

'Five Star' briefings for BN MPs
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Several Barisan Nasional (BN) backbenchers have criticised the recent 'phenomenon' of holding ministerial briefings in luxurious hotels complete with door gifts.

According to a Sin Chew Daily report today, a series of these briefings have been held at five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur since the opening of the new Parliament session last week.

Each backbencher were also reportedly given a free mobile phone at the briefings held by the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry and the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry.

It is a common practice for ministries and departments to brief BN MPs when there is a relevant new bill being tabled in Parliament.

However, previously, such events were mostly held in the Parliament House.

Quoting unnamed backbenchers, the Sin Chew report stated that such extravagant briefings were a waste of money.

"For example, a ministry booked 10 tables for the briefing but only a handful turned up. Each table cost at least RM1,000," the report said.

The backbenchers pointed out that although the door gifts could have been sponsored by the corporate sector, the practice was nevertheless 'inappropriate'.

The BN MPs expressed hope that Prime Minister and BN chairperson Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would look into the matter.

The Sin Chew report also featured a letter dated March 21 undersigned by BN Backbenchers Club acting chief Ahmad Zainuddin Omar informing backbenchers to attend a briefing held at the Seri Pacific Hotel on Tuesday.

The briefing was organised by the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) to explain its move to buy the debt-ridden RHB Bank.

Different environment

Contacted today, BN MP for Pontian Hasni Mohamed defended the move to hold briefings in hotels.

"After a whole day in Parliament, it is important we get a small break and change of environment. I don't think it involves exorbitant spending," he said.

"It (the cost) is a small amount compared to the benefit we gain from it (the briefings) because the MPs get a comfortable place to listen to the briefings and gather their thoughts," he added.

Hasni, who is also the BN Backbenchers Club assistant secretary, stressed that none of the briefings he attended were held with the purpose of handing out free gifts.

"I attended almost all briefings and usually we only get the briefing notes, note pad, pen and sometimes card holders [...] I didn't even bother to look at them, we can tell what is in the paper bag," he said.

However, he confirmed that MPs were given a M.Mobile - a Malaysian made handphone - at a briefing organised by the Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs Ministry.

Meanwhile, Puchong MP Lau Yen Pheng said the briefings were necessary because they helped backbenchers prepare for their debates in the House.

"I just don't understand why we have so many briefings this time around," he said.

Asked if handing out expensive door gifts amounted to bribery, he merely replied: "It's nothing to worry about."

Former minister and Gopeng MP Dr Ting Chew Peh said although ministerial briefings were a tradition, door gifts however were new.

"These briefings were usually held in the ministries and throughout the nine years I led the Housing and Local Government Ministry, we never gave out any door gift," he said.

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