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Ghostbusting the electoral roll

WE are gratified by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's acceptance in principle of the Election Commission's proposed empowerment to transfer voters from one constituency to another based on their identity card addresses. This is the long overdue antidote Malaysia's body politic has been crying out for, infected as it is by the virus of phantom voters.

The principle is simple: Voters must be genuinely connected to the places where they are registered. All voters who have no business being registered in constituencies where they have no nexus, be it for residence or work, should be removed from the electoral roll.

As it is, some quarters say there is a lack of definitive consensus on what constitutes a phantom voter. We urge the authorities to end the futility of such debates by amending the election legislation to define a phantom voter as one who has no residential or work ties in the constituency where he or she is registered as a voter. Voters who fail this test of constructive residency should be held for committing an election offence. Whether this test should be solely determined by the address in the identity card or supporting documents such as utility bills or bank account statements is a technical matter.

More importantly, the term "phantom voter" should not be confined to those political party supporters who were illegally transferred out of their voting constituencies. Such a narrow definition would only perpetuate the allegations of fraud in the country's election system. In the 1999 general election, it was estimated that there were 2.8 million phantom voters - and even that was a conservative number. And who could forget the incident in the Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections, where some 1,359 Umno supporters could not cast their votes as their names were not on the voting list?

The phantom voter-busting and cleansing exercise is a long overdue initiative, and if it requires the expansion of the Election Commission's ambit of powers, so be it. But its efforts to produce a clean national electoral roll should be supported by a nationwide house-to-house campaign and the mandatory notification of any change in address as provided for under the National Registration Act. The proposed registration of political parties with the commission and the enlargement of its powers to act against those who violate election propriety is necessary to ensure fair, free and tension-free elections.