

"NURTURING A CULTURE OF CLEANLINESS AND MAINTENANCE"



RS RAKAN Sarawak : You often remind civil servants of the importance of properly taking care of, maintaining and preserving government properties and structures in Sarawak. Could you explain the philosophy behind your strong stand on this issue?

YB DATUK AMAR WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY) : When it comes to the issue of taking proper care of, and preserving our physical infrastructures, such as our roads and buildings, especially those that are funded and built with government resources, (in effect by the peoples' money), I am strongly motivated by the meaning and symbolism that I attach to these structures, other than by the functional or pragmatic reasons why we need to have and maintain these facilities.

I am not discounting the vital fact that these structures are useful and necessary for us to perform our daily tasks with ease, comfort and efficiency. But if we do not look beyond the practical purposes and intents of why we built these facilities, then we run the risk of being neglectful and complacent in the way we treat these facilities.

For example, we might end up thinking that as long as we have a roof over our heads and four walls around us to protect us from the elements, then that should be fine. With this kind of mindset and attitude, then we won't have any motivation or desire to continuously upgrade and improve our surroundings, and hence our quality of life.

We will never be conscious about whether the surrounding is pleasing and comfortable to the eyes and our other senses, or whether the physical layout or arrangement is ergonomically safe to prevent injuries or accidents or whether the room is conducive to harmonious interactions or creative thinking.

If all we care about, for instance, is a bridge that will allow us to cross the river, then we would be content with a functional wooden bridge. But if we want a structure that will reflect the heritage, progress, and dynamism of the people and which will symbolize their hopes for a better tomorrow, then we would want to have a bridge made of the highest quality (timber, iron and steel) materials, and with an architectural design that incorporates some elements of the peoples' unique cultural heritage, because it is a structure that fulfills its function as a bridge but will also serve as a symbol of the peoples' sense of pride in their heritage and in their community as well as their aspirations for the future.

RS : What is it that you are most unhappy about when it comes to the way our public buildings, landmarks and other physical structures are maintained and taken care of?

STATE SECRETARY : I will take anyone to task those that I can see lacking in their sense of accountability in two very crucial areas as far as our physical assets are concerned. One is in the area of maintenance; and the other is in the area of security. Needless to say, these two areas go hand-in-hand.

I, like most concerned citizens of our country, bemoan the fact that we seem to suffer from the lack of **"maintenance culture"**. We are a very creative people, capable of coming up with uniquely designed and amazingly built physical structures or facilities. However, not long after we declare the building open or launch a bridge or a park for public use, then we lose our fascination for that particular structure and let it slide, so to speak. We seem to be lacking in our civic-mindedness, in our desire and efforts to maintain these facilities in their pristine, clean and attractive conditions.

Our indifference to the deterioration in the physical conditions and aesthetic value of these public buildings and facilities can only mean one thing – that we lack a sense of ownership and pride in our physical heritage.

All of us – the civil servants and the general public – must realize that we are all owners of these government properties. These were built with the peoples' money and the cost of not maintaining these properly is a waste of public funds. The costs of repairing broken down structures, or even building a new one, will reflect poorly on the government's image as responsible custodians and trustees of the country's assets. Besides, buildings that aren't well maintained and rundown are an eyesore, thus making our towns, cities and neighbourhoods less wholesome for our residents and less attractive to tourists and visitors. One has also to understand the difference between curative and preventive maintenance

And for those of us who are occupying these buildings, we must be concerned that poor maintenance could lead to what we call "sick building syndrome", which of course, poses a serious health hazard to the people working in its premises.

Let me further reiterate on the importance of preserving and maintaining our historical buildings. In Sarawak we have buildings that have become our heritage and are the envy of many in the region. It behooves upon us to ensure that these heritage buildings will always be maintained and preserved. A good example of these buildings are the forts of the past which constituted part of the administrative machinery.

RS : The issue of safety and security is something that you constantly remind civil servants to give priority to. Why do you feel so strongly about this issue?



STATE SECRETARY : We all must feel strongly about safety and security as far as the use and care of these physical assets are concerned because it is an integral part of a caring and cultured society. If there is that one place or area that our citizens should feel safe and secure in, next to the privacy of their own homes, it must be in those areas that are considered "government property". And here, we are not just talking about physical safety,

reaching. A simple example I can think of is of a person who has lost his or her birth certificate, and because documents pertaining to that person's identity that were kept in a government repository were destroyed or damaged by, say, a burglary or a fire in years past, he or she would have to go through a lot of hassle just to prove his identity and secure a new copy of his birth certificate.

The possible negative, frightening

parks, seaports, airports, etc – that we are fortunate to inherit, and for which we are now responsible to care for, upgrade and/or improve, we not only received amenities and facilities that make our day-to-day lives of work and leisure much more comfortable and efficient. We have also received the stories of the struggles and the victories of those who have come before us as they sought to provide us a future that was much better than what they have inherited from their forefathers. We will not do justice to the hard work, dedication and commitment of our forefathers if we do shoddy work today, and destroy or damage whatever they have handed down to us.

Likewise, we are also crafting a story of our times in whatever we are building now, and leaving behind for future generations. We live in privileged times, a time of peace and prosperity, when we have the means to build structures and edifices of the highest quality. We will not do justice to the achievements of our generation if we are to bequeath to future generations physical structures that were grandly designed and built originally, but has become shabby and rundown because of our substandard efforts at maintaining these structures.

Whenever we do our part, in small and simple ways of creating, restoring and maintaining the beauty and cleanliness of our government properties and landmarks, we are not just doing it for ourselves. Our simple efforts – like making sure there are no chipped paints or cracked tiles or broken window panes or keeping pathways clear of clutter and lined with potted plants – speak of our desire to honour and value the solid foundation of peace and stability that we have received from our predecessors. And, equally important, it speaks of the life of quality and excellence that we would want our children and their children to emulate from us.

What stories of our times are we crafting within and outside the walls and with every brick, stone, glass and steel components of our government properties and landmarks? Are we leaving behind a story of quality or mediocrity for the future generations? It's our choice.

but also the sense of security that comes from knowing that valuable records and documents that are directly or indirectly relevant to the peoples' needs, are well guarded and preserved in the government buildings that they are housed in. And beyond that, we are also talking about the sense of peace and serenity that residents of a civilized society should enjoy in, and the pride that they must have, over public domains that are clean, beautiful, relaxing and well maintained.

The culture of cleanliness and maintenance reflects the kind of mentality that the citizens of a country has. So, if our public properties, structures and facilities are not well maintained, we could be seen as a society with "first class infrastructure but with third world mentality".

In terms of physical safety, it is easy for us to imagine how disconcerting it must be if we, or anyone of our friends or relatives, will be mugged or assaulted in our public parks, a place which was built to provide us a means of leisure and relaxation.

Now, in terms of a government building that has been burglarized, and where important documents might have been destroyed or stolen, the consequences could even be more damaging and far-

and costly repercussion of peoples' carelessness, indifference and lackadaisical attitude about the security, cleanliness and maintenance of our government properties, should be enough to move us to action. But beyond the negative consequences, there is also the real fundamental reason why we should take every means possible to maintain and preserve government properties and public landmarks.

RS : Any other reason why you are so passionate about this issue of maintaining and taking proper care of our government properties?

STATE SECRETARY : I remember a quote by John Ruskin, an art and social critic who was extremely influential during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. He wrote: *"The greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, not in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity."*

In all the physical structures – buildings, roads, bridges, monuments,

