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Now, let's not take it for granted

By Munir Majid

A SPECIAL relationship, it used to be assumed. When former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave it a huge body blow with the "Buy British Last" policy, it sent the then British leader Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher scampering across the globe to pronounce in Kuala Lumpur in 1985 the importance of the relationship between the two countries.

I remember the time only too well. I recall that meeting of the great and the good organised at INTAN where Thatcher waxed lyrical about the special relationship. I had asked her, if it was so special, why was it she was only the first British Prime Minister to visit Malaysia since Independence in 1957, and that too goaded by the irrepressible Dr Mahathir.

This angered her, of course, and at the tea afterwards, she just about stopped short of hitting me with that famous handbag.

Anyway, "Buy British Last" did not last, as many efforts and initiatives were made to repair the Anglo-Malaysian relationship. The efforts, as new High Commissioner, of the late Sir David Gilmor, after his blundering predecessor, were classy and professional. He went on to become a highly successful Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office but, sadly, died shortly after retirement.

This week in London, I was reminiscing over this period at a luncheon for British and Malaysian businessmen, with the former Governor of the Bank of England, Lord Richardson, now 92 he tells me, who, together with our own late Tun Ismail Ali, were among those who made various efforts to repair relations between the two countries, notably the setting up of the British-Malaysia Society, which was followed by the establishment of the British-Malaysia and Malaysia-British Business Council.

The luncheon took place last Wednesday after an address to the UK Business community by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

In a rather well-constructed speech, he pointed to the need to revisit and revitalise the long-standing relationship between the two countries. There was absolutely no threat this time, as relations are very good but, as Najib noted, Britain was falling behind a number of other countries in investment and trade with Malaysia.

Britain was failing to take advantage both of the fount of goodwill that exists for the UK among many Malaysian leaders, businessmen and intellectuals but, perhaps more importantly, it was missing out on the huge economic potential in Asia and Asean, where Malaysia, with its many comparative advantages, could be its anchor and nerve-centre.

The fount of goodwill will in time be depleted, not least because the number of Malaysians attending university in the UK has come down to 10,000 from a high of 30,000. The cultural and personal relationships would then not be as available to develop economic associations for mutual benefit.

For instance, there is tremendous potential for Britain to forge a symbiotic relationship with Malaysia in areas our country is emphasising, like Islamic banking and finance.

London, after all, is actually the largest market in the world for Islamic capital market products, with some investment houses expert at it. Bursa Malaysia and the London Stock Exchange could work together to cross-sell products in markets in two different zones.

The investment houses in London could also train young Malaysians in

the development, issuance and trading of such products, who would then be able to present a marketing face that could only enlarge it.

To take another example - and this is something Najib underlined - more British universities should get established in Malaysia to tap the potential of Asian human capital development. Malaysia has all the advantages of cost, language capabilities and cultural familiarity, with Britain and the rest of Asia, to make it a worthwhile enterprise and, indeed, also to bring British students to study in our country, to prepare them for a future that will be dominated by Asian economic growth.

Providing leadership

The Prime Minister has visited Britain twice since becoming leader, and now his deputy is following, but the British Prime Minister has not visited Malaysia, and Tony Blair has been leader for over seven years now.

He has been busy, of course, being bambi on the world stage with George Bush, not to mention trying to address the many political and social problems that seem always to dog him - and a general election is widely expected to be held in May.

So it is unlikely that a British Prime Minister will be visiting our country in the near future.

But the more important point is that a British Prime Minister should provide the political leadership to show that a certain market or area is of strategic economic, and consequently future political, significance. This the British political leadership has not done.

The Malaysian political leadership, on the other hand, has done more than its share to show the importance it attaches to the relationship with Britain. But, as the Malay saying goes, bertepuk sebelah tangan takkan berbunyi.

Perhaps the Malaysian business and intellectual community could do more to rouse their British counterparts - and themselves in some instances - from the rather somnambulistic and sentimental conduct that informs their relationship with one another.

It would be a good idea, to use the Deputy Prime Minister's words, to also revisit and revitalise the British-Malaysia Society and the two Business Councils set up many years ago.

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