status in a few years. Are more laws the only way to improve our behaviour in a public loo?

Yes, Malaysians ought to be ashamed. And many times over too, particularly for those with a penchant for holding grand opening ceremonies, only to let the buildings fall into a state of neglect later. How many times have we come across clogged and dirty basins in public places or rubbish bins not emptied, not to mention garbage lorries leaving a trail of slimy water and stench along roads? And what about the dirty toilets in many restaurants throughout the country, the blocked drains and vandalised public telephones? The list goes on and on.

While it is true that the maintenance of public amenities and facilities lies with this department or that company, the bottomline is always our general attitude and mentality. The apathy lies not in our genes but in private and public behaviour that excludes an active concern for others. Malaysians need to retire their bad habits and change from an agrarian to an urbanised, industrial outlook. And the change shouldn't at all require prompting from the Prime Minister or his Deputy.