

THE LAUNCHING OF THE MALAYSIA-BRITISH BUSINESS COUNCIL
CARCOSA SERI NEGARA, KUALA LUMPUR, 21 APRIL 1998

I wish to thank and congratulate the British Malaysian Society and the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI) for initiating the establishment of a high-powered Malaysia-British Business Council comprising 15 prominent business leaders on each side. The establishment of this business council by the business community of both countries and with the active support and encouragement of the British Department of Trade & Industry is indeed apt and timely; apt because it builds on the solid and dependable relationship between our two countries and timely because it demonstrates that despite the current Asian economic crisis, British business is still interested in Malaysia. I am confident that the Business Council will further deepen bilateral partnership between our two countries. The Malaysian Government like the British Government will lend its support to the Business Council and will be interested to hear of its progress.

2. When I was recently in London for the Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM, I was impressed with the friendship shown to Malaysia by the British Government and the British people. The statement by Prime Minister Tony Blair that Britain is not a fair-weathered friend is appropriate and appreciated. The statement on the financial and economic situation in Asia issued at the end of the first day of ASEM recognising the shared interest in restoring stability, stressing the concern about the human cost to the people of Asia and noting the strong economic fundamentals of Asia as well as the need to curb speculation-induced instability vindicates the long-held stance held by Malaysia.

3. During ASEM, the leaders of participating countries noted that developments in Asian markets could lead to a drop in investments in both directions and pledged to do their best to facilitate the maintenance and expansion of foreign direct investment. In this regard, I wish to reiterate that Malaysia welcomes foreign investments. Malaysia has always adopted a pro-market, liberal and open economic system in which foreign participation in our economy is welcomed and encouraged. In fact, some British companies have operated in Malaysia for well over a hundred years. Let me assure our British and foreign friends that we shall do what we can to have and maintain an attractive climate for foreign investment. We shall continue to liberalise our economy and adopt market reforms that will make us more competitive and resilient.

4. We recognise that we cannot develop Malaysia on our own. Whilst we promote self-reliance, we also know that in an interdependent, globally interconnected world, we need to work with foreign friends to develop our nation. As such, foreign investors will find a hospitable business environment in Malaysia. With the depreciation in our ringgit and with currency fluctuations having somewhat stabilised, this is the right time to invest in Malaysia. I hope British members of the Malaysia-British Business Council will encourage your companies to invest more in Malaysia and to get more British business to come here to Malaysia.

5. Besides encouraging two-way trade and investment, I believe that the

Business Council can also play a useful role in facilitating business partnerships and joint ventures in third countries. Being the fulcrum of Asia, Malaysia is well-placed for foreign investors to enter the Asean market of 500 million people as well as the China, India and Middle East markets because of our historical, cultural and religious linkages. I am also encouraged by the Business Council's objectives of developing opportunities for small and medium enterprises which are also consistent with the ASEM objectives.

6. Having achieved 40 years of independence, the time has come for Malaysians to drop our historical baggage. Whilst the past provides us with useful lessons, it also gives us both pleasant and unpleasant memories. British colonial rule has left behind a rich tradition for our civil service, education systems and judiciary to build upon. Yet at the same time, colonial rule has deprived us of much of our wealth and compartmentalised our society through a 'divide and rule' policy. We are not here to pass judgement on the British. As I have said, we are no longer interested in carrying our colonial baggage of historical injustices. Let us let bygones be bygones. More importantly, we should look to the future, to what we can do together to create a better future for our respective countries and peoples.

7. In Malaysia, Vision 2020 provides us with a clear strategic direction of where we want to go. ASEAN has also adopted its own Vision 2020. And ASEM has established a vision group to develop a long-range shared vision for Asia and Europe. Having a clear vision is important as it provides a roadmap of the route to take in the future. Sadly, in business, few of our business leaders or corporations have a vision of where they want to be in 10 or 20 years time. Short-term and shallow negative thinking will not get us out of our current difficulties. Our business community must be able to conceptualise and articulate a clear vision of where they want to go. Merely depending on the Government for hand-outs is not the way to succeed. Neither is blaming the Government. It can be so easy to be negative, and to apportion blame. It is so much more difficult to right wrongs, to build and to create. Yet, as we progress towards the new millennium, only two years from now, we must build and create a new and better world for all our people. To succeed, we need a smart partnership of government, business, employees and foreign friends, working together to develop the nation and bring it to new heights of achievement. With close cooperation, a clear vision and proactive strategies, we can emerge again to be a regional economic powerhouse. It will be difficult, it will take time but we will triumph finally.

8. In our efforts to promote national economic recovery, I call on the business community to discard negative thinking. Have confidence in the government and in our nation. Together, we shall prevail. And with the good friends from Britain and also from other countries cooperating and working together with us, we can recover faster.

9. On this note, I have pleasure in launching the Malaysia-British Business Council and wish Mr. Patrick Gillam and his team every success.

