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From the yellow brick road to Cyberjaya

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If you take a person of my age, and a sentimental old fool at that, and put me down in Hollywood, then you must expect my nostalgia gland to go into overdrive.

Remembrance of things past conjured up a memory of Judy Garland, that sweetest of songstresses, in the days when songs had real melody and lyrics real meaning. Judy singing of the Wonderful World of Oz - Oz, not Auz, and therefore not to be confused with our Antipodean neighbour, but a land of dreams.

For "the yellow brick road" which the song invites us to follow, read "the Information Super Highway". For the Land of Oz, its destination, read the Multimedia Super Corridor.

And for the magical City of Oz, enticing and beckoning us, we must imagine not one but two great cities - Putra Jaya and Cyberjaya. (Malaysia has a propensity towards twins. The first, the Petronas Towers, were identical: these latest ones are fraternal).

Like Oz, they are cities of the future for when they grow up, their tallest antennae will link Malaysia to the global world of the information era.

A fantasy on my part? I might have thought so if that sober magazine, the Asia Pacific Economic Review, had not spotted the same analogy. For one moment Mirzan Mahathir threw me by asking who then was the Wicked Witch of the West. I have a few candidates in mind but respect for the law of libel is too much to name them. More importantly, who is the Wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz, who makes everything happen? No prizes for guessing this one.

Early last month Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his role as Malaysia's supersalesman, embarked on the first of no doubt many missions to sell the Corridor.

It was well stage-managed - beginning first in Los Angeles, the entertainment capital of the world, most subject to a multimedia takeover; and specifically to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) where it is claimed, in 1969, the Internet was born.

Then on to Silicon Valley, the world's role model of a super high-tech, dedicated industrial cluster predicated on electronics.

It was a gruelling schedule - the man is, of course, indefatigable - resembling nothing less than an American Presidential Tour - the "When in Rome" adage clearly applied. Eleven high octane speeches a day.

Confronting the assembled Titans of Technology - cybernauts to a man, bemused at the spectacle of a politician with such a grasp of their brave new science, right down to the prescribed jargon of "webs" "hubs" and "2.5 to 10 gigabyte digital fibre optics". The consensus - "He sure knows what he is talking about."

What was he talking about? And what prompted him? First, the recognition that the explosive growth of the Internet has brought mankind to the very threshold of cyberspace.

The most exciting development is the world of multimedia created out of the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computer technology. The Prime Minister has no intention of being left behind.

His response is the Corridor, the first of its kind anywhere in the world - a specially created environment, from a greenfield site, designed

to realise the full potential of multimedia. His precedent - the US itself. Britain produced the Industrial Revolution but "America won it" - precisely because that vast greenfield site of a country had provided the ideal environment for technology and business to flourish.

The Corridor is intended as a catalyst that will bring together world-class multimedia companies large and small, across the full industry spectrum to set up here in this country their business units, their R&D, and their hi-tech operations, along with their dependants supplying the full range of support services.

Concentrating these industry-linked activities in the one dedicated area means they can be more efficiently managed and better facilitated. It will be ecologically friendly and business welcoming.

Malaysia will provide the physical setting. Government will provide the incentives. Business will be protected by ground breaking, commerce-enabling cyberlaws, policies and regulations.

In California, the Multimedia Super Corridor became integrated with Prime Minister's overarching Vision - Malaysia's own Oz - the world of 2020.

The country's road to fully advanced status will not be traversed in steady, incremental steps. Along the way giant leaps will have to be taken. This is one of them. It will involve, inter alia, a very real technological leapfrog for we are not yet so advanced in this new multimedia dimension.

The Corridor concept is the most visionary, the most daring and the most mega of Dr Mahathir's projects to date. But it is also the most meticulously planned on a comprehensive and complex scale.

A "practical proposition" and a "careful" creation he called it. This is where we depart from any resemblance to the mythical Land of Oz. The Corridor benefits from Malaysia's highly developed and rightly acclaimed skill in planning. After all did not Time Magazine dub our Prime Minister "The Master Planner"?

It has taken two years of the most thorough study to perfect the Corridor concept. Physically it is massive - 15km by 50km, an area, there are those not slow to point out, larger than Singapore.

It will run from the KLCC to the KLIA. The nuclei of this new enterprise zone will be the twin cities, Putrajaya, the nation's future seat of Government, and administrative capital, complete with its paperless bureaucracy thanks to Information Technology; and Cyberjaya, the IT city dedicated to multimedia companies, a Mecca of science and technology.

Not only "intelligent" -cities, but going one better, "intelligent garden cities", environmentally friendly and people-friendly, seeking to ensure a quality of life for the denizens.

The MSC is to have the very best of infrastructure - another of Malaysia's specialities. Dr Mahathir suggests we incorporate a tower crane in our coat of arms.

The world's tallest towers will be linked by rapid train services and a dedicated highway to the KLIA, destined to be the region's largest airport. It is also electronically linked.

The Corridor's fibre optic "backbone" will be provided by Telekom Malaysia with its fully digital global communications capability - enough network power to support virtual boardrooms, remote CAD/CAM operations, etc. The overseas investor's first priority is a guarantee of strategic services.

