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Britain keen on high growth strategic industries, education

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THE UK has expressed a strong interest to collaborate with Malaysia in areas of education and high growth strategic industries, particularly in information technology.

Visiting British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Robin Cook said the two areas hold potential for collaboration because they are the main priorities of both the UK Labour Administration and the Malaysian Government.

"There is a very strong overlap between the main priorities of the new Labour Government and the Malaysian Government. We are both stressing immense importance on education," he added.

He was speaking to reporters in Kuala Lumpur after a one-hour discussion on bilateral issues with Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday.

Cook said UK's new Prime Minister Tony Blair has even described his Government's first three main priorities as "education, education and education."

"I believe we can develop strength from a very powerful education link between our two countries," he added.

Cook said besides education, both countries have also identified that the key to industrial prosperity is focussed on high technology, especially information technology (IT).

He added that UK is very supportive of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), as outlined by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Some UK companies will be coming here in November to demonstrate what they can do to contribute towards the MSC.

"I am sure we can work together in exchanging technology and experience, and to make sure that both our economies stay strong," he added.

Describing his discussion with Anwar as "a meaningful meeting", Cook said he took the opportunity of assuring the Finance Minister that the new UK Government saw itself as a "natural friend of Malaysia".

During the meeting, the visiting British minister also informed Anwar that the UK has transformed its relationship with the European Union (EU).

"The UK is now neither on the sideline of EU nor is it merely marginalised during an European debate.

"Britain is now a leading partner in the EU, and its views are taken seriously," he said.

Cook added that the UK is however not turning its back on its "friends in South-East Asia" such as Malaysia.

"On the contrary, I strongly believed we are better placed to use our new influence in Europe on behalf of our 'friends in Asia' ... we want to achieve a more constructive engagement with our neighbours because we recognise that in the world today, no country can stand alone.

"We are interdependent on one another and must work closely together. This does not only apply to Europe but also with countries on this side of the globe.

"We are closer now because of modern telecommunications technology," he added.

"We will be able to act as 'a bridge' between the European Union and Asean, and Malaysia, as one of the influential members of Asean, is well placed to be at the 'other end of that bridge,'" he said.

Earlier when meeting Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Cook said Britain and Malaysia should build stronger ties based on their existing close linkages.

Cook also assured Malaysia and other Asean members that Britain fully recognises the importance of the region.

Abdullah also called for better bilateral relations between Malaysia and the UK.

Informal meetings should be held more frequently to establish closer ties between the foreign ministries of both countries, Abdullah told reporters after the meeting.

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