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Australia-Malaysia

AUSTRALIAN OFFICIAL WORRIES OVER POLITICAL CHASM WITH MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR, June 21 (Bernama) - The new secretary to the cabinet of Prime Minister John Howard, Paul McClintock, is concerned over the political rift between Howard and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and is seeking ways to mend the ties between them.

He told a meeting with Malaysian newsmen here today that he was deeply concerned over the differences between the two political leaders and among his main tasks in his new job was to bring the political relations to the same level as the other ties.

Describing the long-standing relations between Malaysia and Australia as special and deep on the ground level, he said they counted "education" as a core of that relationship which was not reflected at the political level for the last decade or so.

McClintock, a businessman who will assume office next month, is here for a week-long visit to wrap up his 15 years of business involvement in Malaysia. He is chairman of Ashton Mining, a major diamond mining company in which the Malaysian Mining Corporation (MMC) has a substantial stake, and a past president of the Australia-Malaysia Business Council.

According to a brief issued by the Australian High Commission here, he and his father, Sir Eric McClintock, had been active promoting close business and people-to-people ties between the two countries for many years.

"The strong trade and investment ties between our two countries owe much to their efforts and connections in both countries," said the brief.

McClintock said Howard expected him to bring his contacts into his job and among other things, to seek ways to mend the political divide between the two countries.

He said he found Howard to be "more Asian", more courteous and more open and constructive than the previous leaders.

Yet he (Howard) was accused of not being "Asian" when he was prevented from playing a more wider and active role in Asia, he said.

McClintock said Australia, which faced similar issues and problems over the question of globalisation as Malaysia, had been wrongly "lumped" with the "big guys".

"We are equally trying to find our place (in globalisation) and we are grappling with similar issues," he said.

He also said that "anything that stops us from working closely with Asia, is of great concern to us."

McClintock said he has no programme to bring about closer ties between the two leaders but he would like to see more exchanges of visits between the cabinet ministers of the two countries for a start.

Australian High Commissioner Peter Varghese, who was present, said there was a need for them to explain their interest and position in the region.

McClintock said he saw no reason why Australia should be differentiated from Asia, like being excluded from Dr Mahathir's proposed East Asian caucus.

-- BERNAMA

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