

**THE GALA DINNER OF THE MALAYSIA-AUSTRALIA FOUNDATION IN
CONJUNCTION WITH THE MALAYSIA- AUSTRALIA UNIVERSITY ALUMNI
CONVENTION**

LEGEND HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR, 18 OCTOBER 1996

It is a pleasure for me to be here at the Gala Dinner organised by The Malaysia-Australia Foundation (The MAF) in conjunction with the Malaysia-Australia University Alumni Convention.

2. It was about two years ago when I launched The MAF and spoke of the many common grounds upon which the relations between Malaysia and Australia were based and our desire to enhance relations between the two countries.

3. Since then, I understand that The MAF had, on a low-key basis, undertaken several initiatives towards this end, one such initiative being to offer fellowships to Australians to do attachments here in Malaysia. The initiative to hold this Convention is commendable because this will bring together Government ministers, university vice-chancellors and graduates of Australian universities, and other alumni members of Australian universities, both Malaysians and Australians. I hope the Convention which aims to identify prospects for cooperation between Australia and Malaysia in the 21st century will achieve its objectives. This effort will no doubt enhance bilateral relations between our two countries.

4. Besides the Government to Government exchanges, there are substantive diplomatic and trade presence in each other's countries. While increases in the number of tourists and visitors from Australia and vice-versa as well as vigorous and growing trade exchange and other areas of two-way cooperation and contacts, one of the most valuable and enduring bonds between Malaysia and Australia has been the links through education. Some 120,000 Malaysian students have completed their studies in Australia. Malaysia has been one of the biggest single sources of overseas students for Australia for many years and has the highest number of higher education students in Australia. Presently 12,000 Malaysian students are pursuing their studies in Australian schools and institutions.

5. I understand that The MAF and the Malaysia- Australia Universities Alumni Associations (MAAA) derive their support from these 120,000 alumni and both have come together to promote stronger ties between Malaysia and Australia.

6. People-to-people relations provide the strongest foundation for relationship between countries. This is truly the case when the students of each country have lived, studied and worked in the other country for certain periods of their

lives. With 120,000 Malaysian alumni, Malaysians must, to some extent, be knowledgeable and appreciative of the culture and lifestyles of the Australians. Alumni chapters in Malaysia enable graduates to maintain the friendships and professional associations begun in the universities.

7. These educational bonds create a strong tie among the Malaysian alumni for Australia and Australians. Unfortunately as Australians do not normally spend the same amount of the impressionable years of their lives in Malaysia, the knowledge of Australians about Malaysia and its multiracial people is not as extensive as that of Malaysians about Australia. I am therefore happy to note that The MAF, in close association with the MAAA is working to encourage more Australians to visit, study, train and work in Malaysia.

8. I also note that through the fellowships offered by The MAF, some Australian postgraduate students have come to Malaysia to avail themselves of what Malaysia has to offer in the fields of journalism, commerce and engineering through short periods of attachments with our local corporations. These initiatives will serve to create a better awareness and understanding of developments in this country and dispel wrong perceptions and prejudices born out of ignorance or exposure to slanted reports by sensation-seeking media or to those Malaysians who, for one reason or another, are disenchanted with their own country. Still, despite the ups and downs, relations with Australia have been generally good and in recent years have grown stronger.

9. This good relationship is reflected in the economic field where trade has been growing ever stronger with each passing year. Australian exports to Malaysia in 1995 were valued at RM5.3 billion, an increase of 14.2 percent over the previous year while imports rose to RM3.08 billion, up 28.2 percent over the previous year giving Australia a good trade surplus. Malaysia remains Australia's third largest ASEAN trading partner and it is also Australia's 11th major trading partner. Correspondingly, Australia is Malaysia's 11th major trading partner.

10. Malaysia is very keen to be an international centre of excellence in higher education in the 21st century. To achieve such status, Malaysia will need to have enough institutions of higher learning not only to satisfy the huge demand for trained and skilled manpower for its industrialisation drive and the fulfilment of Vision 2020 but also to contribute to the equally huge demand for skilled manpower in the region beyond the year 2000.

