

A Spanner in the Works Ministry

The Works Ministry, and the minister in particular, have come under fire recently for a spate of mishaps which seem too numerous to be mere coincidence. This has culminated in the call for the minister to resign. But why should this be the case when accountability demands that leaders, above all, admit weaknesses and restore the faith?

WORKS Minister Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu is but ordinary. So, it was quite unnecessary for him to proclaim to the Press that *saya bukan orang biasa* (I am not an ordinary person) as he did last month.

Orang biasa (ordinary people) are those who suffer hardship or even death when hillsides come tumbling down on roads and highways.

Ordinary people are those who pay toll but cannot make full use of highways because they are full of dangerous cracks.

Ordinary people are those who die or are injured when their motorcars and motorcycles skid off poorly constructed highways.

Samy Vellu is not an *orang biasa*. He is a minister. He has the power. He can make things happen.

On the contrary, Samy Vellu is, by all accounts, an *orang luar biasa* – extraordinary person. Otherwise, how do we explain his political longevity despite countless landslides and mishaps that have taken many lives?

And running the Malaysian Indian Congress for a staggering 24 years. Only an extraordinary person can last that long in

a political party that is known for its boisterousness. Just ask those luckless party ex-deputy presidents.

He has served as full minister to two former Prime Ministers – Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and is now serving under the third. Only an extraordinary politician can maintain such a record.

Thus, I disagree totally with the calls by MPs and an assortment of other detractors that he should quit.

To begin with, such a call is futile. People don't resign in this country just because a few critics want them out. It is not in our political culture for a politician to resign under pressure.

Secondly, it is not in our political culture for a politician to accept responsibility and resign.

Samy Vellu has survived landslides, cave-ins, construction delays and shoddy workmanship before. He has been Works Minister for nearly 20 years. So why should a few landslides bother him now?

Last but not least, if indeed Samy Vellu is culpable, then let him answer the charges and set things right. The true test of a good leader is in solving problems. But sparring with the Press and issuing challenges will not cause cracks in the highways to go away.

And appointing experts and consultants to fix the neglect and the dereliction of duties by officialdom is not the answer that we are looking for.

It is easy to appoint experts to study problem-ridden projects, as Samy Vellu told the Press. There are many of them around. We have no problem with that as long as the errant contractors or Samy Vellu himself pays for their services. It is unfair and unjust to burden the taxpayers with the mistakes of the contractors and the supervising civil servants.

Bad highway construction isn't new. Samy Vellu was already Works Minister when the North-South Highway was privatised in the mid-1980s. Part of the reason for the exercise was the shoddy workmanship and cost overrun of the Lembaga Lebuhraya Malaysia (LLM)-built Kuala Lumpur-Seremban stretch.

Since then, most new highways have been built and operated by the private sector. Still, we have problems. And since the concessionaires are appointed by the government and the construction of these highways is supervised by the LLM, the government is equally liable for these problems.

For that reason, Samy Vellu must be

made to stay and rectify them. His resignation will not solve our million-ringing problems.

Here I am reminded of my kampong childhood when I was told not to venture to unfamiliar places lest I wanted my head chopped off and fed to the spirits at construction sites. So, when the construction of a concrete bridge was carried out in our village in the late fifties, we would not go near it unless in the presence of adults. We feared the workers would chop our heads off and bury them to satisfy the spirits.

Maybe, we should keep this option open as our last resort. Who knows, the construction of the highways might have offended the spirits. And if need be, we know whose head to chop off to appease these ghosts and demons.

CIVIL SERVICE WOES

IT IS not unusual for the *orang biasa* to be disappointed and feel a sense of hopelessness when dealing with bureaucracy.

Despite the slogan *bersih, cekap dan amanah* (clean, efficient and trustworthy) and countless client's charters, the government service is far from flawless.

There are admittedly improvements in counter services in such departments as Immigration, Registration and Road Transport. But even at these departments, the quality of service is not consistent. Different locations have different levels of comfort and efficiency. Mostly, they depend on the men and women in charge.

