

Auditing govt performance

The Sun - 23/3/2007

At the Dewan Rakyat

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AND so began the "grand inquest of the nation," when the MPs as the people's representatives or *wakil rakyat* audit the government's programme implemented last year and scrutinise its plans for the next 12 months.

On Monday the new king addressed the joint sitting of the two houses of the national legislature – the Dewan Negara and the Dewan Rakyat – and acquainted their members, and through them the *rakyat*, with his government's own assessment of its performance last year and what it has planned for the current session.

The debate and discussion kicked off on Tuesday with Datuk Markiman Kobiran (BN-Hulu Langat) moving an address to thank the young Yang diPertuan Agong Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin for his maiden speech to parliament. It was seconded by Fadillah Yusof (BN-Petra Jaya.)

They spoke at length but significantly fought shy of openly criticising the government. Even when Markiman said that bloggers – unpopular with the government – have a rôle to play, he quickly added that "they must be responsible for what they say and write."

Fadillah, a member of Sarawak's dominant Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) in the state ruling Barisan Nasional, was a little more critical when he spoke on the National Integrity Plan which he said had still to conduct courses for top government officials and politicians.

If they – and their colleagues who intervened while they were speaking – actually tried to bring back the glory days of the Dewan Rakyat – an exhortation by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to MPs,

according to BN Backbenchers Club acting chairman Datuk Seri Raja Ahmad Zainudin Raja Omar – their speeches did seem to show it.

Maybe it was because they heeded too closely the advice of the government's chief whip, deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, who during the BN pre-council meeting on Monday told the coalition's MPs to "tread with care when criticising the government.

But their deficiency was more than made up by the walloping volubility of Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang. For two days he was chafing at the bit as Markiman and Fadillah waltzed through their speeches.

His turn came just before 4pm on Wednesday. Up he got like a jack-in-a-box even as Fadillah was intoning the *de rigueur* concluding line, "*Tuan Yang diPertua, saya pohon menyokong.*"

The veteran legislator that he is, Kit Siang began by thanking the king for his speech which he said was actually the policy statement and programme of the government.

Having said that he quickly added that it was for that reason amendments are allowed in Motion of Thanks for the Royal Address in Britain and other Commonwealth countries because they are not personal slights or attacks on "the person or office of the Yang diPertuan

Agong but a proposal of amendment to the government's policy presentation contained in the Royal Address."

And then he launched his frontal attack on the government on all fronts starting with national unity which he said was undermined by the racial discriminatory policies of the government.

Kit Siang spared no one and pulled no punches. He said the policy speech was a disappointment as it offered no new policy initiatives nor any legislative programme to deliver the prime minister's pledges of "an efficient, clean, incorruptible, accountable, transparent, just, democratic and progressive administration."

Most of those who heard the tirades and revelations of the opposition maestro were fifth and six formers from several schools who packed the public galleries and government officers who sat on the edges of their seats in the gallery reserved for them.

Save for a few deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries most of the government pews were empty. Just enough government backbenchers were present to make up the quorum of 26 in the 219-seat Dewan Rakyat.

Kit Siang – saying that he was going against the grain of government thinking – also criticised the Internal Security Ministry for influencing the mainstream media and the people not to believe everything that come from blogs and the Internet portals.

On Thursday more government representatives and backbenchers were in the Dewan when he continued his debate.