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Working together in high technology

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MELVYN L. MacDonald, the Canadian High Commissioner to Malaysia, does not expect his tour of duty in Malaysia to be easy, and for good reason. It is not every newlyappointed envoy who has to contend with providing feedback to his Government on the early days of a new Prime Minister in his host country or the implications of the general election around the corner.

Or, even more coincidentally, providing answers on the impending election of the Prime Minister in his home country and the general election expected in the new year.

Brimming with barely-contained excitement at the prospects of being tied up at work for the best part of the next six months, he cannot wait for the action to enter its next phase.

"There is lots that needs to be done in areas that we can work on together. The obvious priority is commercial and economic relations where Malaysia remains Canada's largest export market in Asean.

"Given the similarities between our countries, we can work together in high technology. This is going to be a continuing priority. We are also looking at expanding the two-way flow of investment," he said in a recent interview at his 17th floor office at Wisma Tan and Tan.

MacDonald is excited with the proposed establishment of a branch of the Canadian Export Development Corporation at the High Commission in January which will hopefully transform Malaysia into a gateway for a larger Canadian presence in Asean nations.

In this, Canada will join numerous other nations around the globe which have identified Malaysia as the gateway to the greater Asean region in terms of trade and investment.

The reasons are obvious: a stable political climate, a solid economic background, excellent infrastructure and the wide use of English by Malaysians.

"This is a very important move as it signals the establishment of the Canadian export financing organisation in Southeast Asia and the turning of Kuala Lumpur into the hub of its activities in the region.

In this, he expects the Malaysia-Canada Business Council to play an important role by educating and informing members, and the larger business community, of opportunities available for two-way trade and investment.

The MCBC has about 250 members of whom about 80 per cent are Malaysian and the rest Canadian.

There are many Malaysian members in joint ventures, using Canadian technology, or having some other connection to Canada. Large Canadian companies include Talisman Energy, Alcom, Teknion, Teleglobe, Scotiabank, SNC Lavalin, Bombardier, Nortel Networks."

His other priorities are to increase the number of Malaysian students in Canada and boost the two-way flow of tourists both of which have suffered as a result of the issue of terrorism and its implications and a lesser degree the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

MacDonald wants to win back Malaysian students who are going elsewhere because of lower tuition costs and type of courses. He admits that Canada has lost its competitive advantage in this area and needs to urgently address the problem or risk seeing its role as an international education hub further diminished over the years.

Like Malaysia, Canada realises that tourism is the lifeblood of any growing economy and cannot be ignored by politicians, bureaucrats or heads

of missions.

He says 15,000 to 17,000 Malaysian tourists visit Canada annually.

"Because of the difficult year experienced in the tourism industry worldwide, realistically these numbers cannot be expected to increase in 2003 and more likely will decline. One can only hope that they will bounce back in 2004."

While the outlook appears rosy for the best part, there are still areas of bilateral co-operation that are mired in difficulties.

For one, MacDonald can be expected to walk a thin line in the very near future with Canadian Prime Minister-in-waiting Paul Martin's statement that better relations with the US may be on the cards.

Canada's qualified rapprochement with the US after years of incumbent head of government Jean Chretien's "arms-distance only" policy has probably created a new set of dynamics for Canadian heads of diplomatic missions.

And the task before MacDonald, and other Canadian envoys the world over and especially in Muslim nations, is how to reconcile Martin's proposed building of bridges with the US with the general antipathy towards the superpower.

With Malaysia at the forefront of the international body of opposition to the manner in which the US is fighting its so-called war against terrorism and generally trying to bully the world into submission, he appears to have his work cut out for him.

Fifty-four days into his new posting here, the former Canadian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia is already in the thick of work, unfazed by the potential for controversy in Kuala Lumpur.

The veteran diplomat, who is just weeks shy of 59, is convinced that things will be the same between Ottawa and Kuala Lumpur despite Martin's intense gaze towards New York.

"While we are going to see more co-operation with the US, we will continue with our policies with regard to the rest of the world," he said.

MacDonald, who came to the 55-minute interview armed with a folder full of printed answers to possible questions, however, appeared surprised by the question on Martin.

He talks about training Malaysian policemen in counter terrorism besides bringing in Canadian experts to lecture at the Southeast Asian Centre for Counter Terrorism in Kuala Lumpur.

His point is this: how can there even be a possibility of a strain in bilateral ties of the future when both countries are joining hands in the fight against terrorism?

A corollary to this comes by way of Canada's decision not to support the US decision to send troops into Iraq and how the coalition of American allies did not include his country.

He feels strongly that Martin will formulate an independent foreign policy that will not be propounded at the expense of existing friendships and bilateral co-operation.

"Our foreign policy will be dynamic and will involve what is right for Canada," he says mid-point into the interview in reply to a question on how independent Canadian foreign policy is likely to be with the change of guard.

Yet, one wonders how practical it is to expect Canada to balance the interests of the Islamic world with that of the US given the American tendency to bulldoze its point of view over opposing positions.

MacDonald feels that Canada and Malaysia have several commonalities that can help create a synergy needed to tackle challenges that come their way.

For one, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has taken over barely three months before Martin, a fact that can help the two leaders look anew at

bilateral ties without the distraction of historical baggage.

For another, he feels that both countries come from a British colonial past with similar aspirations for the future in terms of physical and social development. Then, there is, of course, the personality of the incumbent envoy to factor in.

Where his predecessor, Jean Mc-Closkey, was more guarded in expressing her views despite their acknowledged cogency and focus, MacDonald is definitely freer with comments.

Punctuating words with liberal laughter and often looking towards head of the political and economic and public affairs section Rachael Bedlington for confirmation of facts, he displays an ability to go with the flow in an exchange of ideas.

Diplomat watchers in KL concur with this impression of MacDonald as a person willing to discuss new ideas and explore new vistas.

He is also committed to helping Canada understand the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thinking, a necessity after Sept 11, 2001.

The need for this becomes clearer when he explains that Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada.

And so the timing could not have been better for the visit of a mixed team of government and opposition here recently from Canada to understand Islam. To be sure, the tour was of the region but Malaysia may have given the team insight into how a modern and progressive Islamic nation functions.

MacDonald has many things going for him in his desire to enhance bilateral ties. Topping the list are experiences culled from his previous tour of duty here in 1989 as deputy head of mission and commercial counsellor.

"Coming back to Malaysia was an exciting opportunity ...My experience here gives some perspective to compare. I will also be able to watch Datuk Seri Abdullah leading Malaysia into new areas of growth and development after taking over the reins of power from (Tun) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad)."

Although these are still the early days of his tour of duty, MacDonald can be expected to take already good ties with Canada to a new high with his infectious enthusiasm and drive.