

OPENING OF "NATIONAL SEMINAR ON PUBLIC SERVICE"

ISTANA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 01 SEPTEMBER 1995

I am honoured to be invited to declare open the National Seminar on Public Service with the theme: Public Service - New Strategic Dimensions in the 21st Century. I have been informed that members of the Board of Directors of the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM), who are having their meeting here tomorrow, have chosen to participate in this Seminar as well. To our guests, on behalf of the Government and the people of Malaysia, I wish you all a happy stay in Kuala Lumpur.

2. Since CAPAM is here I would like to make reference to the Public Service in the Commonwealth, with particular focus on those commonwealth countries which gained independence after the World War. In a way we can consider ourselves fortunate that most of us inherited from the British some experience in Public Service. For the commonwealth countries this means that we are familiar with each other's systems, with the rules and regulation and the laws. These enable us to work with each other more easily, even to train in each other's countries.

3. But the structure and function of the public service cannot be static. They have to respond to the needs of the times. A purely colonial civil service cannot possibly serve an independent nation. In the colonial Public Service, the real head or chief or minister responsible resided in London, in Whitehall to be precise. The system of Government was not democratic for the Colonial Civil Service effectively ruled the colonial territories. They were powerful and they answered only to their head in London or his local representative, the Governors or High Commissioners.

4. The Legislative bodies, if there was any, were filled with a majority of civil servants, members of the local British Community and a few appointed locals. The Legislature was very much an apparatus of the colonial Government, headed by the Governor, a bureaucrat. The Colonial administration was truly bureaucratic, with the Public servants responsible really to themselves. Public accountability was therefore practically non-existent.

5. Independence brought in a new creature, the politician. Whether democratic or otherwise, the politicians oversee and exercise power over the public service. This was a radical departure and the public service had to adjust to a role where they do not have the final say. Yet they remain the permanent wing of the Government. The Government may change but the Public Service remains.

6. In Malaysia the switch in roles was quite smooth as a few civil servants who had taken up politics became senior members of the independent Government. They understood the role of the permanent civil service and did not try to undermine them. But they did initiate a change in attitude. The Public Service must be answerable to the public. Of course, the elected politicians as Ministers had to do the actual answering in the Parliament or outside. But the Minister must make sure that the Public servants understood that they had to be sensitive to the needs of the public and to serve them as true public servants.

7. As more and more projects and policies were introduced which were intended for the public good, the Public Service was forced to interact directly with members of the public. In the Colonial days the District Officer, for example, was practically the local chief, feted and made much of. Now he has to attend to all the complaints of the villagers, to meet them and to try and deal with things affecting the lives of the people.

8. Immediately after Malaysia's independence a Rural Development policy was launched. This brought the Public Service into the open, supervising projects and implementing development plans hatched by the politicians. Desk-bound Public servants just could not remain desk-bound. They had to get out and meet the people. Naturally none would like to see the plan failed, especially as visits by ministers require not just office briefings but also on-site visits.

9. The Civil Service of today remains very much a professional service, quite non-partisan and willing to serve whichever party or politician is in power. In Malaysia this is essential as state Governments may change and be formed by parties which are not the same as the Central Government.

10. But the process of getting the Public Service more involved in the affairs of the country and the needs of the people never ceased. The most radical change in Malaysia is the introduction of the Malaysia Incorporated concept.

11. Hitherto, the Public Service merely implemented Government policies and plans according to the administrative rules and procedures. Whether the results of applying the rules and methods are good or bad for the nation, and for the people interacting with the Government, was not too important.

12. Thus if an application made for a business permit is wrongly worded or slightly incorrect, it will simply be rejected. That the effect is to cause the applicant to lose money or trade is not the concern of the Public servant. He

has done his work in the way prescribed and for which he was paid. What happens to the client is his problem.

13. Under the Malaysia Incorporated concept, the whole nation is regarded as a Corporation and both the Public servants and Private Sector people are responsible for the success of the Corporation. They have to work together for this success. The Public servant understand that the failure of the private sector would result in loss of revenue for the Government. Since the revenue is used at least partly to pay the Public servant, losses by the Private Sector have a direct bearing on his own income. If the Civil servants want better income, then the surest way is to ensure Government revenues are increased through taxes paid largely by the private sector.

14. More than that, the development of the whole nation depends on the success of the private sector. Obviously the more the private sector makes the wealthier will be the nation. Jobs will increase and there will be sufficient funds for public works, for more amenities for the people, including the Public servants.

15. The Public servants are partners in the Corporation. If the Corporation, i.e. the Nation prosper, then as partners, they will enjoy the dividends. More than that, they will enjoy greater pride as the prosperity and success of the nation is, to a considerable extent, the result of the service provided by the Public servants.

16. Under the Malaysia Incorporated concept the Public servants are now interested not in just doing what is prescribed administratively but in the end results. They have to ensure that their work and their decisions contribute to the success of the private sector. If they don't then they must find out why, and they must take the necessary action to overcome the mistakes or the problems of their clients. In all these they must be conscious that time is of the essence.

17. But in Malaysia, we went one step further. We decided to reduce the size and role of the Government and its functions and transfer Government jobs to the private sector i.e. to privatise. It was thought at one time that certain function must be done only by the Government. Indeed the Communist and Socialists believed that the Government should do everything, including business.

18. Under Malaysia's privatisation programme nothing is sacred. Everything that can be privatised will be privatised.

19. Naturally this policy met with resistance by the Public Service. If the Government has no work to do, then what will

happen to the Civil Servants? The short answer to that is they will become businessmen. And so, while many Government companies, agencies and functions have been transferred to people already in business, many have also gone to those civil servants willing to leave the Government and set themselves up as businessmen.

20. But the Government cannot wash its hands off these functions altogether. It has to continue ensuring that the public services formerly rendered by the Government agencies and departments are properly rendered by the privatised entities. And so a number of Government officers has to be retained to supervise and check on the services rendered, so that profit will not be the only objective, but service must also go with it.

21. This puts a new twist to the responsibility and function of the Public Service. It is now more a supervisory body than an operational body. It can, if it wants to be quite obstructive, look for faults and failures. But then the Public Service has become a partner in Malaysia Incorporated and it is in its interests to see that the public and the nation are well-served by the privatised entities. Being obstructive and finding faults is certainly not going to achieve this. It must be in every way helpful without being irresponsible.

22. The Public Service in Malaysia is now more truly a public service. The members are no longer Mandarins, the officials whom the people must kow-tow to in order to procure the services they are supposed to give. The Public Service is not a colonial bureaucracy meant to serve the colonial office and the metropolitan power. The Public Service is now truly a servant of the Public. It is not a Civil Service.

23. During the colonial days members of the Malaysian Civil Service appended the letter 'MCS' after their names. The Malaysian Public Service no longer do so. They are not a caste apart. They are very ordinary people who have been given a special role—to ensure that the nation is properly administered as a nation, to implement policies of the elected Government and to positively contribute toward national success as targetted by the various national objectives.

24. Today the Public Service is part of the machinery to make Malaysia a developed country by the year 2020. The Vision has been spelt out very clearly. As a partner in Malaysia Incorporated, the Public Service must apply administration to the overall effort to achieve growth and change the basic parameters of the nation. Towards this end, procedures and functions have been revised and simplified. And from time to time they will be revised and revised again to ensure that the

administration serves the people and the nation and not the other way round.

25. The Public i.e. the Nation must be served and the Public Service is there to do just that-to serve the Public.

26. On that note, I now have pleasure in declaring open the National Seminar on Public Service.