

Penyampai : TAN SRI ABDUL HALIM BIN ALI
Tajuk : THE PUBLIC SERVICE IN MALAYSIA - STEPPING INTO THE NEXT MILLENNIUM
Lokasi : INTAN BUKIT KIARA
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1. First of all, I wish to thank INTAN for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on a subject that is of immediate concern to me and members of the Civil Service. This concern clearly arises out of the desire of members of the Civil Service, me included, to perform the role of an effective advisor to the government as well as facilitator and implementor of government policies. The success of the privatization policy has already, in some way, led to a perception that the role and influence of the public service has been eroded. A culture is also developing in which the roles of the public sector are constantly being evaluated to see whether they continue to be necessary and whether such roles could not be taken over by the private sector.

2. The pressure on the public service to deliver better and faster service is enormous. Not only the government that it serves is a demanding one, with clear vision, mission and targets but also one that is made up of well- educated, well-informed and committed leaders. The general public too being better-informed and wealthier than what they used to be, are expecting better service from public servants. In addition, the impact of economic liberalization and globalization in the region and the world at large is exposing countries to intense international competition for markets, capital and technology. The competitive edge that Malaysia used to enjoy in attracting foreign investment because of the availability of cheap labour and other incentives are no more with it today. Other countries with large pool of surplus labour have also opened their doors to foreign investment and are offering equally attractive incentives. An efficient civil service that facilitates business and industry can make the difference to retain Malaysia as an attractive place to invest. The pressure on the civil service therefore becomes heavier, what more when it is also expected to be adept at the use of computers and information technology, the advent of which is already transforming the way in which government and business is run in many parts of the world.

3. Being the 17th. biggest trading nation in the world and an active participant in global affairs, Malaysia must of necessity forge close links with the international community, either bilaterally with both developed and developing countries or multilaterally through international organisations. The civil service is once again expected to provide the expertise in managing these interactions.

4. The question that arises is how well prepared is the Malaysian public service to meet these expectations. The proud fact is that a tradition of continuously upgrading the public service has already developed over the years.

The setting up of the Development Administration Unit in 1966, INTAN in 1972 and MAMPU 1977 clearly reflect the Malaysian government's recognition of the need to continuously improve the civil service. In the eighties, soon after Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad took over the reign of government, several innovative programs were introduced, designed to instil good work ethics and values and increase productivity in order to enhance the capacity of the civil service to facilitate and implement a more robust economic development. The programs included the introduction of the punch clock, name tag, the Look East Policy, the Malaysian Incorporated Policy, the Desk File, Manual of Work Procedure and Productivity Measurement. In the Nineties, this is right now, preparations are being made for the introduction of an electronic government and the application of quality standard MS ISO 9000 in all government departments.

These innovations have, without doubt, brought about significant increase in efficiency and productivity of the public service.

5. The issue is really whether these achievements are enough for the public service to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, when the working environment is expected to be somewhat changed. I anticipate the 21st Century public service environment in Malaysia will include the following characteristics: (i) more privatisation and corporatisation of government enterprise with the consequential

narrowing of direct government participation in the implementation of economic projects; (ii) more outsourcing of services required by the government; (iii) wider and more intensive use of computer and information technology within the government and between the government and the public; (iv) a vibrant, high-growth economy based on high- technology manufacturing and services industry; (v) a global working environment in which both domestic policy formation and its administration are subject to increasing international constraints.

6. These changes have important implications for the public service: (i) Privatization and outsourcing implies that the days of the big public service managing a wide variety of public enterprises are over. The existing 880,000 strong public service is certainly too big and there will be further pressure to reduce it to a much smaller but efficient and responsive one - one that is committed to the principle of "steering rather than rowing". The core function of the public service will be more and more public policy-making, and regulating rather than providing goods and services. There would be less 'doing' and more thinking'. Changes in the role and function of the Ministry of Energy, Post & Telecommunications is a case in point.

