

10/06/2003

Blowing whistle on local councils

WHAT does it take to become an effective whistleblower in this country? Too much, apparently, if you're just plain Tom, Dick or Harry. So unaccountable have the local councils become that it has taken a whistleblower of the stature of a Deputy Minister to get attention - and even then after considerable dithering and delay. They even sometimes disregard Cabinet directives. Early this year, the Minister of Housing and Local Government cited the case of a directive to raise the level of manholes after a road was resurfaced, a simple matter which many local councils continue to ignore. Now a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, has decided to become a whistleblower too.

As Rais pointed out, the major complaint is that complaints to the local councils go unheeded. "I have been flooded with letters complaining about the MPAJ's (Majlis Perbandaran Ampang Jaya) poor services, and have also personally written to them requesting action, all to no effect; I ought to know, I live in Ampang Jaya," he said. Rais has urged residents to stand up and demand better from their local councils by not keeping quiet and tolerating bad service. "Action should be taken by complaining to the councils when they fail to perform," he said. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself has now warned that council officers could be turfed out for failing in their duties.

But as Rais himself has pointed out, the problem is the local councils are not listening to the complaints and acting on them. It is not enough to exhort them to be accountable. What is needed is to institutionalise the handling of public grievances and making it mandatory for local councils. There is no need to reinvent the wheel because there are many models available. Ironically, in 1999, a regional workshop by the Asian Development Bank was held in Kuantan to identify the best practices that can be adopted by local councils in redressing public complaints. One of the key elements in such a mechanism is regular monitoring and auditing. To make local councils more accountable, the role of an informed citizenry and resident associations in local government should also be formalised.