

Cure for a paralysed civil service

The Sun - 14/2/2007

ON THE desks of most government officers are wads of coloured paper. The ones in pink read "SEGERA" (urgent) while those in red read "UNTUK TINDAKAN SERTA-MERTA" (for immediate action).

How letters and files with these coloured notes are treated can only be guessed. Are we to assume that pink ones are meant for those which come routinely (with a supporting letter from influential personalities) and the red ones for preferential treatment because the "outstanding matters" in these files had been *kau tim* (settled)?

Actually, is there a need for such colour codes? Shouldn't all correspondences and files be acted upon immediately? Are we to assume that files without these colour-coded notes should be kept in cold storage and not attended to at all?

These questions are pertinent in view of the appointment of 23 senior civil servants and captains of industry who will make up the *Pemudah* task force, which aims to cut red tape and facilitate business.

Pemudah is the Bahasa Malaysia acronym for Special Task Force to Facilitate Business. It is jointly chaired by Chief Secretary to the Government, Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan and Royal Selangor head honcho, Datuk Yong Poh Kon, who is also the president of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM).

The setting up of this group can be viewed as a slap in the face for the civil service, which appears not to have heeded repeated calls by the prime minister (over the past three years) to improve service and delivery to the stakeholders – citizens and the business community.

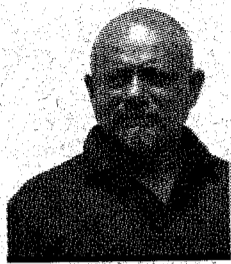
All that these department heads did was to set up task forces and special committees to "review the existing procedures" but after a series of meetings with *teh* and *kuih muih*, it remained a review board with no changes being implemented.

The statistics are compelling. A World Bank report which the PM quoted three years ago, said:

» Starting a business in Malaysia required nine procedures completed in a minimum of 30 days, whereas Singapore only required six procedures which could be completed in six days, and Australia, two steps done in two days.

» To set up a warehouse or factory in Malaysia, businessmen had to go through 25 procedures which takes at least 281 days to complete – far behind Vietnam, where businessmen go through only 14 steps in 133 days, 11 steps in 129 days in Singapore, and nine steps in 127 days in Thailand.

But it is not just starting a business or setting up a warehouse which is beset with layers upon layers of officialdom and documentation. Obtaining a simple licence for a signboard can take months. All that is needed is a visual of the signage and the necessary fees, but why should it take three months when approval can be given on the spot? That's because such licences come under the purview of the Little Napoleons in local govern-



CitizenNades

by R. Nadeswaran

ments.

Talking about them, I wonder how Mohd Sidek is going to handle them because they do not come under his purview and they are not likely to give an iota of notice to *Pemudah*'s existence. Will they implement changes ordered by Messers Mohd Sidek and Yong?

Let's get realistic. Local authorities come under the purview of the *mentris* besar and chief ministers. So, can anyone do anything to errand, corrupt or inefficient officers when they have their political Godfathers? No Sir! They are untouchable!

Having said that, one must give credit to Bank Negara, which sometimes works throughout the night to study requests and give approvals for transactions involving financial institutions. Why can't all government departments and their respective heads work like that?

It boils down to work culture and moreso on leadership. Does any government department have a rule, written or otherwise which requires all correspondences to be

replied within 48 hours?

The setting up of this group can be viewed as a slap in the face for the civil service, which appears not to have heeded repeated calls by the prime minister (over the past three years) to improve service and delivery to the stakeholders – citizens and the business community.

replied within 48 hours?

Read the newspapers, especially the "Letters to the editor" column and there are hordes and hordes of complaints against government departments and statutory bodies. Except for the Employees Provident Fund, the Inland Revenue Board and a few others, the rest pay scant regard to public complaints and the irony is that they get away with such an indifferent attitude.

It has been said before and it is worth repeating now that the CEO of the civil service – Mohd Sidek – is co-chairing the task force. Shouldn't he make it compulsory that all heads of departments should respond to any complaint or report within 48 hours, and copies of which should be on his desk at the same time it reaches the media offices? If they don't, a transfer order or disciplinary action should be instituted.

In this way, government officers have no choice but to be responsive instead of adopting the *tidak apa* culture that has firmly entrenched itself in the civil service.

R. Nadeswaran is deputy editor (special reporting) at theSun. He can be reached at: citizen-nades@the-sundaily.com)