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Matching dialogue with deeds

THE pre-budget dialogue is one of the many examples of the special way business is conducted in this country, where the Government takes time to listen to the private sector and the captains of industry put together their thinking caps to help the Government come up with another good budget. With such dialogues, the private sector is given the opportunity to propose incentives, measures and strategies that they think will make the budget more pro-business. Even non-business organisations are included in this practice to ensure that the interests of consumers, the environment, the poor and the workers are taken into account when the policy-makers prepare the budget for October. That the Acting Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim finds it necessary to chair the dialogues only goes to show the importance attached by the Government on listening to the views of others.

From the first dialogue in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, it was clear that the private sector had a lot of proposals to make. More than 60 proposals were submitted, many of them on how the Government can help specific industries but just as many on how the general investment environment can be improved. The Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers asked the Government to provide seed capital to technopreneurs, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies wants quotas and deadlines on foreign labour use to be established, the Association of Merchant Banks wants a central syariah council to be set up, and the Association of Banks Malaysia has asked the Finance Ministry to liberalise immigration policies. The Malaysian Institute of Accountants, meanwhile, wants interest to be paid to overtaxed taxpayers, the Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce and Industry thinks corporate tax should be lowered to 26 per cent and the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia wants fiscal incentives for local shipping lines to enable them to offer rebates to local exporters.

Not all of these proposals will be accepted by the ministry and incorporated into the budget. Some will be relevant maybe in the years to come. Ideas that will be used by the ministry for the 1998 budget may also not be in their original forms. Whatever the outcome, the exercise of consultation and discussion at such a high level is one of the factors that have attracted foreign investors to this country, even after it had lost its edge in terms of cheap labour costs and raw materials. Through these dialogues, come policies and programmes that have taken into account views of industries. The views of the Government will also be made known to the private sector leaders at the dialogues, which help them understand better why the Government does what it does.

The Finance Ministry is not the only avenue for spokesmen of industries to channel their ideas, comments, and criticism. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Miti) and the Domestic Trade and Industry Ministry also hold annual dialogues with the private sector. There are also various committees that have private sector representatives as important partners, such as the National Labour Advisory Council and the Malaysian Business Council, which is chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Miti even formed a committee comprising mainly private sector leaders to help it draw strategies for last year's World Trade Organisation's inaugural ministerial meeting in Singapore.

Malaysian Incorporated is alive and kicking in other instances, such as

in trade delegations abroad, at international conferences and forums, in privatization exercises, and in national events such as the Langkawi International Dialogue, the Commonwealth Games, the war against dadah and efforts to preserve environment. It is important that the dialogues continue even if some ideas may take years before they are even considered or implemented by the Government. There is no fear that these dialogues will be called talk-shops because it has been proven that in these dialogues words are matched with deeds.

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