

Walk the talk? It's mission impossible

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IT takes a lot of guts to admit one has failed. This is especially so when one is torn between personal conviction and that of the organisation that one belongs to, especially in matters of public interest.

So when one reads headlines such as "My failed mission — by Shahrir" (NST, May 6), one can almost feel the deep pain it entails.

It is best described by the Malay proverb *luah mati emak, telan mati bapa* — there is never an easy choice.

But for those who want to walk the talk with a clean conscience, somehow the option is clear, particularly when it relates to the question of ethics, integrity, and ultimately, trust.

After all, trust is an all-important building block that cements relationships, be it between individuals and institutions, more so between those who govern and those governed.

Of late, the latter in the various government agencies have been at the receiving end.

The few who failed to walk the talk have been made the subject of public ridicule and now people think everyone in the entire system is in the rut.

It then spread from one department to another. Rightly or wrongly, they were demonised, starting with the police force, civil servants and, more recently, Customs officers.

Each time it gets bolder and louder, at times leading to a perception of mistrust which could undermine public confidence.

As to why this is allowed to happen is uncertain. Some say it has something to do with political mileage, others say it is a form of quick (and cheap) publicity turning an unknown into a champion overnight.

Still others say it has to do with curry favouring. After all, it is easy to assign blame rather than provide an intelligent solution.

Regardless of the actual reasons, the survey by the Business Ethics Institute of Malaysia last month tells a different story.

The police and civil servants are considered to be more trustworthy compared to those in business and politics.

In other words, the integrity of business leaders and politicians are questionable, although some may question the reliability of the findings of the institute.

Interestingly, a similar poll conducted during the same year by Mori, an independent opinion research organisation in Britain, reached the same conclusion.

This is what makes the report (NST, May 5) of an MP who asked the Malacca Customs Department to "close one eye" following the seizure of sawn timber from Indonesia rather special.

For once, the public is made to realise that there are two sides to a story.

On many occasions though, only one side gets to tell its version, while those criticised, namely the ordinary civil servants and those in uniform, are not privileged to do so, no thanks to the General Orders.

Here again, the NST report is even more special since it bares the anatomy of the parliamentary debates where facts and principles can be supplanted by emotions and mere head counts, to paraphrase the ex-Barisan Nasional Backbenchers Club chairman (NST, May 6) when he conceded that he had failed to get the support of his fellow MPs.

Not one of them stood by him in his quest for integrity.

What took place seemed to fit well with the observation made by philosopher-cum-thinker John Saul in his book *The Unconscious Civilisation*: "Conformism, loyalty and silence are so admired and rewarded."

Criticism, on the other hand, is punished or marginalised in the context of what he termed as a corporatist

society, a situation the Malaysian Parliament must be aware of.

The punishment in this case is having to step down, an act which many regarded as very courageous as it is rare.

The paradox is that facts and principles alone seem insufficient to cause the conscience to act justly.

Perhaps, as Saul explained, this passivity which we are conditioned to accept as normal is the primary obstacle to changing things.

While those in the public sector are constantly urged to improve their performance, the other players must also get their act together.

The politicians, too, need to look at themselves and improve on the perceived image of themselves as a group least trusted, before they start to mind the affairs of others.

It is all about walking the talk when it comes to integrity and where public good is placed above all others.

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