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If not for a few good men

THE subject of governance motivates much discourse, often concluding with profound emotions and sentiments. Disappointed by the system, the process, the leaders who were supposed to make it happen and, most of all, disappointed for losing the hope for something better.

For those of you who may be familiar with the work of the ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, you might know that ancient dice was first invented of sheepknuckles some 2,500 years ago in the kingdom of Lydia. There was continuous and severe famine in the land and the King of Lydia decided that they had to implement something that would distract the people from the extreme conditions of suffering which led to in-fighting.

A kingdom-wide policy was adopted where on one day everybody would play the dice game, and on the other, everybody would eat.

The games were so absorbing and engaging that the people would forget the suffering and hunger.

When the famine did not recede after 18 years, the king decided they would play one final dice game.

He divided the entire kingdom in half. It was collectively decided that the winners of that game would leave Lydia in search of a new place to live, leaving behind just enough people to survive on the available resources.

Recent DNA evidence has shown that the Etruscans, who made up the ancient civilisation of Italy leading to the Roman Empire, shared the same DNA as the ancient Lydians. And so scientists have suggested that Herodotus' seemingly wild accounts did actually happen.

As outlandish as this story may sound to us today, this act probably saved a civilisation by making everyone own the solution to a problem.

Whose system is it?

The modern world is modulated by ideological encounters. We are all involved in this, whether we decide to partake in it or be a victim of it.

When we decree that the system has failed us, is it not that we are the system? Is it not that what we condone and approve makes a system in a society?



Humanism and humanity each has its unique meaning even as each is derived from the common word "human".

A human is not a sum of all the different parts of his biological functions as is a painting reduced to the quantity of paint used.

There is more to being a human and there is more to what makes a painting exclusive. What a place of worship stands for is not similar to what government offices represent, even if both are built on bricks and mortar. Equally, a dictionary filled with words is not the same as a poem. I raise these comparatives to put it to you that the very essence of governance must delve deep into essence, element and substance of what makes a society.

It must be rooted on the values and principles that the society aspires for. Simply put, it must respond to the society it serves and not to the critics who merely observe.

In search of humanity or productivity?

And so we ask ourselves what is governance.

Is the ultimate goal of governance founded on progress alone? Or, must elements of humanity be the driving force of governance?

Bees are probably the best example of a well organised social life in the animal kingdom. But they completely lack what we call humanism. Bees totally discard useless members in their community by simply throwing them out of the beehive.

So should governance be a protection of the productive only or of all who make a society?

Governments are to serve the needs of the public. Governance in governments is to ensure those needs are served efficiently, effectively and fairly by way of clear processes and structures.

But when private corporations fail to meet shareholders' expectations, does that become a matter of public

or corporate governance?

When the British Petroleum oil spill took place off the coast of Mexico, the *Financial Times* reported on President Obama's National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling.

In its article of Jan 6, the FT quoted a damning paragraph which accords the failure to "a single overarching failure — a failure of management".

A "single overarching failure" in this disaster affected the livelihood of hundreds, caused havoc to wildlife and the environment, brought into question the role of non-governmental organisations and media in their own oversights of governance in the market place, and of course brought to the fore the role of governments in monitoring businesses.

Is it fair then to conclude that failures of corporations are a private matter? Equally, can one argue that weak public institutions have no bearing on the competitiveness of private businesses?

Is it also fair to ask if the roles of media and NGOs should start before a catastrophe, rather than simply reacting and reporting after the fact? Benchmarking who again?

So what are the benchmarks and governance standards that apply for today? Does a less developed nation benchmark a developed?

Do emerging markets use mature markets as their yardstick?

Have we a model that has saved any nation, any society, and any civilisation escape the catastrophes that governance or the lack of it can bring about? Can we all, across cultures and race, nations and governments, businesses and markets share a common aspired standard of governance?

Man is a product of his environment, as is an environment a product of society.

It is then not wrong to conclude that our rights and wrongs, acceptance and reprieve as individuals and society maketh what we deem "The System".

When we say that our government is inefficient, our laws are too old, our local councils have not stepped up to the plate, the Internet connection is a joke or the transport system is a laugh, can we also reflect our own

roles in each of these situations? What have we each done about it beyond saying, saying and saying?

When we are in someone else's country and we have to pay abominable taxes, or are told that we are not allowed to smoke or discard chewing gum in public, or speed beyond a certain limit or beat the lights or stop at pedestrian crossings or park only in certain areas, are we not willing and able to comply and relent?

Why do we allow ourselves to respect and conform to a foreign system, yet indiscriminately throw rubbish and cigarettes on the road the moment we touch Malaysian soil? Not just about doing the right thing

Governance in its every sense and essence is predicated on human calculation. Benchmarks and yardsticks of other societies and countries are simply that — benchmarks.

They cannot be duplicated and imitated if die participants are not willing to exercise and implement the aspired standards.

In the final analysis, the system of governance in a society must safeguard and preserve humanity, and sanctify shared human values that cut across ideological differences.

So if we each rise to sanctify bad values, the governance in our system will preserve just that. The contrary, of course, is equally true.

The face of our public and private institutions is a reflection of what we condone or penalise as a society, and as a country. And so, when we demand excellence in one part of our society, we must equally have delivered that excellence in our business, our lives, and our sectors. Small events, big returns

Often, the fundamentals of governance are inculcated in the simplest of events and actions.

In the book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Changed a Nation*, John Carlin writes of the events in South Africa before and during the 1995 Rugby World Cup hosted in that country following the dismantling of apartheid.

While Mandela attempts to tackle the country's largest problems — crime and unemployment — he at-

tends a game of the Springboks, the country's rugby union team.

Mandela saw the blacks in the stadium cheering against their home squad.

As depicted in the movie *Invictus*, Mandela would argue that this one game, played by the minority could be used as a means to bringing consensus, reconciliation and pride back into South Africa.

His aides disagreed as they felt that integration and reconciliation could only be achieved through specific policy measures.

One of his aides would go so far as to tell him that it was an incorrect political calculation. Mandela would abruptly cut her oil" by saying its "human calculation".

Another one of his aides, Jason Tshabalala would strive to dampen Mandela's views by saying, "according to the experts, we'll reach the quarter-finals, and no further".

To which Mandela would reply: "According to the experts, you and I should still be dead."

Our prosperity lies in how we approach governance, and approach it meaningfully as involved citizens and not prime-time commentators.

The system isn't someone else's problem. It is ours, yours and mine. It isn't the job of a few good men, but the work of all good men and women.

This is the critical message that should feature in the discussions for the development of a Code of Public Governance.

In the words of Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the 11th president of India:

"If a country is to be corruption-free and become a nation of beautiful minds, I strongly feel there are three key societal members who can make a difference.

"They are the father, the mother and the teacher."
I would add just three more — you and me and all of us.

• **The writer is the chief secretary to the government. This is an excerpt of the keynote address delivered at the roundtable discussion 'The Code of Public Governance', organised by Cluster of Governance, Law and Public Management, Majlis Profesor Negara on Feb 17**