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Australia must know its place

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HOW dare Australian Prime Minister John Howard say we are "an undemocratic nation". Malaysians are deeply saddened by the offending remark and by the various comments by Australia's prejudiced media. Sadly, time and again the arrogance of a few Down Under has caused an unnecessary spat accompanied by residual bad feelings in what is otherwise a "comfortable and improving bilateral relations."

During his presidency, Richard Nixon opened the door to China, ended the United States' painful war in Vietnam and generally squared-off with Russian leaders. Howard should learn from Nixon.

The Aussie leader has much to learn about handling relations with Asean leaders, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in particular. For Howard to claim that Australia's relations with Malaysia are "deep and close" is not only inaccurate it also shows this "likeable bloke whom Australians do not respect" is naive.

Australia should - no problem with Kuala Lumpur - focus its attention to mending fences with Indonesia. Howard's dream of assuming the role of US Marshall in Southeast Asia, I do not believe, makes anyone lose sleep.

It will take time getting over the spat in Malaysia-Australia relations as good bilateral relationship is a two-way street. It can and must be improved only through a sustainable co-operation, goodwill and friendship. The ball is at Howard's feet. He can choose to kick it into the goal, dribble it aimlessly or shoot into the crowd. If he wants to stop further spat he can then remain silent and prove that he has erred in taking the sacked and jailed Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's side against Dr Mahathir and his government.

Howard must resist the temptation to behave as if Australia were a big power, it's anything but.

* Howard must also fight the desire to export his Aussie values to Asean for each of the 10-member nations has its own values and civilisation; longer and well-entrenched compared to Australia's.

He made many anti-Asian remarks when he was in the opposition, regarding them as lesser Australians than white Australians. As Prime Minister he has kept his deep-seated feelings close to his chest. His anti-Asian remarks now haunt him as he travels in Asia.

It is true he is received in several places (not in Malaysia), but not embraced.

Howard, like Western Liberals, spends too much time hand-wringing over developing countries and far too little time trying to understand them.