

AUGUST 24, 2008

Public service as it should be

THE headlines tell the story, and sometimes the stories they tell are that of sleaze and corruption involving politicians and public servants, of their inefficiency and apathy, stories of the nefarious deeds that they are not paid to do, or stories of what they have not been doing for the salaries they are being paid on the dot every month. Recent headlines like that on "China Dolls" told a story of corruption where social visit passes of young foreign ladies of dubious reputation, who work the night club circuit offering "personalised" services for a fee, were extended easily. There were other stories, too, of immigration officers being offered money, sex and free holidays. And corruption in immigration seems to be the flavour of the month following the recent arrests of several top-ranking department officials. But corruption and apathy is not restricted to just one ministry or department, for corruption will rear its ugly head where there is an opportunity or a loophole in the system. The deeds, or misdeeds, of avaricious public officials can derail the best laid out plans of the government that benefit the people, for it is in the hands of the officials to translate these plans or public policy, and how well they do it or not do it will reflect on the government. The exemplary service of many a public servant and efficient department is overshadowed by the proverbial bad apple.

The new director-general of Immigration, Datuk Mahmood Adam, has taken up the cudgels and he is promising to get rid of "Little Napoleons" who may exist in his department, and is working towards an open computer online system to make immigration processes "more user-friendly, faster and less bureaucratic" to eliminate or reduce opportunities for corruption. But the failing in the public delivery system is not restricted to immigration. There are bad apples in almost all public agencies, departments and local authorities that deal with the public and the business community, as the newspapers have reported. We do not have to come to a situation like Thursday morning where the prime minister had to go to the ground, to take an LRT ride to tell the public transport people of their failings. The responsibility for implementing public policies effectively lies with the civil service bosses at all levels. No more warming the seats and collecting salaries, no more paying mere lip service or taking extended tea breaks, no more time spent on the golf courses. The people and the government expect this.