This does not mean however that the public service is weaker or less significant in nation building. After all, those who steer the boat (policy design) have more power over its destination than those who row it (actually providing goods and services). Besides there are many essential services or functions that can only be better provided by the government or public service. Such core functions include the management and administration of justice, defense, elections, internal security and finance. Even in education, health and infrastructure, such services will continue to be provided mainly by the public service though some may be provided by the private sector. This new development calls for a new set of skills and knowledge among public officials. They must be multi-skilled, which includes the ability to use computers and multimedia technology; (ii) There is also the increasing possibility of delayering of the public service. We may not need to have so many levels of public servants of the future in Malaysia. There will not be that much need for so many supportive personnel. What we will have is a flatter pyramid, or even an inverted pyramid which will reflect a bigger need for "thinkers" as against "doers".

7. Against this anticipated 21st Century environment how well-prepared is our public service to meet the challenges ahead? In my view, inspite of the enormous improvement in the way the public service functions, a lot more have to be done to ensure that the service meets the full expectation of the government and the public:

(i) computer literacy is still relatively low in the public service as it is in the whole country.

Without a high level of computer literacy, it would be difficult to realise the objective of an efficient electronic government. Therefore an intensive and extensive training program for public servants in the use of computer and information technology is urgently needed. It is hoped that INTAN and other training institutions can effectively carry out this program immediately.

Outsourcing should be considered too. Related to computerisation and Information Technology, something must be done quickly to create an Information Technology Department within the public service; (ii) Training and retraining of officers including support staff in new skills and knowledge must also be embarked more vigorously.

(iii) There has been tremendous changes in the theory and practice of public policy and public management in Malaysia the last twenty years. More changes are continuously being made as we approach the year 2000 and beyond. It is therefore opportune and timely that we now take the time to seriously examine the adequacy and suitability of the education and training plan for the public service. The big question that need to be asked is in the matching and alignment of the current plan to the new and projected demands of the civil service. We may have not moved fast enough. As an example, we have to make further allocation of resources for INTAN and other training centres to provide training in the area of ISO 9000, Information Technology and Electronic Government. We have created a huge training backlog. In the era of globalism and borderless world, we need to expand training programmes in the area of International Relations and International Trade. Similarly training in foreign languages have to be intensified. Our public officials must feel at home dealing with foreign officials as they are with their

Malaysian counterparts. Professionals need to be educated and trained in new areas of specialisation.

(iv) An expanding and buoyant private sector has provided another significant effect on the public service.

It is becoming more difficult to recruit and retain talented manpower, given the ability of the private sector to give them a better pay package.

Nevertheless the government is committed to recruit and sustain a professional and motivated work-force, committed to making a career in the civil service.

While the pay package and benefits will be reviewed and improved from time to time depending on public service productivity and the government's ability to pay, salary revision is not the only answer to attract good and competent public servants. Other incentives should be looked at, including better office conditions, training facilities and higher education study loans for children of public servants.

(v) In an environment of intense global competition and the need to maintain high economic growth, expeditious decision-making and policy adjustment is necessary. In this regard, as far as the bureaucracy is concerned, greater delegation of authority from central agencies, like the Public Service Department and the Treasury, to operating Ministries and Departments should be seriously considered. Some of the present procedures are too cumbersome and time consuming. Let us give the concept of let managers manage a real try.

8. These suggestions are made on the basis of personal observation after 6 months in the present office. I believe, if seriously looked at, they would make a positive contribution in preparing our public service for the 21st Century.

Ladies and gentlemen:

9. There is nothing more important to the effectiveness and prestige of the civil service than the government in power and the general public having the confidence in the loyalty, integrity, fairness, discipline and the professionalism of the public service. Continuous efforts must therefore be undertaken to preserve and enhance this climate of confidence and acceptance. Towards this end the public service must constantly maintain and adhere to the high standards of accountability, particularly in the area of program and financial management. Greater vigilance will be maintained to ensure that the civil service is free from the incidence of fraud, corruption and dishonest behaviour. The members of the civil service must maintain a high ethical and moral conduct. It is important that these principles of moral conduct and universal values become the core culture of the government and the public service. History has clearly shown that great and flourishing empires are created on the foundation of such principles and values of human conduct. Without them empires fell, going down with all their glories and wealth.

11. In conclusion, let me emphasise how high the public expectation is towards the public service as the agent of change and progress. To achieve the status of a developed society in 2020, the public service must be reminded that the vision can only be realised if it plays its role with a sense of mission, imbued with the values of efficiency, responsiveness and responsibility.

It is the duty of every member of the public service to make this hope and vision become a reality.