11. According to the 1995 population figure, there were 1.68 million Malaysians between the ages of 20 to 24 years - the ages at which they should be pursuing tertiary education. However, at present only 13 percent of them obtained places in local universities. Our target is to ensure a 40 percent enrolment in institutions of higher learning by the year 2000. This means we have a long way to go because we need about 560,000 more places before we can reach that target.

12. In recognition of this and other needs, the Government has set a policy to liberalise education. Five Bills were passed in Parliament this year. They are the Education Act, the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act, the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, the National Council of Higher Education Act and the National Accreditation Board Act. The Bills among other things, set the pace for the incorporation of universities, the establishment of private universities and branches of foreign universities to enable us to meet our Vision 2020 objectives.

13. In this regard, as we move towards the 21st century, we believe Australia can play a major role in Malaysia's aspiration to become an international centre of excellence in higher education. It is our hope that Australia which has several good established universities and institutions will encourage such universities and institutions to open branches in Malaysia or to twin with local institutions. Malaysian interests are already talking to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Monash University of Australia. We hope there will be more universities that are interested to come to Malaysia.

14. Malaysian institutions of higher learning should look towards attracting academics and experts from all over the world and set up the required faculties and chairs of learning. They should adapt to changes taking place around them so that they will remain relevant. It may be that in the olden times, universities were where knowledge was pursued for the sake of knowledge. We cannot afford that luxury now. Universities are costly investments for the people and the country. They must serve the people and the country, not just themselves or the people who work in them. Ivory towers gleaming in rarefied air are things of the past and should remain in the past.

15. To be truly relevant universities must not only disseminate knowledge without caring or knowing what the knowledge may be used for. Modern universities must apply the knowledge or at least know and teach about the application of that knowledge. For this Universities must stress research. Academics who never produce any academic papers as a result of

their research, but are only interested in passing on old knowledge, contribute nothing to the accumulation of knowledge. The application of knowledge requires development capabilities. For a country desirous of industrialising rapidly the role of research and development in institutions of higher learning is not just invaluable but is quite indispensable. It is hoped that Australian universities which may be interested in setting up branches or twinning with Malaysian institutions would appreciate the need for strong research and development capabilities.

16. Since 1985/86, a number of overseas institutions including Australian universities have entered into twinning arrangements with Malaysian institutions and are able to offer certain courses in which the first year or the first two years of the degree courses are undertaken at private colleges in Malaysia and the student then completes his degree in Australia. Twinning programmes have become popular because of the reduction in overall cost of acquiring a recognised degree. Such twinning programmes can of course be reversed so that students from Australian universities can also take a part of their early years of study in Malaysia and complete it in Australia or even the other way round.

17. One cannot speak of education now without mentioning the role of rapid and varied forms of communication in the Information Age. The advent of multimedia opens up vast possibilities of disseminating knowledge at lower cost to a very great number of people. No longer should students face their lecturers in lecture halls in order to interact with them. Through the multimedia facilities physical limitations will be overcome and hopefully the cost of education would go down too. We have launched the Multimedia Super Corridor which will have all the latest in infrastructure to enable distance learning to be effective and of a high quality. Here again is another opportunity for Australian institutions of higher learning to participate and help make a success of this Malaysian project.

18. It is time for us to look boldly ahead into the future and to proactively maintain contacts and exchanges, expand people and business networks and nurture cultural understanding so that the youth of our countries, the corporate, political and business leaders of tomorrow will be better able to continue and improve on the relations between Malaysia and Australia. They should not harbour misconceptions about each other but should in fact help to correct the mistakes and prejudices of the older generations.

19. For this, more talks, dialogues, or public forums with distinguished panels of speakers comprising of academics,

intellectuals, corporate and business leaders from both public and private sectors of both countries should be organised to exchange ideas and views, impart, acquire and share knowledge.

20. I wish to congratulate The MAF and MAAA for carrying out their stated missions and the initiatives they have taken to organise this timely and useful get-together.

21. I wish you every success in your endeavours.