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Dougan's main interest - people

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AMBASSADOR Diana Lady Dougan steps up to the podium and addresses a packed auditorium of state government officials and corporate big wigs in Kuching. Her topic - the global information infrastructure.

She humanises the rather dry and technical subject by talking about how it will affect people.

During one anecdote she mentions that she first came to Asia in 1950.

The audience gasps in surprise and one bank manager leans over to his neighbour and asks, "Just how old is she?"

His surprise is understandable as from afar, there is something indefinably youthful and energetic about Dougan, especially in the way she moves and the way she speaks.

Later in an interview with Business Times, which she graciously squeezed out of her very tight schedule, Dougan shared some of her thoughts on life, technology, the universe and of course what seems to be her main interest in life - people.

Her driving force in life has been to help write policies that create individual choice and opportunity, whether it be for entrepreneurship or creativity.

Having spent many of her formative years in Asia, as her father was an economic adviser to the South Korean Government both before and after the Korean war, she feels a special connection to this part of the world.

"I'm really more comfortable in Asia than in Europe," she admitted.

In fact, she is the governing board co-chair of the Centre of Information Infrastructure and Economic Development, based in Beijing, under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, probably one of the very few Americans trusted enough to hold a high-level position in a think-tank in that country.

She is also the only non-corporate person (as well as the only woman) to be invited by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to be on the International Advisory Panel (IAP) of the Multimedia Super Corridor.

She has served in presidential appointments in the Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations and spearheaded some major initiatives.

One of the most well-known of these initiatives would probably be the Global Information Infrastructure Commission which is dedicated to strengthening global private sector leadership in policy reform as well as globalised applications in telecommunications, broadcast and information-technology-based services.

Dougan now serves as Senior Adviser and International Communications Studies Chair at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, based in Washington.

At 23, she was Time Inc's youngest executive and first CATV marketing director. Time Inc is the famous publisher of popular magazines Time, Life, Sports Illustrated and Fortune.

However, she waved aside her claim to fame on that account.

"Part of the reason I ended up being the youngest executive in the company was that at that time, Time was primarily focused on publishing. It thought that the most important thing was printed magazines, not television, not cable television."

As she was in the broadcasting division, which was not a priority at that time, she was given a free hand and the opportunity to try things which "...if they thought were so important, they would probably never

have let someone so young do them".

"It was new and unproven and that was the reason I ended up in that position."

So she was at three and 20, challenging the norm and the boring establishment activities, as she is today, more than three decades later. Since then she has had a very rich and varied career, spanning the world, and across many different industries.

One notable accomplishment was producing the award-winning PBS Christmas Special, "the Nutcracker" and MX Debate with Bill Moyers, which won the Peabody Award for "excellence in broadcast journalism" in 1981.

But while technology seems to have been the mainstay of her life, she is not so interested in technologies by themselves, but, as she said, how they can be used to help people and make the world a better place.

"I have a special interest in Asia and I have a special interest in development that helps empower people and choice," she said.

On Malaysia specifically, she had this to say, "I think you have a lot of vibrancy and a really wonderful blend of different cultures. I am not naive, I know that blend can also be conflicting, but if you deal with the conflict and the 'differentness', even of minorities and let them take advantage of their strengths, Malaysia will have a very good future."

Dougan, who has authored, or served as executive editor of over 30 publications on cutting edge technologies and policy challenges, pointed out that one of the wonderful things about technology is that there is no single perfect design or single right answer.

"People can develop their own answers for their situation, their culture and their circumstances.

"One of the great surprises is that with all this access and ability to move information, it is not controlled by governments or big institutions. It has become a resource for people rather than a tool for control.

"And I want to keep it that way," she said emphatically.

Dougan, describes the Internet as the quintessential America in that it is very non-hierarchical, nobody controls it, nobody owns it and it is a resource that different people can use in different ways.

"So much of the world has the temptation to control rather than utilise. And although the initial funding for the Internet came from the Government, academic and defence communities, it was designed so that nobody could control it.

Although she has served under three different administrations, Dougan does not consider herself particularly political.

"I am not political and it is quite unusual to be appointed to presidential appointments with Senate confirmation by presidents of different parties.

"My appointments were not for political reasons but because of my activities and very long-term experience and involvement in the areas I was asked to take on.

"To some extent, it was probably most interesting and rewarding working for the Reagan Administration because there was a very clear, broad agenda to reinforce the role of the private sector and competition in telecommunications and information technologies.

"No government is really rich enough to afford to pay for these things themselves and no government can do as well as industry in providing things that require innovation, flexibility and creativity which are the strengths of information technologies and services," she said.

And with all these commitments, how has she found time for family?

"Well, sometimes when you know that you don't have all the time in the world, you respect it more. You make time and you use the time you have more effectively.

"I have two children. My daughter is at university and my son has finished university. My husband is an economist but he has an interest in educational kinds of things like I do.

"Our family always manages to spend some concentrated time together but it takes work. I have been very blessed in having wonderful children and a wonderful husband. We like one another as well as love one another."

And finally, the mystery behind her rather enigmatic name which has got everyone wondering how an American can be a member of the British nobility.

"My maiden name is Lady and it is an old Scottish name. People knew me by my maiden name for many years before I got married because I started working professionally at a very young age.

"So when I would introduce myself as Diana Dougan, they would say, but aren't you Diana Lady? I wanted to take my husband's name but people knew me by my own name and that is how it got stuck to me and wouldn't go away.

"Even Dr Mahathir calls me Lady Diana most of the time," she added with a laugh.

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