

27/07/2003

Hapless 'house owner' should also take the blame

Vasanthi Ramachandran

I AM a little confused here. Is the issue over the shoddily built school computer laboratories actually closed and resolved? Just like that!

So far, RM507 million has been spent, and more will be pumped in for the repairs. But, it seems, the public is expected to forgive - and forget.

Resolved, apparently, merely by sacking some contractors. Should someone at the Education Ministry be held accountable for the whole mess?

Wasn't there anyone at all in the ministry monitoring the contractor's work regularly?

When pressed, we are told that the Education Ministry is akin to the "house owner" who has been cheated. Therefore, we should not blame the hapless ministry, it seems.

I don't understand. Isn't the public the owner here? Besides, if this was "my house", I would be making quality assurance checks almost every day.

No, this is about government funds. Public funds. Taxpayers' money. Our money.

As I understand it, the Government had entrusted the Education Ministry with hundreds of millions to build computer laboratories for schoolchildren.

Evidently, millions have been wasted. It was bad enough that phase one of this computer project was pitifully behind time - 2,135 laboratories were to be built under this phase but only 1,449 are operational.

What was even worse was that, the Works Ministry's inspection showed that 574 of the 600 computer laboratories checked were unsafe and in dangerous condition. That's more than 95 per cent.

The Education Ministry should have confined itself to just enhancing the quality of education and left infrastructure to the Works Ministry.

With so much money already spent, and so much time wasted, terminating the contracts alone will not be enough. It is simply not sufficient to restore lost public trust.

The other morning, as I dropped my daughter at school, I actually shuddered looking at the scaffolding around the renovation site. What if it was "unsafe and dangerous"?

There are other "what ifs" that worry us as well. For instance, what if Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin did not expose the shoddy handling of the computer labs?

What if Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had not stepped in to investigate the matter with a task force that included the Works and Finance Ministries?

How far more would this project have gone ahead unchecked?

Just like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah has computer literacy high in his agenda, and wants it as a core subject in schools - to give the younger generation a head start in embracing new technology.

But it was shocking that this was never discussed in the 10-year Education Development Blueprint (2001-2010) announced by the Education Ministry.

So while we are at the physical, and now visible, cracks of the computer laboratories, we should ask for a transparent account of what really happens in these computer classes. It would be a further waste of funds if nothing substantial is taught there.

Time and again, there are discrepancies between our Prime Minister's

vision and its implementation, especially in education. This is not the first time that there have been controversies involving the Education Ministry in the last two years.

A case in point is the allocation of RM5 billion to implement the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English in schools for 2002 to 2008. So far, there have been allegations that far more is being spent now, thus fast depleting the allocation.

And is the quality of English being improved? Is the Education Ministry monitoring the progress? Or, will it, just like the computer lab fiasco, point the finger at others, and call itself the unwitting "house owner"?

There are many other upsetting issues that have surfaced and have gone unnoticed. One example is the transmission of TV Pendidikan programme from RTM2 to Astro - when less than a quarter of the 9,000 schools have Astro facilities.

These are just a few issues on the primary and secondary schools. As for institutions of higher learning, letters written by the public in various newspapers are enough to show the "irregularities" that surround university issues.

Coming back to the question of accountability, I am sure if a fraction of this problem were to happen in, say, any part of Europe, the public would have demanded the resignation of the person of the highest authority in the ministry concerned.