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The institution of development

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DON'T pass go. Go straight to jail. From our Monopoly board, this decree could become a part of our development tapestry if the government has its way. A wrong move; a bad roll of the dice could see developers thrown out of their offices and into a dark, dingy dungeon to ponder over their wrong-doings.

Many quarters are cheering on this suggestion, first mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and echoed all over the country by state leaders like Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob. They all hope it will be more than words; that it will become a piece of legislation that can be exercised on irresponsible developers and green rapists.

Koh had said in a Bernama report that "jail terms should not be limited to people guilty of indiscriminate land-clearing and hill-levelling, but also on irresponsible developers who build low quality houses and other buildings".

In elaborating, he said these "black sheep among other responsible developers" would permit the safety of the people to be endangered, and could not care less about paying fines - presently the only punitive measure available under the law.

Quite naturally, one of the greatest supporters of the jail sentencing proposal has come from the National House Buyers Association, and they have their say in their column on page eight of today's issue.

So, it seems that the politically correct thing to do at this point in time is to endorse the call. But let's play devil's advocate for a while, and try to make a form of defence. After all, somebody has to - developers have a way of remaining strangely silent in the face of such wrath from the powers that be.

In the argument, we might want to point out that no developer sets out to intentionally cheat buyers. There are a many simpler premeditated cons to pull than build property.

Secondly, a jail term only goes as far as satisfying retribution. It is primarily a knee-jerk reaction to something that has already gone bad - the hills would already have been raped; the poor quality buildings would already have been built.

Instead of reacting to a problem, the better way to go might be to proactively plan methods to prevent such situations from arising in the first place. If this can be done, not only would our prisons play host to fewer millionaire developers, the development landscape would also have fewer raped hills and sub-standard structures.

I'm an advocate of education, of holding hands and guiding people down the proper path, and one suggestion would be to set up a development institute in which anybody who wants to become a developer must enrol.

Overseen by bodies such as the Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association, Construction Industry Development Board, Master Builders Association and Department of Environment, the institute's syllabus would cover topics such as methods to achieve sustainable development, environmental impact and total planning guidelines and the preparation of studies to support a project's viability.

After a development firm has earned its wings from the institute, in order to keep building, it would have to attend a set number of yearly refresher courses. This would be in much the same way professional valuers

and estate agents now need to attend a certain amount of Continuous Professional Development, or CPD programmes every year to keep their licences and themselves up-to-date.

With this set in place, what we could possibly look forward to is an industry as well taught and disciplined as any other professional