

Change due in R&D sectors of civil service

A FORMER secretary-general of the Finance Ministry recently wrote about the country's burgeoning civil servants to population ratio.

It is the highest in the Asia-Pacific with 1.6 million people or 11% of the country's labour force.

It may be difficult to sustain. Malaysia's ratio of civil servants is reported to be 1:19 civilians. As a comparison, the ratio in Indonesia is 1:110, in China it is 1:108, in Singapore it's 1:71.4 and in South Korea the ratio is 1:50.

The figure was later disputed on the grounds that the ratio would be different if the army and police were excluded. Most other countries do not include the police and the army in their numbers. It is therefore not comparing apples to apples.

Whatever it is, the civil service is a major financial commitment of the nation.

It has been reported that we are expected to spend RM76bil in salaries and allowances for the civil service this year. A more important question to ask is, how do we get the best from the civil service?

Few would dispute the fact that over the years there have been vast improvements in the civil service.

One which has been well publicised is the faster processing of passports by the Immigration Department. I still remember my first application for an international passport in 1969.

I needed a passport for my travel to Melbourne, Australia to study chemical engineering at Monash University. The immigration office then was situated next to the old KL railway station. Then we had to jostle to get to the immigration officer at the front desk.

There was no numbering system like we do now. And queuing up was not the norm. So I had to spend virtually the whole day just to submit the necessary forms. We could only collect the passport two weeks later.

It is different now. Just two months ago, it took me less than an hour to get my passport renewed at the UTC, the Urban



Transformation Centre, a project under the National Blue Ocean Strategy, NBOS program. Admittedly, it is not just the Immigration Department which has witnessed positive change.

The Road Transport Department (JPJ) has also made significant improvements. For example there is no more hassle renewing driving licenses.

Renewing road tax is also done online. Again everything is done in quick time.

Notwithstanding, there is one sector of the civil service which can do with some changes. This refers to the R&D civil service.

Over the years, the government has invested significant amounts of money financing R&D in the many public research institutes. These include the likes of SIRIM, MIMOS, Nuclear Malaysia, NAHRIM, FRIM, MARDI and many more.

This is very much in line with

the nation's commitment to drive innovation and build a strong research culture in the country. Though there have been some successful breakthroughs in the R&D, the efficiency of spending can do with some improvements.

Firstly, because the institutes operate independently of each other, duplications in some research areas are unavoidable.

Secondly, there is little sharing of resources especially for expensive equipment which are often underutilised and also not well maintained.

Thirdly, collaboration among the institutes is almost absent. It is no wonder that policy makers have generally become less convinced of the power and potential of investing in R&D, which is unfortunate.

A recent attempt to improve the coordination of the institutes has yet to see the light of day. The idea to establish a Research

Management Agency, RMA, initiated by the EPU remains a subject of speculation.

RMA could have been a good start to put the nation's public sector R&D on a more solid footing. Many years ago, during the time of Dr BC Sekhar, better known as Mr Natural Rubber, an idea to put all the R&D civil service under one scheme along the lines of the PTD was mooted.

Under the scheme, R&D personnel can move among the many institutes as and when needed. It may be a good time to revisit that idea and make the nation's civil service R&D more motivated and serve as a strong force to drive the nation's innovation agenda!

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