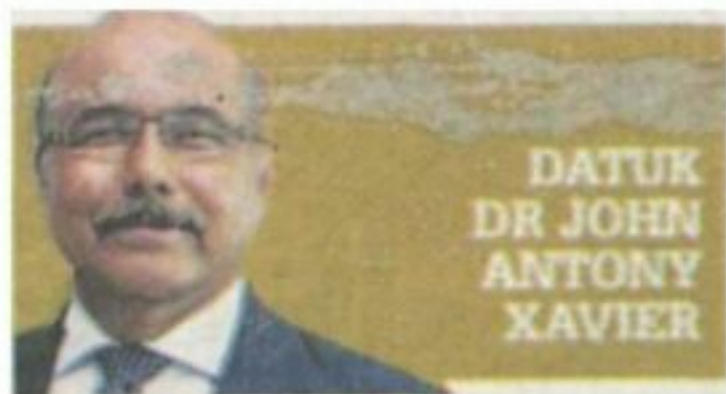


Without integrity 'nothing else matters'

CHALLENGE: With a more sophisticated middle class to serve, the onus is on public servants to be more efficient and less corrupt



IN 1979, the song *Honesty* climbed up the charts to become a top-10 hit. Billy Joel crooned the words, "*Honesty is such a lonely word, everyone is so untrue*". While it might seem an exaggeration, regrettably, the lyrics still resonate today.

Presumably, the fear of the public service slipping into that pathetic state might have motivated Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Ali Hamsa to issue this advice at the excellent awards ceremony of the Prime Minister's Department last week: "Discipline, integrity, a strong sense of responsibility and the ability to uphold secrecy are required of public servants in carrying out their tasks honestly and transparently."

These are profound words. They should prick the conscience of not only public servants but also reverberate across the business world which is racked with scandals of unthinkable order.

Take the most recent cases of Toshiba, Volkswagen and Mitsubishi Motors. Toshiba ~~is~~ ~~its~~ ~~staff~~ about cooking the books while Volkswagen has confessed to cheating on carbon-emission tests. Apparently, Mitsubishi Motors had been cheating fuel-economy tests in Japan since 1991, longer than it had previously admitted.

These cheats will reap what they sow. Apart from hefty fines imposed by the authorities — Volkswagen has to pay fines close to US\$20 billion (RM 78.57 billion) — these companies face massive losses from poor sales on account of bad publicity, tarnished image and declining stock price.

So, is it all worthwhile to compro-

mise on integrity? Public servants may already know that it is not worth it in terms of the risk to their accumulated pensions that can span two generations, as well as their good name and honour.

Yet, the short-term gains, or even the excitement of beating the law, take the better of a few of them. One would surely recall the recent case of an alleged RM100 million fraud perpetrated by a Ministry of Youth and Sports senior official.

Does not one realise the universal and immutable law of nature, akin to Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion, that for every action there is a consequence? And, this is my theory of retribution. These are the days of instant karma. The punishment for wrongdoing does not have to wait for the after-life. It can be here and now.

So, someone who compromises his integrity may never get caught. But that individual, and maybe members of his family, too, may ultimately pay the price through ill-health or premature death, all for a worthless pursuit of a forbidden fruit.

As Bette Midler sings: "*And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance.*"

As the chief secretary suggests, integrity goes beyond issues of corruption and fraud. It is also about how we live our lives — at work, marriage, and parenting. In government, integrity is about safeguarding the public interest and putting the public above oneself.

We do this by being close to the public, meeting their needs and solving their problems. We display integrity by doing more with lesser resources and doing more than what we are paid for. It is not for gimmick that the government coined the mantra, "People first, performance now".

Mismanagement of government funds — the auditor general's report

has examples galore — is a travesty of integrity. So is inefficiency. How often to a request to urgently meet a public official or speak with him do we hear the refrain, "The boss is in a meeting"? However true that may be, surely there can be someone to stand in for the boss when he or she is on leave or at a meeting?

Stifling bureaucracy is another source of frustration that is not in keeping with the chief secretary's call. So is the lack of willingness to help, partly on account of being terrified of taking the initiative. One gets the impression that public servants, fortunately not many, do not want to go the extra mile.

One of the foremost scholars in public policy, Aaron Wildavsky, titled one of his books, *Speaking Truth to Power*. Therein, he traces how the public service had to confront increasing politicisation and the need to emphasise the human aspects in public policy. So, integrity is also about speaking truth to power.

Andrei Sakharov, the Russian nuclear physicist and Nobel prize winner, shot an arrow of truth at the very heart of the Soviet empire. The Nobel prize committee called him "the conscience of mankind".

The authorities persecuted Sakharov and his wife for championing human rights and calling for an end to the nuclear arms race. Notwithstanding, his honesty prevailed against the might of Soviet power.

Integrity is infectious. Other dissidents, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist and historian, took up Sakharov's cause. Combined, they laid the ground for Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms that subsequently broke up Soviet Russia and introduced democracy in Russia.

Doubtless, there are pockets of excellence in the public service. True, the public service has progressed