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Choose PTD officers from top honours grads

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ON his return from a two-month vacation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said if the Government was to accede to the claims of public servants for salary increases at this point of time, the Government will go bankrupt. With an establishment of 800,000 public servants, an increase of five per cent of current salaries across the board will cost millions.

One cannot but agree that this is certainly the wrong time to ask for a salary increase when the economy is being badly affected by external forces not of our own making, particularly by the Iraq war and SARS. Tourism has been the greatest casualty made worse by unjustified warnings issued by the US State Department to its citizens to avoid visiting Malaysia, thereby influencing other foreigners as well.

The Government machinery, however, has to be kept on running even in these uncertain times. This is perhaps an opportune time as any to undertake a thorough review of the public service as a whole.

Ever since Independence, it is the public service that has kept the country going, implementing, among others Five-Year Development Plans inspite of periodic changes of Government. Indeed, of all the newly independent countries after World War II, we can take pride that Malaysia has made a quantum leap in socio-economic development due almost entirely to the existence of a well established and traditionally apolitical career public service.

But, however efficient a machine may be there comes a time to carry out an overhaul to maintain and enhance its efficiency.

In particular, mindsets have to change with the times.

When I first entered government service in 1948, we were trained on the job. Part of the British plan for career development of the officer corps of the civil service was that our first appointment was to the District Office, an agency that performs all the administrative functions at district level.

We were posted to outlying districts so that we learnt first-hand the problems of the rakyat at grassroots level. As an Assistant District Officer, we were required to visit every mukim in the district and to get personally acquainted with the penghulu. We had to complete the visits during the first three months of posting.

We were transferred from district to district before being appointed to a post in the State capital. By then we had first-hand knowledge of the State before being posted to the Federal level.

Today, this is no longer the standard route in the Administrative and Diplomatic Service (PTD). On recruitment, PTD officers are sent to Intan for a course in public administration and very few are given the opportunity to serve in the districts. This is partly due to the fact of direct recruitment to the PTD instead of by promotion from the State Civil Service or the Malay Administrative Service.

It is also due to the fact that the number of posts at district level for PTD officers is limited because States like Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak still retain the State Civil Service.

It should be noted that a number of the administrative posts at State-level and many at Federal-level as well are routine performance jobs which could be easily and even more efficiently performed by executive officers who are non-graduate diploma holders. Steps should be taken to identify

these posts and transfer them out of the PTD.

PTD officers should be chosen from the top honours graduates of our universities. They should be thinkers, planners and decisionmaking managers capable of giving the best advice to the political masters on matters of policy. They must necessarily be an elite group with the emphasis being on quality rather than quantity.

To be part of an elite group, it is not enough that its members occupy the position of secretary-general of a ministry. As at present constituted, secretaries-general belong to a wide range of the civil service hierarchy. A person can be the secretary-general of a ministry today and transferred to being a minor functionary in another ministry tomorrow without loss of salary of course.

The secretaries-general meet as a body regularly. It follows that they should all belong to some sort of level playing field more or less. All Cabinet Ministers, except the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, receive the same salary although the responsibilities of the respective portfolios vary greatly.

All secretaries-general of ministries should therefore be placed in the Staff grade although a very select few will be more equal than others.

The Government should create the office of Inspector-General of the Establishment to monitor and regularly review all appointments in the government service.

Notwithstanding the current freeze on salary increases, readjustments of the grading of government posts will go a long way towards maintaining a vibrant career civil service.