

Prescott seeks M'sian formula

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By John Prescott, Britain's Deputy Prime Minister

I'M DELIGHTED to be here in Malaysia. During the last week, I have travelled across Asia, exchanging views in Japan, South Korea, and China, on global issues such as climate change, technology, trade and security that affect all of us.

Now I am seeking Malaysia's perspective on these issues, to learn more about your approach to the peaceful co-existence of different faiths.

In a world of increasing interdependence, where mass migration and urbanisation are bringing together more and more people from differing cultures and religions, we need more understanding, more dialogue and more cooperation.

Last month, I represented Prime Minister Tony Blair at the international summit which brought together the heads of government of Asia and Europe in Helsinki.

During the Sixth Asia-Europe Meeting, your Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi gave a powerful speech about dialogue between people from different cultures.

He said: "Modern Europe has generally embraced secularism, and largely removed religion from the public domain into the confines of the home and family. For the Muslims, Islam is their way of life, both public and private."

It's clear that we need to be sensitive to the differences which arise from religious and cultural beliefs.

Malaysians may be aware of the recent controversy, both within and outside the Muslim communities in Britain, about

the wearing of the veil. The answer is not to close down that discussion but to have an open debate, with open minds.

There must be no "no go areas" for discussion. We must have the confidence to talk to each other, with mutual respect, in order to achieve understanding.

This week, the Muslim festival of Eid (Hari Raya Aidilfitri), in which people open their homes to friends and neighbours, is a good example of that openness.

I'm keen to learn more about Malaysia's approach to being a successful, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural society in a rapidly changing world.

As Abdullah had said, Malaysia aims to be "a progressive society that is compatible with modernity yet firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam."

Muslim communities in Britain are involved in every walk of life, and they make a significant contribution to the economic and social success of our country.

At the Islamic Art Museum here in Kuala Lumpur, where I will meet leaders and scholars, I will also be reminded of the astonishing creativity of Muslim art, architecture and science.

Islam enriches Britain's society in many ways. It teaches that we have a duty to look after each other - that we are all part of one moral universe, that humanity is intertwined and interlinked like different parts of a human body, reflecting each other's condition. This is a universal moral principle we can all learn from.

Indeed, whatever our beliefs,

whether Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or even agnostic, we share common values: respect for the law and each other, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, and responsibility towards others.

Such values often require a legislative framework to protect them. That's why our government has brought in legislation to promote equality and make expressions of reli-

gious hatred illegal.

But in our desire to treat all as equals, we must also recognise the differences which define us. To be truly equal and fair, we must treat some people differently from others, and our law must be sensitive to, and reflect, these issues.

I remember participating many years ago as a Member of Parliament in debates about safety legislation to enforce the

use of motorcycle helmets. This was a matter of indifference for most of the population. But for the Sikh community, this was in conflict with their religious beliefs. So the law was framed to allow them to wear turbans instead of helmets.

I'm proud that our government was the first in Britain, not just to have Muslim MPs, but also to allow *syariah* compliant lending, so that Muslims can invest and borrow in ways that are consistent with their beliefs.

Syariah compliant home financing arrangements now enjoy the same tax treatment as traditional forms of home finance.

These are practical examples of how we can and should be tolerant, flexible and aware of the needs of different religious beliefs in a modern British secular society.

We've achieved a lot in recent years to realise our goal of a Britain in which those of all backgrounds, races and religions overwhelmingly live side by side in tolerance and friendship.

For example, as you sit on the Tube, bus, train or walk about London today, or visit a school, the chances are you'll overhear many languages being spoken, by people of all races and creeds. London is both one of the most economically successful cities in the world and also one of the most cosmopolitan.

But we recognise that some of our poorest communities are also those with significant Muslim populations, and that's why policies like the minimum wage and the New Deal - aimed at helping everyone in disadvantage - will also help

many thousands of British Muslims. Not because they are Muslim, but because they are in need.

In Britain, there has been a lot of discussion, quite rightly, about how we ensure "community cohesion." But what do we mean by that? Some take it to mean how our Muslim and other minority communities integrate into wider society. But it is something far more complex, challenging and comprehensive than that.

There needs to be a far wider debate than one between politicians or political parties. It needs to be within and between all our communities. And that debate can be radical. People should be free to express their thoughts within the law of the land.

I've come to Malaysia, not just to represent my government and to discuss common economic and political interests, but also to listen and to learn about your approach to achieving peaceful co-existence in your communities.

As Malaysia moves towards 2007, the 50th anniversary of your independence, I offer my congratulations and I look forward to our countries continuing to work together for a safe and secure future for all our people.

■ Prescott arrived in Malaysia yesterday for a four-day working visit expected to focus on investment, education and research. Among other things, he is scheduled to meet Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and visit the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur.