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Stop making monkey out of the people

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IN THEIR eagerness to be seen as doing their jobs or being tough, some public officials - ministers and senior civil servants included - are shooting themselves in the foot, and, in the process, making fools of the people.

It is all right if we feel like making monkeys of ourselves once in a while. Monkeys are, after all, among the most mischievous of animals. They are so fascinating that many people risk their lives and their beloved cars to stop by the roadside to feed them.

But there is a limit to us making monkey of ourselves, more so if in doing so, we make monkeys of other people. We can say that this is a free country and we, including ministers, civil servants and writers, can make fools of ourselves if we want to.

But at the end of the day, we are answerable to our constituents, more so if one is an elected representative. The problem arises when a newly elected Yang Berhormat does not know what he or she ought to be doing, and the veteran thinks he or she knows everything.

This brings us to the issue of the adoption of a common electronic toll collection (ETC) system for the nation's toll highways. In the June 16, 2003 issue of this magazine, we congratulated the Government for eventually deciding on the adoption of Rangkaian Segar Sdn Bhd's Touch 'n Go system as the sole ETC system.

Unfortunately, since missing the Jan 1, 2003 deadline, Works Minister Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu has been sending motorists on a wild goose chase. First, he delayed it for six months to July. When the deadline came, he extended it by another month.

Then, on June 6, he told the Press that the implementation of the standardised ETC would be postponed for a whole year to July 1, 2004. It would not come as a surprise if during that period several more changes are made.

Thanks to him, this scribe and other supporters of the system were made to look like fools. Some of us went to the extent of exhausting the remaining balance on our SmartTags in anticipation of the changeover.

Looking back, there is some truth in a recently circulated SMS which said something to this effect; Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik has gone. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has decided when he would go. Samy Vellu is Touch 'n Go.

Big Plans, Sad Facts

ANOTHER hot item in the media is the clamouring by several states to achieve industrialised or developed status ahead of the national target of 2020, as spelt out in 'Vision 2020'.

At least two of them seem to think they are pretty sure of achieving this objective. Selangor hopes to become Negeri Maju (developed state) by 2005, and Kedah by 2010.

This is not necessarily bad. In fact, they may very well be right in their expectations, depending on how they define the term 'developed' or 'industrialised'. What is disturbing is the fact that the two are not the most developed of states. Selangor came second to Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur in terms of mean monthly household income in 1999. While its incidence of poverty of 2% in 1999 was the lowest in the country, it had the highest number of squatters. There were 33,829 squatter households with 171,396 occupants in 1999.

In February, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo was reported by Berita Harian as saying that there were only 43,000 squatters left in the state. But two months later, in April, the same newspaper quoted one of his State Executive Council members as saying that the state government was planning to build 200,000 low-cost houses although only 120,000 units were needed to house the squatters registered with the state.

There appears to be several sets of figures being used by various parties to indicate the number of squatter families and the squatter population in the state.

Kedah is even more ambitious. Despite being one of the poorest states - occupying eighth position after FT Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor in terms of mean monthly household income and a poverty incidence of 13.2% in 1999 - it has set 2010 as the target for becoming a developed state.

People come first

THERE is no harm in states setting targets. It may even be helpful in achieving the overall national objectives. But there is a danger of states overplaying the issue for short-term political advantage at the risk of jeopardising the overall credibility of the Government and 'Vision 2020'.

In reality, it does not matter much whether a state is billed industrialised or not. In fact, a mixed economy has been proven to be better for the stability of a state or country rather than one that depends heavily on industry or agriculture.

We have seen in recent years how our own economy has been saved from a major decline by the good demand for agricultural products at a time when demand for industrial output and price fell.

I think state governments should not be too caught up with the ringgit and sen issue. What really matters is the well-being of the people. Selangor may be among the most industrialised states in Malaysia, but it has the highest number of squatters, with crime on the rise and social problems becoming increasingly intractable. Even poverty of the minority is threatening to take the absolute form.

In Kedah's case, even if it were true that its industrial output has been steadily increasing in recent years as a result of the overflow of investments from Penang, it still has to contend with the sizeable rice farming community, which is being kept above the poverty line by hefty farm subsidies.

Perhaps, it is worthwhile for us to learn from the experience of industrialised nations where the poor and the homeless have to depend on soup kitchens and shelters to survive the winter.

Of course, our Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers will not get to see these poverty-stricken people if, on their visits to New York or London, they stick only to the main thoroughfares or shopping for Giorgio Armani suits at Saks of Fifth Avenue.

While their intention is noble, the Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers must be reminded that the road to heaven is often littered with broken promises and unfulfilled dreams. In political terms, it can create hell at the polls.

Just try to remember the bitter experience of state-based unit trust funds. Back in the free-wheeling 1990s, very few Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers bothered even to lend an ear to the warning that the setting up of narrow-based state unit trust funds was risky and ran contrary to the establishment of Permodalan Nasional Bhd's unit trusts funds.

Now, tens of thousands of small unit holders are at risk of never being able to recoup their investments. Many of these state-run unit trust funds are as good as dead.

For the good of the people, Ministers, Menteris Besar and Chief

Ministers should try to temper their penchant for sloganeering and making unattainable promises for political reasons with the fact that every four to five years they have to face the people at the polls.

What good would it do to be an industrialised state or to have many Bumiputera-dominated urban constituencies if the party loses at the polls. PAS has always been a threat in Kedah and in the 1999 general elections, it broke into Selangor. Incidentally, two of the four Selangor state seats it won were urban constituencies with substantial Bumiputera voters, namely, Kajang and Gombak Setia. Keadilan won Ulu Klang.

Mohd Khir proudly told the recent Umno General Assembly that there would be more such constituencies in Selangor in the coming general elections, resulting from the delineation of the electoral boundaries.

It is all right for the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers to be media savvy and spend a lot of money buying advertising spots in the newspapers and on television, but this does not mean that the voters will swallow their messages whole.

Making Crime Prevention a Way of Life

IT is very sad that in our country, people have to die a horrible death before someone decides to act. Even so, the concern does not last very long. Perhaps, we are suffering a malady worse than the simple mudah lupa (forget easily) alluded to by the Prime Minister at the Umno General Assembly two years ago.

The concern that there might be one murder or one rape too many in our country is not new. It has been repeatedly raised by many concerned parties, not least by the Press.

But in most instances, it has been brushed aside as quickly as it has been raised. Some ministers and senior police officers were even upset that such concerns should be raised at all. They said it would tarnish the image of the country and scare away tourists and investors. The media was accused of harbouring ill will.

The price of denial is high. The young and beautiful woman, Canny Ong, had to pay for it with her life. On June 13, she was abducted from the carpark of the up-market Bangsar Shopping Complex. She was later raped, murdered and her body burned.

Now everybody, including ministers and the police top brass, want action.

Even the police cannot deny that there is one murder too many in the country anymore.

The Star newspaper, on July 1, headlined Rapes And Murders On the Increase. It quoted the Criminal Investigation Department Director Comm Datuk Seri Salleh Mat Som as saying that an average of four women were raped daily while there were three murders every two days in the country in the first five months of the year.

Ironically, Selangor and Kedah, which are in a hurry to declare themselves developed economies, top the list as number one and three respectively. Johor was second. According to Salleh, 250 people were murdered and 588 women raped during this period. Of these, 128 murders and 491 rape cases were solved.

The question we must address is not just the insufficient number of anti-crime personnel but why such crimes are on the increase in the first place. Something must have gone wrong somewhere or, in the case of rape, the victims are fighting back.

One wonders if more should have been done to prevent crime. Why talk about surveillance cameras now? Can't the police and the security personnel of major shopping complexes go undercover?

This is certainly a better way of apprehending would-be rapists, robbers and snatchers. Prevention is better than cure. But there can be no sure

way when a woman is raped and murdered.