Sadly, it is the departments and services

that are most needed by the very average and ordinary *rakyat* that appear to be struggling with efficiency and trustworthiness – the district and land offices, the police force, hospitals and local governments. This has led to the people adopting the attitude that civil servants are either lazy or have to be bribed. Otherwise, how do we explain poor landowners having to trudge to the land office for years before land titles are issued?

But when the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi himself was reported by the *Mingguan Malaysia* newspaper (Oct 17) to be disappointed (*kecewa*), then what do we make out of it?

Have we come to a point where hopelessness has become a national malady?

The Bahasa Malaysia weekly reported that the Prime Minister was disappointed with the implementation and maintenance of projects relating to the Works Ministry. Perhaps, Abdullah was being human. He has his ups and downs. But unlike us, he is not so ordinary a person. He is the Prime Minister and thus, the most powerful man in the country. Unlike us, he can make things happen. He has the power to summon his ministers and civil servants to account for the things that he is unhappy about – the things that are causing ordinary mortals their lives and limbs.

It does not bring too much hope and relief to the ordinary *rakyat* when the Prime Minister himself is reduced to despondency. Maybe this is the 'nice guy' Pak Lah talking.

But not all people, ministers and top politicians included, appreciate such a quality. They may even misconstrue it as a

sign of weakness and take advantage of his good nature.

Abdullah has said and done many good things since becoming Prime Minister just under a year ago. The people are convinced. But the time will come when they will ask: What is in it for us?

For the ordinary people, this translates into employment, steady incomes, stable prices, security and personal safety, a reasonably efficient public service and, most of all, to be able to look forward to a brighter future in line with the slogan *cemerlang, gemilang dan terbilang* (excellence, glory and distinction).

The daily fare of multiple murders, kidnappings, rapes, robberies, abuse of power and corruption dished out by the mass media does not do much to convince us that we are a nation of excellence, glory and distinction – not yet at least.

REDEEMING HONOUR

THE laudable pioneering decision by the Sultan of Selangor to suspend the datukship of five people facing criminal charges should be seen beyond merely ridding the state honorific of bad apples.

It is a move that will go a long way towards reinstating and re-enhancing the *daulat* (majesty) of the monarchy.

Newspaper reports alleging recipients of royal awards coming from dubious backgrounds and being involved in criminal activities have tarnished the image of royal titles. Until the Sultan of Selangor moved in to stop the rot, royal titles were a favourite subject of coffee-shop jokes. Several other state monarchs have since emulated the Sultan's move.

But to be fair to the titleholders, the rot is not as bad as it is made out to be, considering that some monarchs and governors, at the behest of their *Menteris Besar* and Chief Ministers, have been generously dishing out state awards.

There are just too many titleholders around. And with young and untested people being made Datuks and Tan Sris simply because they are wealthy or hold important business, civil service and political posts, some are bound to become wayward.

It is common to see businessmen in

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their late twenties and early thirties being made Datuks by some state rulers and governors simply because these people are generous with their wealth – not necessarily with the public.

It's fine if they are big donors to public charities. But in most cases they are not. They are more likely to be sons and daughters of some very rich people or important politicians.

And if that is not bad enough, in recent years, ministers, *Menteris Besar* and Chief Ministers have even allowed their spouses to receive royal titles. So now, many politicians' spouses carry their own royal titles – making a mockery of public functions when a minister and his wife have to be differently addressed.

In recent years, the awards of honorific titles have become a matter of practice rather than a true measure of service and honour, except perhaps for Johor where the Sultan is very sparing in giving out titles.

This was not the case in the years following the first and second constitutional crises when the powers and privileges of the Rulers were

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curtailed by Parliament. Then, royal birthdays were more subdued and the Press for some years did not publish special supplements to commemorate such occasions. Today, royal birthdays are a big thing for the Press, and it is not surprising that some editors have received multiple datukships.

The burden of responsibility must be equally assumed by all parties responsible for the process of selecting and awarding royal titles. The choice of candidates is not of the monarchs alone. The *Menteris Besar*, Chief Ministers and State Secretaries are equally responsible.

It would not come as a surprise if some recipients of royal titles were ex-convicts, known gangsters and bankrupts. Maybe, the councils responsible for the royal awards in all states should seek the assistance of the police and the courts to verify the backgrounds of past and future recipients. **mb**

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