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One man's educational dream become reality

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DATUK Patinggi Tan Sri Taib Mahmud has a dream. But the Sarawak Chief Minister is too modest to say it. It is left to his "co-activists" to say it for him.

The dream is to build international understanding through education. The seeds of that dream were planted 40 years ago when, as a student of law in Adelaide University on a scholarship under the Colombo Plan, he was touched by the cross-cultural experience in the most personal way imaginable.

Since then, the lawyer, who became nation-builder, has set out to build on that experience. In Melbourne and Adelaide this month, Taib took two leaps towards realising that dream.

In Melbourne, he took significant steps towards the incorporation of a company to formalise the advancement of his dream. Taib is one of its founding directors, with Datuk Lee Yee Cheong, Michael Abbott and John Button, a Minister in the Keating Government.

In Adelaide, Taib witnessed the birth of an organisation that would nurture that dream in Australia.

"I have fond memories (of Australia)," Taib says. "I visit every so often ... (Adelaide) is like a second home to me."

Adelaide is where the lawyer-to-be met his wife-to-be, Laila, daughter of an immigrant Polish-Muslim family.

It's where the seeds of internationalisation were planted in a nationalist politician-to-be in ways that saw no conflict between the global and the local.

The interaction has been the inspiration of Taib's dream. That dream took the first steps to realisation seven years ago with the establishment of the Malaysia-Australia Foundation in Kuala Lumpur.

Driving that dream forward were then Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia John Dauth and Lee, another beneficiary of the Colombo Plan.

The aim was to build on the people-to-people links that existed between Australia and Malaysia, which, as Dauth acknowledged at the time, were unparalleled as far as Australia's relations with any other country were concerned.

To a large extent, that people link grew out of the Colombo Plan development aid programme of the 1950s through to 1979.

Indeed, Colombo Plan alumni rallied round the MAF, which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched in 1994.

Taib was the founding chairman, with entrepreneur Ananda Krishnan as deputy.

Colombo Plan scholars on the 15-member MAF board of directors today include Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, a former Finance Minister and now executive director of the National Economic Action Council, and Sarawak State Minister Datuk Adenan Satem.

Lee remains a director, as are other scholars - architect Hijjas Kasturi and engineer Chong Chow Pang.

A primary activity of the foundation is to sponsor Australians to study in Malaysia, in a "reciprocating gesture towards Australia for the opportunities in education offered to Malaysians over the years".

To be effective, the MAF had to have a counterpart organisation in Australia. The foundation's promotion of such an objective led to then Prime Minister Paul Keating launching the Melbourne-based Australia-

Malaysia Society in 1995.

The education focus of the MAF spawned the Malaysian-Australian Universities Alumni Convention, held in Kuala Lumpur in 1996.

That expanded to become the Australian Universities International Alumni Convention (AUIAC), biennial conventions to be held alternately in Malaysia and Australia.

The first was held in Adelaide in 1998, followed by the second in Kuching last year. The next convention will be in Melbourne from Sept 5-7 next year.

Taib is co-patron-in-chief of the AUIAC with Australian Governor-General Peter Hollingworth.

While the initiative inspired the establishment of the Malaysian-Australian Alumni Council (MAAC) in Kuala Lumpur, interest waned in the Australia-Malaysia Society.

Taib was not to be thwarted. He called on his Adelaide network. Queen's counsel Michael Abbott had chaired the AUIAC in Adelaide. Abbott took on Taib's challenge.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer launched the Australia-Malaysia Foundation in Adelaide on Dec 5.

Taib was at the launch, with Lee and Chong, and another Colombo Plan scholar, Sarawak business consultant Dr Philip Ting, who is also on the MAF board.

Also present was a fourth MAF director, James Leong, president of the MAAC. The AMF is chaired by Sir Eric Neal, former Governor of South Australia. Neal took over from investment banker Sir Eric McClintock, 83, a long-time friend of Malaysia's and chairman of Malaysia Mining Australia Pty Ltd.

McClintock remains a director of AMF. His son Paul, 52, now Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of the Cabinet Policy Unit in Canberra, had been president of the Australia-Malaysia Business Council from 1994 to 1999.

At the AMF launch, Taib launched a book on the Colombo Plan compiled by AMF executive officer Geoffrey Sauer.

Taib also announced the establishment of a "reverse Colombo Plan" scholarship programme, an initiative of the MAAC to promote a two-way exchange of students between Australia and Malaysia.

Taib's Melbourne mission to incorporate a company would perpetuate the biennial convention of international alumni of Australian universities.

With the Australian Universities International Alumni Convention Pty Ltd, Taib's dream would truly go international.

He gushes enthusiasm that an initiative for Malaysians to maintain links with their Australian universities' alumni has captivated the interest of others in the region.

"Now we have alumni in Indonesia and Hong Kong wanting to host conventions."

There are prospects, too, for commercial spin-offs in the provision of education.

Taib thinks immediately of China.

But for Taib, the MAF's proudest achievement is in the establishment of the so-called "reverse Colombo Plan" scholarships, for which 20 institutions of higher learning in Australia and Malaysia have signed up.

It will, indeed, fulfil one of the foundation's original charter, to reciprocate the opportunities in education Australia has offered to Malaysians through the Colombo Plan.