

## **THE JOINT MEETING OF THE MALAYSIA-BRITISH SOCIETY AND BRITISH-MALAYSIA SOCIETY**

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1. Firstly, I wish to thank the organiser, The Malaysia- British Society, for inviting me here today to share some thoughts with you on issues that could trigger a more serious effort to promote collaboration between Britain and Malaysia. The relations between Malaysia and Britain have largely matured over the years. The generation which knew the Malay States of the colonial days is almost gone. The present generation know very little and remember not at all of the links that our two countries had had in those years.

2. Still there is a sense of familiarity with each other and along with it a degree of comfort. We don't need interpreters for example when we talk to each other and this in itself contributes towards better understanding. When we have interpreters we really cannot be sure they are in fact interpreting correctly. The story goes that General Templer, one of the most prominent of the British High Commissioners in pre- independent Malaya, told the villagers of Kulai, Johore who had failed to provide information of a communist ambush in that area that they were all bastards but he was a greater bastard than all of them. The interpreter was flabbergasted and translated it by saying that the good General knew that the parents of the villagers were all not married but the General's parents too did not get married. Templer was quite happy with the reaction.

3. Well, I am glad no one in this room will be getting the benefit of the dubious ability of such interpreters to interpret for me.

4. But that aside, we know we are comfortable with each other because our systems are largely similar. We have the same system of administration, the same understanding of the rule of law (You are innocent until you are proven guilty etc.) and the same abhorrence of rude bluntness. Except for the fact that the Malaysian Constitution was written, we have the same system of constitutional monarchy and every year we hold a tea party and confer numerous sashes and medals with sonorous titles. In fact even in terms of racial composition of the population we are slowly approximating each other. I suspect next year's Commonwealth Games will see quite a colourful British team participating.

5. All these similarities should enable us to work closely together. The relations now of course should be as between equals. Malaysia is still junior in many ways. Population-wise, GDP/GNP-wise, technology-wise, we are miles or eons behind. But ego-wise we have managed to blow ourselves up and we think and behave as if we are at par with our partner, the British. Just to convince you and everyone, we dig into our pockets and paid for the world's highest building and the region's biggest airport. For good measure we throw in two reputedly intelligent cities in between the towers and the airport.

6. Many say that we are being irresponsibly extravagant. Those edifices or monuments cost us billions which we cannot afford. An American magazine did a

good job by publishing a picture of the twin towers with a wretched slum building in the foreground. But the Prime Minister seems a little bit carried away with memorials before he is even gone. But actually if you add up, his ego is even bigger. The whole Multimedia Super Corridor will actually cost over RM100 billion. By the time it is half-finished, Malaysia will be going around with a begging bowl. But the Prime Minister has already worked this out. The Economic Planning Unit has predicted that he will not be around to carry the bowl in 2020. His successor unfortunately will. The Prime Minister will go to his grave smiling happily, all his monuments in place.

7. Sorry for this gallows humour. But actually it is a standard joke whenever I make a speech about 2020. I always tell my audience ad nauseum, that the date was chosen so I would not be around when the things fail. It never failed to bring a laugh - although I notice that the laughter is becoming a little bit more strained each time.

8. But really, Malaysia has some big plans. We do want to become a fully-developed country by the year 2020. We cannot do this alone. We need help from friends. And British friends are the most comfortable. You have the technology and the skills which we need. To be developed is of course not just a question of per capita income. We must have a fair deal of the know-how, the skills and the expertise. We must be able, firstly, to produce all those sophisticated products which developed countries produce and sell to the world, and secondly, we must eventually be able to invent and innovate and patent our products so that the current stress on intellectual property becomes meaningful to us.

9. We know Britain has the technology and the sophistication. A glance at the new products section of the brochures issued by the British High Commission should convince everyone of the innovativeness and inventiveness of the British. It is said that the Japanese are more skillful in applying these discoveries and profiting by them. Perhaps British entrepreneurs working with Malaysians can find ready application for these ideas and discoveries and market them, or test market them in this region. The Japanese have been doing this all the time. If their South East Asian guinea pigs survives then it is safe to market whatever in the rest of the world. Why not the British and the Malaysians together avail themselves of this strategy.

