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A way around the malaise

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WHAT can be done? Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first address as acting Prime Minister to the Oxbridge Society on March 6 was a forthright indictment of what ails this country of "First World facilities and Third World mentality".

The motif of the speech was the underside of the Malaysia Boleh spirit of frenetic highway, high-rise and nation-building: Malaysian "malaise".

In its literal meaning, the word is used to describe how we feel at the beginning of an illness. Malaise in Malaysia means exactly that: although we may be in reasonable health today, gorging on the easy fruits of rapid development, there is a sense that we are on our way to getting sick; perhaps, because of over-indulgence.

The question-and-answer session after the speech provided an unintended symbolism that would have delighted Freud: "malaise" was consistently mispronounced as "Malays".

Indeed, it was a conclusion that was hard to escape: the country's future global competitiveness depends on the transformation of the Malays, and nowhere will that be more decisive than in the performance of the central institution in which they are most tellingly represented, the Government.

Abdullah reiterated what he has said from the beginning: that there won't be any change in our destination, which is to reach developed-nation status in 17 years' time.

That goal is contained in Vision 2020, comprehensively set down by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1991, and as worthy today as it was then. But what was articulated as a vision of a sunny horizon a decade ago has now become an encroaching target - actually a finishing line in a race that will have dire consequences for the country if it slows down, falters or stumbles.

Abdullah's emphasis was thus on the means rather than the ends. In other words, it was on the execution and implementation of long-range policies, the continuity and consistency of which has marked Malaysia out as an outstanding exception to the general poverty and deprivation of the post-colonial Third World.

Although the Prime Minister-designate's message has ramifications for all of Malaysian society, its thrust fell squarely on the Government.

The onus on the Government is heavier now than when it took on the vastly enlarged burdens of state and the running of the economy with the formulation of the New Economic Policy in the early 1970s.

Much of what it subsequently did was to command and intervene in the economy to produce a more equitable share-out of the nation's wealth and opportunities. To accomplish this, Government grew by leaps and bounds, not just in sheer size but in reach, structure, outlook and philosophy.

The civil service today has an entirely altered complexion (in more ways than one) from the lofty one I knew before and in the early years of Independence. The differences between then and now are fundamental, and not always desirable.

Those differences were brought home to me a day after Abdullah's speech, when I addressed Federal and State civil servants in Ipoh on "Shaping an excellent civil service: Challenges ahead".

There were about a thousand of them, compared with the past when the entire Malayan Civil Service (MCS) could be seated in the entrance hall of

Wisma Kerajaan. Then there was their "look": they looked, in fact, like ordinary Malaysians. Unlike their aloof predecessors, who were a class apart, today's bureaucrats have become egalitarian. They signify, in their personal and organisational capacities, the good as well as the bad in the society they hail from.

In the old days, the civil service was special. A product of the selective and impeccably turned out Colonial Service, it comprised high-calibre officers whose integrity and competence were respected and admired. Respect and admiration extended to the role and sovereignty of the Government itself. Our civil servants were the unsung heroes of Independence.

Umno was started, nurtured and led by either State or Malayan Civil Service officers: Datuk Sir Onn Jaafar (Johor Civil Service), Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra (Kedah Civil Service, then Legal Service), Tun Razak (MCS), Tun Hussein Onn (Johor Civil Service, then Malay Administrative Service), Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Medical Service) and after October, Abdullah (MCS, now renamed PTD or Perkhidmatan Tadbir dan Diplomatik).

Our political class was recruited from them; they held the country together at a time when the future looked terribly uncertain. But democracy, its arrangements, expectations and ambitions, caused government to be brought down to the people, both literally and metaphorically.

That government stands as a metaphor for the Malays is obvious, even in the past. I said in Ipoh that, "critics equate inefficiency, tardiness and corrupt practices with the Malays and Islam", just as they saw what was best in the Malays in the refined meritocracy of the MCS.

Comparisons, not just by those who can combine nostalgia with their present frustrations in dealing with the Government, are therefore inevitable. Understandably, however, senior civil servants, not least the Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Samsudin Osman, believe such comparisons are specious.

They are quite right, of course. In many ways, government has changed so much that setting past against present would be like comparing chalk and cheese. At a luncheon meeting with NST editors on Thursday, Samsudin said that at the time he joined the service in 1969, the entire Federal machinery was housed in the four-storey Federal House.

He quipped that junior civil servants had plenty of time to relish the canteen's roti canai, said to be the best in town. The Government now resides in the township complex of Putrajaya (and no doubt the menu for junior civil servants, if not the downtime to enjoy it, has expanded in equal measure).

Nevertheless, the pressures and challenges imposed on the Government are not due to any structural deficiency. The civil service is probably more hard-working now for the much larger responsibilities and services it undertakes.

But the service of old had a cachet, built around a core of values and ethics, that their present-day successors have only partly inherited. Samsudin himself admitted that there is a lack of mentoring in the service. Departmental heads do not tutor their underlings into a tradition of public duty and honour. A positive culture does not spread down.

Instead, only bad habits become ingrained. Civil servants have been known to take leisurely tea breaks for as long as I can remember.

Values and ethics, or the lack of them, were what Abdullah was referring to. There is no denying that the civil service has done well - after all, we would not have been able to install the "hardware" of our First World infrastructure without it. But the inferiority of our "software" does not just leave that infrastructure under-utilised.

As I asked in Ipoh: "What will become of us if the government service of

the future is manned by third-raters?" It is a question that Dr Mahathir, Abdullah and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew seriously understood. The short answer is that we will remain in the Third World of our collective mentality.

Abdullah envisaged a government that is less a provider than a facilitator - of individual enterprise, ability, self-sufficiency and talent.

The gradual withdrawal of crutches employed for the socio-economic restructuring of the nation under the NEP will require a more adroit, capable and professional government than one whose cardinal function is to dole out concessions, favours and privileges.

Malaysia's malaise begins and ends with the Government. The Government reflects the society it serves. Only the Government can reform and change society. And it can only do that by first changing itself.

Cut red tape, discard dead law and simplify administrative procedures. Too much bureaucracy keeps civil servants in ease and luxury and users unfriendly. Otherwise, be prepared for more palm-greasing - the surest way of getting around the hurdles. And here, giving and receiving bribes is not a kiss of death.