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Openness on MSC issues welcomed: Dougan

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THE Multimedia Super Corridor's International Advisory Panel is impressed with the general willingness to discuss the shortcomings of the project, and not just be given a recital of its virtues.

IAP member Ambassador Diana Lady Dougan, addressing a group of high-level Sarawak government officials in Kuching at a recent dialogue session on the global information infrastructure, said that this openness has made "...what is good more believable."

Dougan, the founder of the Global Information Infrastructure Commission, said among the most fruitful aspects of the IAP meetings were the discussions with young high-tech companies which are among the initial group of MSC-status holders.

"In their presentations, they talked about both what is going well and what is not... I think every single CEO in the room was impressed with this," she said.

Dougan, who is the International Communications Studies Chair for the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies and co-chair of the Center for Information Infrastructure and Economic Development based in China, was speaking during a stopover in Kuching, after attending the IAP meeting in Kuala Lumpur last month.

For example, she said, one of the MSC entrepreneurs had indicated to her before his presentation that he was focusing on only the positive aspects of his experience as one of the early companies to be licensed in the MSC.

"However MSC executive chairman Dr Othman (Yeop) on hearing this, urged the company to include in its presentation the problems encountered as well," Dougan said.

She noted that this openness was also apparent in last year's inaugural IAP meeting at the Stanford University where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a presentation on the MSC project.

In addition to speaking about his vision and plans, he discussed problem areas, including corruption.

"Most of us on the IAP have seen plenty of fancy slides and slick videos designed to attract support for grand initiatives, but the fact that Dr Mahathir was willing to be candid and even presented a slide on where Malaysia had been ranked in terms of corruption relative to other Asian countries impressed us a lot.

"After all, a willingness to acknowledge problems is the first step towards solving them," she said.

Dougan added that the establishment of an independent, transparent and not overly codified legal framework and a commitment to the free flow of information will be crucial to the success of the MSC.

Known for her candour as well, she is a strong advocate of moves to include small- and medium-size companies in the MSC.

"While major multinational companies are important, they as well as the MSC, will benefit from the presence of bright entrepreneurs and small companies willing to be flexible and to take the necessary risks to follow through on new and innovative ideas.

"They continue to be the mainstay of Silicon Valley's success ... needless to say, I was pleased to see that they are now included in the MSC," she said.

To a question from a participant whether a young democracy like

Malaysia's could withstand the onslaught of potentially subversive information from abroad arising from the rapid advances in information and telecommunications technology, she replied:

"Young and old democracies all need the same qualities.

"They flourish from access to ideas and information.

"People know when they are having restrictions on information or when their government is being too controlling.

"They may not know as much as they should or would like to but the more they think they are having things held back from them, the less likely they will trust, much less be motivated to be strong and self-sufficient citizens," she said.

Dougan added that striking an appropriate balance between the rights and responsibilities of individuals and those of the government is not easy in any country.

"In the US, we have constant debates about when the government is, or should be, part of the solution and when it is a major part of the problem," she said.

Having spent many years in government (including appointments in the administrations of presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan) as well as in industry, she said:

"I was continually asked to intervene or develop policies to address problems as they arose in my areas of responsibility.

"But even if I agreed it was a serious problem and even if I thought I knew the answer I would stop and ask myself, 'should I as a government official be even getting into the middle of this?'

"From my experience, I have found that governments are very good at articulating visions and goals, but they aren't good at providing the creativity, flexibility and risk-taking spirit required to turn them into sustainable realities," she said.

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