This multimedia launch pad will be inhabited by the new heroes of our time. Gone are the revered cricket blues, replaced by the knowledge workers. Nor need we imagine only huge industrial complexes. Of course the big boys are welcome but so also are the small. Silicon Valley's top

companies of today started out in garages. There will be many small operations - R&D facilities, for example, manned by the intellectual few.

It is brains we seek to import. Only innovative multimedia developers need apply. Indigenous research and development is the ultimate end product.

Dr Mahathir wants the MSC to be a "global test bed" for new technologies. He himself seems to be prepared to lay aside his stethoscope for the more sophisticated tools and practice of telemedicine.

The zone will house Malaysia's own Multimedia university to grow our own talent. Every school by 2000 will be fully computerised and every Malaysian schoolchild computer-literate.

The legislative, regulatory and organisational frameworks are all in place. The Multimedia Convergence Act 1997 is designed to support companies engaged in electronic commerce. Cyberlaws are imminent, taking the process of regulatory and legislative control further than ever before tried - a brave attempt to control computer crime, illegal access, commercial espionage and theft - and positioning Malaysia as the regional leader in the protection of intellectual property. No one pretends it is easy, but there is enough good faith to raise the comfort level of would-be investors.

Driving the MSC initiative is the Multimedia Development Authority (MDC) a high-powered implementation agency, headed by Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop. The MDC is "fully empowered", given a totally free, unbureaucratic hand. Empowered for example to give instant work permits to the right knowledge workers, as distinct from the usual Immigration procedures.

They will set up the Corridor's one-stop supershop - and 10 offices worldwide. They mean business. Ten flagships applications have been spelt out to galvanise development. Othman also does a sterling job as an MSC diplomat on the platform circuit, at home and abroad.

Dr Mahathir himself clearly means business and is prepared as never before to put his money where his mouth is (incentives); and to be thoroughly businesslike (preferential status).

Just as Bumiputra status companies qualify for the latter, there is to be a special category of MSC status companies. Those of our "smart partners" who pass the stringent qualifying tests of the MDC will become a new corporate species given preferential consideration for Government projects in infrastructure.

A refreshing breath of air is coursing through the regulatory system of the MSC - no equity requirements, a hassle-free 30-day turnaround on applications, work permits almost on request, 10-year tax holidays and other fiscal incentives. Instead of traditional tenders, companies will be asked to submit "concept proposals" simplifying the whole procedure.

And finally, but most importantly, companies are given specific commitments from the Malaysian Government in a Bill of Guarantees. Another first.

At the policy level a high-powered International Advisory Panel (the IAP) has been set up by the Prime Minister to monitor the development of the Corridor and provide ongoing guidance. The 25 members read like a Who's Who of the international multimedia establishment.

It is an unusual step to involve businesses - foreign business and top global corporations at that - in the policy process. Malaysia Inc becomes Multimedia Inc.

Of course there are sceptics. Here we are, a small, allegedly Third World country confronting head-on the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computers on a global scale even as we are still attempting to provide basic telephony in our rural villages. It is a formidable leap frog.

Dr Mahathir freely acknowledged how much more advanced in the field were his audience. His message was collaboration - beyond (but including) former concepts of the transfer of technology. In the past countries competed whereby one nation's trade surplus was another nation's trade deficit - a zero sum game of winners and losers. In tomorrow's shrunken world we can ignore the lines on the map.

We will be operating in a borderless trading environment. Dr Mahathir's vision is a multicultural web of mutually dependent international and Malaysian companies collaborating to deliver new products and new services across an economically vibrant Asia and indeed the world. He is looking for "smart partnerships" and "win, win, win relationships".

Why Malaysia? It is no longer enough, declared the Prime Minister, to rely on factors of comparative advantage like natural resources, population or labour costs. The success of a country today depends on the ability to adapt to global forces. Visionary countries can create value instead of merely struggling to make the most of existing circumstances.

The MSC is a breakthrough venture which owes much to Dr Mahathir's own vision combined with Malaysia's expertise in national planning. Hard-headed businessmen solicited for their opinion gave the scheme an enthusiastic thumbs up.

There was nothing new in the multimedia of the MSC - it is the comprehensiveness and the breadth of what is being attempted that makes it unique, plus the holistic approach to the almost labyrinthine complexity of the multimedia. And therein lies the strategic challenge.

On the question, is it viable, the clear consensus rested squarely on Dr Mahathir's track record in proving his critics wrong. This supplied the indispensable confidence factor.

"Man is a tool-using animal," said Carlyle. Modern technology is a further extension of ourselves and of mankind's mastery of his environment. Even a self-confessed technical virgin like myself, thoroughly daunted by the mystique of the multimedia, can recognise that this will change the way we do business and the way we live. And that for Malaysia the MSC is a brave attempt by the tortoise to catch up with the hare, and create a better world and better living standards for our children.

But a technical virgin with a pen can still have the last word. Ultimately the multimedia age will be conquered not on technology alone but on creativity. To draw a simple analogy from my own profession, a magazine - or the New Straits Times for that matter - will distinguish itself by the quality of the writing and the ideas, rather than the speed of the printing presses.

Which leads nicely into a final tribute to our Wizard of Oz - a Prime Minister with an entrepreneurial mind set and an undisputed level of imaginative project.

Build a better mousetrap and the world will come to your door.

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