

30/11/2003

With all the perks, civil servants cannot claim to be underpaid

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ONE of the recurring topics in the public arena is how underpaid our civil servants are, and therefore, demoralised.

A related argument is that the civil service is not attractive enough to attract the best and brightest.

In fact, many in the civil service say they are doing their "national service".

Let us put aside the rhetoric and examine the evidence, although for a layman, much of this evidence is from newspapers and by word of mouth.

I don't think one is not underpaid in the civil service, considering the job and the amount of time taken to do it.

The fundamental principle of any employment or contract of service is that one should be paid for the level and degree of skills required for a particular task.

The remuneration should also take into account the level of responsibility, stress and demands of the job.

To me, it is very simple. Our civil service cannot be all that underpaid as it has grown manifold to close to the million mark today, not counting those services that had been privatised.

For this article, my definition of the civil service includes privatised entities, as categorising these groups as "private sector" would be an anomaly.

The civil service has become the punching bag of politicians and frustrated public alike, but there has been no objective study conducted to gauge the work and process flows.

But the point remains that many of us are not satisfied with many aspects of the civil service, mainly the unnecessary wait for a simple service.

There is an expectation gap between what civil servants perceive themselves to be and what the public expects of them.

Some civil servants have the notion that they are the guardians of the nation's assets as well as the gatekeepers for the implementation and supervision of the laws of the land. They think they are paid a measly sum to undertake this important task.

The public, however, generally thinks the civil service is bloated, with only a semblance of efficiency and without a clear sense of responsibility, unlike the platform on which the private sector operates.

When some civil servants talk about being underpaid, they conveniently exclude all the other benefits and perks that they directly or indirectly receive in the course of their work.

We are not talking about corruption here. These are legitimate perks enjoyed by many civil servants that should be included in how they are rewarded.

These include not just the benefits listed out in their letters of employment, but also others which are enjoyed that go unnoticed.

For example, on top of the allowances that add to the take-home pay, civil servants enjoy perks such as "unrecorded leave" and the use of "company car". The uniformed services also have access to low-cost housing.

There are some civil servants who spend less than 50 per cent of their time on official functions as part of their job descriptions. They often attend courses and seminars or go on official overseas trips. These are

things they should recognise as "job perks".

Some of them get paid allowances for undertaking other government functions at the expense of their normal duties.

This may explain the lack of cohesion and strategic planning in some government departments as the day-to-day running of the workplace is left to juniors.

Some privatised entities enjoy perks not even extended to those in the biggest multinationals.

One outfit even pays maid allowances to a certain category of officers. Civil servants enjoy regular and mandated salary increases. Everyone's salary goes up according to preset intervals, and bonuses are now a regular extra in the pay packet.

In the private sector, pre-determined targets have to be achieved before increments or bonuses are considered. And during bad times, wage freeze and salary cuts are common.

If you go to a bank or insurance firm, every now and then a senior officer will pop his head out (that is, if he is not already sitting facing the front desk) to review the situation and sometimes decide to open additional counters if the queue is too long.

In the civil service, it took then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad to get the Bukit Bintang area cleaned up as apparently no one in City Hall noticed the dirt and rubbish around.

It also took Dr Mahathir to suggest that an appointment system be introduced at the Immigration Department's offices for people who turned up, but could not be served on a particular day.

Well, if a Prime Minister has to look into mundane matters like these, why do we need so many civil servants?

Admittedly, our civil service is better than that in many other countries. But shouldn't we compare ourselves with the world's best, not the worst?

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