10. Malaysians have bought into British companies in order to gain access to technology or other assets. The purchase of Lotus is a case in point. The potential is tremendous. We need the sophisticated engineering know-how of the company and the injection of Malaysian capital has apparently come in handy for Lotus. The synergy is obvious here. I am sure there are other Lotus-like companies which can benefit from 'Malaysian injection' of equity capital.

11. There is one area which the twin societies can help to realise. For more than a century Malaysian students have been going to Britain to study. This has benefitted both Malaysia and Britain. Malaysia of course gain the kind of knowledge and skills it requires for its development. Britain on the other hand

gained from the tendency of those who had studied in the United Kingdom to favour everything British, particularly the engineering students.

12. But beyond that, partnership between British and Malaysian companies should also do well in third countries. Malaysian companies are now testing the water in many countries of the South. They have not done too badly but they need greater skills and sophistication. Employing British engineers and other professionals is one way out for the Malaysians. They could have employed Russian or Poles but there is a language problem. The British fortunately speak English and although it is not exactly the English the Malaysians speak, the Malaysians can understand the British English quite well. But a better way would be for serious joint-ventures to be set up between Malaysian and British companies, each side contributing its particular strength, thus enhancing the capacity of the joint venture company. It is difficult to identify what strength the Malaysian companies have which is not found in British companies. But I do believe they have something to contribute which could be worthwhile.

13. But at the ASEM meeting in Bangkok last year it was decided that there is merit in European students in large numbers studying in Asian universities. As Asian students studying in Europe learnt to understand the culture and the way of life of the Europeans, European students studying in Asia will similarly learn Asian culture and Asian ways. They would be then more understanding and less critical of Asians and would contribute towards better relations between the West and the East. It may not happen of course. There could still be clashes of civilisations. But we can try.

14. Now Malaysia in particular is keen to receive European students, particularly British students to study in Malaysia, not about anthropology, about Homo Asiatics or Homo Malaysians but other quite mundane subjects. We assure you our universities will be just as good. You can provide some of the teachers and the external examiners. God willing, British students will learn to appreciate our value systems and be more friendly when later on they work in the British press or in the British Foreign Office. They might even learn how to understand and speak Malaysian English. I am sure Malaysia/British relations will benefit from this.

15. Finally I would like to mention our most ambitious project yet - the Multimedia Super Corridor. Physically, this is a 15km wide stretch of land extending from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre 50km south to the new International Airport in Sepang. Within this area and next to the new so-called paperless electronic Government Administrative City will be Cybercity, a haven and heaven for the Information Age industry involving Multimedia. I will not say much more about this Super Corridor but I am sure we can provide lots of information on what we intend and is in fact already doing there. British multimedia companies are welcome to participate in this exciting new venture, a testbed for real life experiment in electronic government, multimedia university, borderless manufacturing, a single intelligent card to replace the numerous cards that we have to carry today, R&D laboratories, media content producers and a host of other activities which have become possible because of modern real-time,

borderless information distribution world- wide.

16. Clearly the scope for cooperation between Britain and Malaysia is unlimited. Britain (and America) has the advantage because language is less of a problem. Hiccups will occur but we have had two major hiccups and came out of them with better understanding and stronger relations. We should be able to take future hiccups in our stride.

17. The Malaysia-British and the British-Malaysia societies can obviously play a big role in enhancing the relations between our two countries and peoples. Purely business consideration should be supplemented and augmented by forays into other fields, into culture, education and even religion. As long as we can agree to disagree and leave the meeting rooms as friends, there is no limit to the things we can discuss when these two societies meet.

18. I wish you all the very best for this session of your conference. I am sure you will take us one step further in the cementing of relations between our two countries and peoples.