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Open letter to Sukom visitors

Paddy Bowie

ALLOW me to join other Malaysians and thank you for supporting the 16th Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur.

It seems a little late to be welcoming you when others more worthy have already done so, and rather superfluous after the formal reception at the impressive opening ceremony of the Games.

However, I have another special reason to be heartened when I see so many foreign visitors descending on Malaysia. In my own travels in recent months, I've been amazed and dismayed at the impression people abroad have of our country.

We seem to be hostage to the distant view of Malaysia. With every kilometre one travels away from it, the greater the number of distortions, helped by the jaundiced eye and vitriolic pen of the media.

A healthy dose of reality would be welcome. I also confess to an ulterior motive, which will become clear as this letter develops.

First, let me hazard a guess. Things are perhaps not quite what you had been led to expect. We can even surmise that a few pleasant surprises awaited you. No haze, for one thing, but clear blue skies.

It's been like this for most of the year. Yet only a few months ago a man alighted from his plane wearing a gas mask. He was not the first to have been duped by misleading reports.

Last November, someone from abroad called and requested a meeting be moved from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. The reason: "That terrible haze you've got".

"You mean Singapore hasn't?"

"Oh no, the papers say nothing about smog in Singapore."

Resisting the temptation to direct the caller to her atlas, which would have shown our island neighbour directly in the path of the forest fires, we merely sent the Air Pollution Index reading for the preceding three days.

"Thank you for your smug fax" was what we got in reply.

"It's all a matter of image."

For those who travelled here by air, you must have been dreading your arrival at the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport, based on the stories you read about it.

I'll lay bets it took you no more than 30 minutes from touchdown to limousine; 30 minutes of not only efficiency but aesthetic delight as you passed beneath that magnificent vaulted ceiling.

Once outside, I hope you spared a backward look at the unique silhouette. By some miracle of design, the KLIA achieves state-of-the-art functionality without forsaking the grace and beauty of Malaysia's distinct architectural heritage.

It would come as no surprise, therefore, to behold the National Sports Games complex at Bukit Jalil. Enough, even at first glance, to silence sceptics and all those who sought to fill us with foreboding that the infrastructure would not be ready or would not meet the stringent standards of an international event.

The Australian swimming coach said that the facilities rival the best he has even seen, exceeding even Atlanta Olympic Games.

Perhaps by now this will have prompted thoughts that all you had read or heard before coming here about Malaysia's mega projects was an exaggeration.

Those "monuments to self esteem", those "grandiose infrastructure follies" are productive buildings, commerce-enabling and life-enhancing. If you still remain to be convinced, I recommend to you the Petronas Twin Towers, not because they are the tallest buildings in the world, but because they take architecture to new frontiers of design.

It's preferable to see it at night. Illuminated, it has a fairy-tale, almost ethereal quality. This has not escaped the notice of Hollywood. The towers will appear in Sean Connery's next movie, Entrapment.

For some, there can be no greater accolade. However, full marks go to whoever has begun to recognise the scenic potential of Malaysia for the world film industry.

Now, my ulterior motive and some points I wish to make.

This country faces a severe image crisis, a perception gap abroad that does us less than justice and erodes investor confidence.

All the protests we may make are of no avail. The best we can hope for is that good people like you come here and see for yourselves what this country is like.

It may then be possible to substitute an inside-out view for the all too often erroneous outside-in perspective.

It is not, however, as simple as it sounds. Today, we are confronted with a formidable external force: the power of the media and the power of prejudice.

Even the most well-disposed, open and fair-minded can easily be intellectually hijacked. The best chance of being rescued, of being able to refute the misconceptions, is with facts, and what better way to test out some of those facts than while you are here.

Start with something that will have a comforting familiarity: the post boxes are red, cars drive on the left side of the road and English is spoken, all the hallmarks of a Commonwealth country.

By the same token you will recognise the institutional framework we all share as part of the English legacy: democracy, for instance.

Despite the allegations that would make us out to be some kind of dictatorship, Malaysia practises parliamentary democracy on the Westminster model. Elections must be held every five years. There is no pro-democracy movement to instigate a civil uprising, nor is there any need.

Coup d'`tats are unknown. Neither is there a military government, nor a civil government with the army looking over its shoulder. Our armed forces are loyalist, pro-establishment and apolitical.

Contrary to what you may have been told, this is a populist Government, the same Government voted into power ever since Independence in 1957, and with never less than a two-thirds majority.

This is the unique political stability on which this society rests and which is the ace in our pack in tackling the economic downturn. Also, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad holds the trump card in tackling the downturn.

Dr Mahathir has become the longest-serving leader in the region as others succumbed to the downturn. The same political continuity, moreover, confers a similar degree of policy continuity, enabling that same leader to plant his flag on the 21st century and decree a developed-nation status for Malaysia by the year 2020.

At 73, he may not be around by then, but he knows he can count on his Government still being in office.

It is a predictability that allows for long-term strategy any corporate planner would envy. While other governments are uncertain of their tenure in office, Malaysia can work to a 30-year perspective with no changes of Government.

The other British legacy most of you are familiar with is the judicial system and the Rule of Law, under siege now from rumour-mongers. Malaysians are more than ever today looking to this system and relying on justice being done.

We also hear a lot about free speech. Among our visitors are scores of foreign correspondents covering the Games but with an eye for anything of news value. They are allowed to come and go without hindrance to pursue their stories.

The word "independence" has a special meaning for all Commonwealth countries. Malaysia, for instance, did a bold move by imposing currency controls earlier this month. It could do so because it is a free agent and not tied to the International Monetary Fund. This financial independence allows for more experimentation and creativity.

The step Malaysia has taken is bound to be controversial, but it is a brave initiative and one that exercises our independence and the nationalism that goes with it. It is in the spirit of doing the best for the people.

The visitors, I'm sure, were impressed at the tremendous response during the opening ceremony of the Games in the 100,000-capacity stadium.

Then, there's economic stability. No one underestimates the grave situation we are in, but we have faith that the Government's economic strategy will bring recovery.

There is a high level of motivation and a growing national resolve. You saw it during the opening ceremony. It was an enthusiastic crowd. The loudest cheers predictably were for the home nation, and for the home leader. Athletes will know that sound: the full-throated roar reserved for the greatest moments.

The ovation that night was given to an unobtrusive figure in a blue suit. You might not have noticed but for the response of the crowd.

Dr Mahathir did not thrust himself forward. He did not demand salutations, and he did not address the crowd.

The loudest voice came from Jeneral (R) Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali, who gave the welcoming speech.

The Prime Minister was visibly moved. He let the spotlight shine on others. Athletes know that the Prime Minister has found time to visit the Games all week to provide encouragement.

Much has been said about him, mainly by people who have never spoken to him or been near to him.

But most Malaysians view Dr Mahathir as man who will fight to save his country. God willing!

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