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PM clicks a coup with cyber giants

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THE who's who in the International Advisory Panel that will help steer and determine the destiny of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor could provoke vicious catfights, digital Cold War and perhaps a den of spitting cobras.

Well, almost. For included in the IAP are multi-billionaires and multi-millionaires who rule the world's computer desktop and databases - visionaries with a penchant of rolling the dice and determining the numbers, and sages with a steely grip on the flow of cyber information.

But some of these extremely wealthy personalities are also sworn enemies with each other, prepared to fight and wipe out their rivals in the global market to win the ultimate prize - control of the Internet and become the Overlord of the Information Age.

Take a look at the IAP make-up, especially the key personalities who are also among the most aggressive, and it is easy to understand the fire-brand quality of its make-up.

And astoundingly, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as the force behind the MSC, pulled off the coup of getting these clashing technological giants sit at the same table to discuss ways to reap digital profits in Malaysia.

Larry Ellison, the CEO of database king Oracle Corp and a maverick conceptualiser of the both intriguing and the maligned network computer, has an enthusiastic cheerleader in Scott McNealy, Sun Microsystems CEO.

McNealy's company, of course, wrote the cross-platform programming language Java, which is on its way to literally dictate the way World Wide Web pages are designed and presented.

Sun Microsystems had begun shipping the JavaStation, a bare-bones network computer that taps into the Internet for applications and avoid being bundled into a bloated Windows operating system now dominated by Microsoft Corp.

Ellison and McNealy also forged a strategic alliance with Netscape Communications which, under its visionary founder and chairman Jim Clark, technical boy wonder Marc Andreessen and the shrewd organisation of its CEO Jim Barksdale, wound up Netscape Navigator, a near-monopolistic web browser, to 45 million PCs.

Ellison, McNealy and Barksdale, also members of the IAP, share a common loathing - Microsoft chairman and CEO William Henry Gates III, another IAP fellow, and the richest man on Earth with a net worth of US\$23 billion (RM56 billion).

Dislike is an understatement: they collectively and passionately hate Gates' guts.

"There are two camps," McNealy said in a Dec 2, 1996 Newsweek piece, "those in Redmond (Microsoft's headquarters), who live on the Death Star, and the rest of us, the rebel forces."

McNealy's deadpan use of the Star Wars metaphor of good and evil (the evil being Microsoft), is echoed bluntly by Ellison.

"Everybody hates Microsoft!" Ellison growled in the same Newsweek piece.

IBM Corp, another IAP panelist, would think so too. IBM was working closely with Microsoft in the 80s to develop OS/2, a new computer operating system, until Microsoft, armed with inside knowledge of OS/2, released Windows 3.0 in 1990 to completely upstaged OS/2.

"Whether they were just playing on the gullibility of the industry, or

whether they positioned it that way, they told the world they were going to OS/2, when they were really headed to Windows," former IBM chief strategist James Cannavino was quoted as saying. "You can question whether that is ethical behaviour."

Gates is both riled and unperturbed by these sentiments, even as Netscape Communications, troubled by the way Microsoft reinvented itself to be hardcore on the Internet via the Internet Explorer browser, yelled "Murderer! Monopolist!" as it got US anti-trust authorities to probe the software giant's marketing tactics.

Part of the loathing comes from Microsoft's hardball ways. Listen to Microsoft executive vice-president Steve Ballmer's rants on Netscape and other Microsoft rivals and you will understand why.

Being the enforcer of the Microsoft vision - a computer in every desk and Microsoft systems running it - Ballmer is a kind of Dirty Harry who kicks butts to get things going the Microsoft way.

"Prepubescent adolescents ... immature!" Ballmer ranted in a Forbes magazine interview. On the Oracle-Sun concept of network computer, he jeered: "They haven't got a clue what customers want!"

Little wonder that if Gates and Ballmer get in the ring with Ellison, McNealy and Barksdale, it becomes a fight-to-death of angry, spitting cobras.

And yet, these people have been brought together in a seemingly impossible circumstance by Dr Mahathir.

But Malaysians, and probably now the world, have learnt never ever underestimate the charismatically persuasive powers of Dr Mahathir. Time magazine did not call him Master Planner for nothing, especially now that he has pulled off this coup.

Dr Mahathir knew the potential for dangerous friction by the presence of these billionaires when he convinced them to take part in the IAP.

When he got Gates to take part, that sealed the success of the IAP for in Gates lies the digital Pied Piper who attracts allies and foes alike to enter a firepit and do the jig on its smouldering coals.

The fact that Gates committed himself to the MSC kindled these other giants to join the fray, if not to tap into the great fortune to be made, at least to check Gates and Microsoft's disturbingly growing dominance of cyberspace.

And that was why Dr Mahathir confidently quashed suggestions that the IAP may be unable to get going, judging by the clashes between Gates and Ellison, McNealy and Barksdale.

And that was also why he exclaimed that the MSC will be a success. "...I feel we are in safe waters," he told a Press conference after the inaugural meeting of the IAP in Stanford University in San Francisco on Friday.

"Besides, we are in very safe hands," the Prime Minister said as he gestured his hands to the likes of Ellison, McNealy, Barksdale who were present.

Gates was not there, primarily busy with the launching of Microsoft Office 97, the company's latest update of the popular office suite applications.

There was one baffling exclusion: Andrew Grove, Intel Corp CEO. Intel is the world's largest computer chip maker and has an extremely strong presence in Malaysia.

With Intel chips and Microsoft's Windows operating systems, the so-called Win-Tel combination controls the operation of at least 85 per cent of the world's PCs. Perhaps, Grove may be roped in later.

The MSC will also do good to consider the possibility of roping in other Silicon Valley sages - Jim Clark, Netscape founder and Andreesen and even

the ballistic Steve Ballmer.

And while we are at it, why not rope in another visionary, Nicholas Negroponte, the author of that groundbreaking book Being Digital.

Negroponte is very much aware of the MSC. He has been to Malaysia several times to talk about the digital future and, as director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, he would be a natural fit into the IAP.

But it will be a mouth watering prospect if the MSC were to convince Apple co-founder and now chairman of Pixar, Steve Jobs, to also join.

Jobs' company NeXT Software was bought over by Apple as part of the latter's strategy to overhaul the ageing MAC operating system. And help from the man they unceremoniously booted out in 1985. For Jobs, revenge must be sweet.

While Jobs made the phrase "insanely good" famous was out in the cold for too long, it was his vision for Apple that blazed the path for the PC to change the way we do and look at things.

In the end, what is the prospect of the MSC? As far as Dr Mahathir is concerned, it will be a success. The distinguished IAP members agree wholeheartedly.

But more importantly is the endorsement of Sun Microsystems chief scientist John Cage who enthused that Malaysia - scarcely larger than New Mexico - is a true "model Internet country" as it strives to be a truly wired country.

Coming from Cage, that should help seal the positive fate of the Multimedia Super Corridor, notwithstanding the vicious catfights of some of its extremely powerful members.

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