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Graft is a two-way street

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THERE will be no grantees if there are no grafters. The grafter or corrupter is perceived to be less sinful than the politicians, civil servants and corporate bigwigs who "betray a public trust".

The American columnist Walter Lippmann explains even better: "A public official who serves private interests; a rail-road director who is also a director in the supply company; a policeman in league with outlawed vice..." In other words, the attempt to serve simultaneously two antagonistic interests is what constitutes graft.

About 36 years ago, the term rasuah or bribe came into official use, arriving roughly when economic growth was becoming a major, perhaps the highest, government priority. Before that it was called makan suap (spoon-feeding), tumbuk rusuk (a nudge in the ribs) or sogokan (inducement). Corruption, of course, has a much longer vintage.

But it is in the nature of graft to conceal itself under any number of guises and artful pretexts. To combat it, rasuah was enlisted to give the culprit a specific name, and even today it is uttered with odium and contempt, not least by those who commit it.

The Government has been aware of corruption as the flip side of economic growth and rapid development for many years. The Anti-Corruption Agency was started in 1967 - not, as in many other cases, as a response to events but in anticipation of them.

Naturally, it had very little to do in a poor country whose economy was still largely controlled by foreign interests. It was rechristened the National Bureau of Investigation to give it more work than the then-unproductive function of snooping into public servants' bank accounts and lifestyles beyond their means.

The ACA was given its present form and powers by an Act of Parliament on May 13, 1982. The date is perhaps symbolic. May 13, 1969 marked the point where the previously standoffish Government took on a much larger role in the economy.

The year reflected a recognition that seven-percent-plus economic growth was here to stay - with all its consequent drawbacks and pitfalls. Since corruption is insidious, difficult to detect and even more difficult to prosecute, a legal framework was readied for its interdiction. As far as this framework was concerned, I don't think the Government could have done much more.

I was therefore quite surprised by the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2002. It placed Malaysia 33rd out of 102 countries surveyed; a little unfairly, I thought, given the level of official concern that has been expressed, and the action taken, against corruption.

Although the accuracy of an estimation based on "perceptions" can be endlessly disputed, I think part of our ranking was due exactly to that expressed and wide-spread concern. Few countries compare with our awareness - due to the Government's efforts - of the menace and perfidy of corruption. All of us know that it exists, that it is immoral and potentially ruinous, but few of us see it as a problem large enough to do anything about.

That is the central issue facing us in the battle against corruption, which compels me to see the index in better light. Corruption is far from endemic in this country - you don't have to bribe public servants to do

what they are supposed to (you only have to grease them to do what they are not supposed to).

This means that the habit of graft is curable, but for the fact that there is no shortage of people willing to pay their way out of trouble or to obtain through foul means what they cannot get fairly or to avoid going to court for traffic and other offences.

The apathy of Malaysians is what we are dealing with here, not the determination of the Government nor the dire lack of men and women of probity in its ranks.

Perhaps in acknowledgement of this, Transparency International Malaysia conferred its National Integrity Medal awards on three very eminent Malaysians - Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Ismail Mohamad Ali - on Saturday night. They are exemplars of a rarefied caste whose passing has hardly been noticed - those who defy Lord Acton's axiom that power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Don't we have anyone alive left who is worthy of the awards next year or in 2005?

I had the good fortune of observing all three at close quarters. I knew them officially as well as personally. They were formidable personalities, motivated by self-belief and uncompromising rectitude, honest and gentlemanly.

As a result, they were sometimes cold and haughty, but amiable in private. They had an overpowering sense of public duty, and the personal sacrifice that entails. More than any other crime, corruption is a matter of temptation and opportunity. The enticement to abuse power for personal gain was hard enough to resist then; it is even harder to resist now.

In his address at the awards ceremony, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad paid tribute to the trio, in an age when people are increasingly remote from such high standards of conduct, and morality is little more than the cleverly calculated risk of getting caught.

"The personal virtues and qualities, as exemplified by the three Tuns, which we so much admire, are even more relevant today than ever before as we struggle to strike a balance between material success and spiritual development.

"We have seen a steady deterioration and erosion of ethical standards of behaviour in both the public as well as the business sectors, with predictable consequences for sustainable development, not only here in Malaysia, but unfortunately in many of the countries we look up to," he said.

What many people fail to realise is that corruption does not involve only venal officials. It requires the willing participation of both parties, the giver as well as the taker, and thereby corrupts them both. Too little censure is accorded to the other of the two in the tango of corruption.

But the giver is also corrupted by his ability to buy what he cannot earn on his own merit. In the end, as Dr Mahathir warned, corruption becomes acculturated, justice for the deserving counts for nothing and civil society dies. When that happens, you have to become a crook in order to get ahead, if there is anything left to get ahead on.

"Malaysians, and the Malays in particular, should therefore know the dangers of corruption and bribery and should avoid it like poison," Dr Mahathir said. "Corruption cannot be fought through laws and punishment alone. The most effective weapon against corruption is discipline and good values. Equip the people with this culture and three-quarters of the battle will be won."

Transparency International advocates a "national integrity system" of interlocking institutional arrangements that reinforce accountability.

Although all governments and businesses should be more open to public scrutiny as a matter of course, against corruption such measures are necessarily finite. Nothing can beat the moral archetype of the three Tuns - corruption will end if everyone follows their example, and will only be reduced in proportion to those who do.

The nation should come first, both in its own interests and in the people's. The wealthy, propertied and the business-people should have reciprocal obligations to the society of which they are part. They have a social contract to observe and entrench.