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LEAPS AND BOUNDS

PUBLIC SERVICE HAS IMPROVED

The good work continues; there is a greater sense of urgency and responsiveness in service delivery

LAST Thursday witnessed the launch of Tan Sri Sidek Hassan's biography, *No Wrong Door*. The eponymous title reflects one of the author's signature initiatives of sparing the public of the misery of going from one department to another to secure a service.

The book narrates how a kampung boy from Cherok Paloh in Pahang made good to become the chief secretary to the government.

In launching the book, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak testified to Sidek's zealous ambition. It caused me to reflect not only on the journey that he had taken but also that of the public service.

Despite all the brickbats, the public service and public services in particular, have improved by leaps and bounds since Merdeka.

It counts among the better ones in the world. Today, four-fifths of public services are accessible online. We find it faster and easier to deal with government departments. We can pay a traffic summons, renew a passport, driving licence or MyKad in a jiffy.

It is the unyielding tenacity of our prime ministers and the fervent implementation zeal of top bureaucrats that made it all possible.

The alignment between the political and bureaucratic leadership has ensured the preeminence of citizen welfare in public service delivery. No area of public service, from rules and regulations to systems and processes, has been spared from the transformation wave. Just like the ocean waves that lap the shores and, with each gentle swash, push the tidal-water mark ever higher, so too, have the changes that have taken public service to greater heights of excellence.

To recount the public service's



Unlike in the past, paying traffic summonses and renewing passports, driving licences and MyKad are now faster and easier. FILE PIC

transformation journey, we must start with the transformation of the budget process — an important institution that determines "who gets what and when". Then a colonial legacy that allocated money to departments by items of expenditure, performance budgeting, introduced in the late 1960s, allocated money based on what a department intended to achieve in a particular year. The system has undergone revisions to strengthen the nexus between budget and outcomes. This nexus remains elusive. Notwithstanding, there is in place a more rational system to allocate public money.

Human resource management, too, has undergone a similar overhaul. Its information system captures information on public servants electronically for ease of planning and management of human capital.

League tables and secretary-general's performance scorecards keep bureaucrats locked on performance.

Five-star management ratings by the auditor-general and the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit pile pressure on ministries for continuous improvement in public services.

Merit determines recruitment, promotions and accelerated pay increments.

Productivity measurement, including the setting of key performance indicators and targets, drives departmental perfor-

mance. Total quality management, ISO and citizen's charter seek to ensure that services are delivered according to predetermined standards.

In keeping with Najib's philosophy that the days of the "all-knowing" government are over, the aloofness in service delivery, especially of those in the higher tiers, have been replaced with public engagement.

Collaboration among inter-related departments, including the public and business, propels the national transformation programme.

Collaboration also underwrites the execution of the National Blue Ocean Strategy — an initiative that seeks to create better value in service provision at lower costs.

Although their salutes are irreconcilable, the National Blue Ocean Strategy had made the police and armed forces comrades in arms in crime control.

Sidek's *No Wrong Door* initiative melted barriers that agencies had erected to protect their turf. Pemudah, or the Business Facilitation Committee, further gave him an added platform to promote a nimbler public service.

As its co-chair, Sidek was brutal in tearing down dysfunctional regulations. He was unwavering in simplifying rules.

Deregulation has made doing business easier and faster. Malaysia's world competitive ranking stands at an admirable

23rd out of 137 countries surveyed.

The culture of service is palpable. And, a greater sense of urgency and responsiveness pervades service delivery.

The good work started since Merdeka continues. The public service continues to scale ever-higher heights in service delivery. It moves with dedication to its mantra: "We must deliver".

Champions are made from something they have deep inside them — a calling, a purpose.

Resources may be limited. But, with love for humanity, much can be accomplished. Public servants, from the highest echelon to those who man the counters, have proved themselves so.

Notwithstanding, there is a wide berth to fill between the current global competitive position and the much sought-after top spot.

Reminiscent of the traveller in Robert Frost's poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, who is tempted to stay longer, but cognisant of the tug of obligations and the great distance yet to be travelled before he can rest for the night, so, too, must the public service journey on: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep; But, I have promises to keep; And, miles to go before I sleep; And, miles to go before I sleep."

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