

The following talk was given to BMS members by
HE Simon Featherstone CMG, British High Commissioner to Malaysia,
at the Inner Temple on 19 May 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful to the British Malaysia Society for giving me this chance to reflect on my first 200 days as High Commissioner to Malaysia. There are quite a few books about how to succeed in one's first 100 days in a new job. I haven't yet come across any about success in one's first 200 days – perhaps such books would be found in the slow learners' section! To be precise, it is now 222 days since my wife Gail and I arrived in KL and we are enjoying it enormously.

In the light of the richness of the history and current relationship, and the fact the coalition UK government is giving such attention to emerging powers like Malaysia, it feels a particular privilege to be the British High Commissioner at this moment.

I'd like to pick out several specific aspects of the relationship, before going on to make some more general comments about UK-Malaysia relations.

I'd like to begin with the subject of high level visits: an area where I am delighted to report that we have seen an impressive increase in the tempo under the coalition government - which has made relations with the emerging economies and the Commonwealth among its top foreign policy priorities. As a leading member of the Commonwealth, with a growth rate last year of 7.2%, Malaysia fits both categories. Following a fallow 5 year period during which there were no Cabinet level visitors to Malaysia, in recent months we have had visits by two Cabinet ministers - Jeremy Hunt (Culture Media and Sport) and Liam Fox (Defence) as well as by two FCO Ministers - Lord Howell and Jeremy Browne, the Duke of York and the Lord Mayor of London. In the opposite direction we have had visits by Home Affairs Minister Hishammuddin, visits by the Plantations Minister, Higher Education Minister and Health Minister and many others – I believe no fewer than 7 Malaysia Cabinet Ministers were in Britain at some point over the Christmas and New Year period.

Most significant of all, Prime Minister Najib was in the UK this week, giving an important and well-received speech on the Global Movement of Moderates at Oxford University. I am delighted that he will be coming back again in July as a guest of the British government, during which he will be received by both the Prime Minister and Her Majesty The Queen. As you can imagine, preparing substantive deliverables for that important visit will be a top priority in the coming weeks.

My second theme is Education which has traditionally been one of the strongest ties linking the two countries. The Prime Minister (an alumnus of Nottingham University) and many of the top political and business leaders studied here in the UK, and in a good number of cases their children are among the 13,500 Malaysians now studying here. At a recent meeting between the Employers Provident Fund and the Lord Mayor, 100% of the Malaysian side had studied in the UK

A less well known fact is that there are 40,000 people studying for UK qualifications in Malaysia. Nottingham University blazed a trail: the Malaysia campus is now into its 11th year. In a memorable visit to the campus Foreign Office Minister Jeremy Browne, himself a Nottingham alumnus, gave an inspiring speech about the value of trans-national education and how far-sighted Nottingham had been to establish the campus a decade ago.

Ten years later a range of other educational institutions are following Nottingham's lead: Newcastle are setting up a Medical School, Southampton an Engineering faculty, and Marlborough College a school - all in Iskandar, Johor. Epsom College is setting up a campus near KL Airport and several other British educational institutions are also in active negotiation with Malaysian counterparts.

But the educational relationship is not simply about buildings - it is primarily about people, including:

- the 120 teacher English language teacher trainers the British Council is bringing to East Malaysia;
- Advocacy trainers who have been extremely well-received by the Malaysian legal profession; and
- ground-breaking research relationships between Queen's University Belfast and Petronas, to name but a few.

A third important tie binding our two countries is a love of Sport – and particularly a passion for the English Premier League. In my first meetings with the Prime Minister and the Agong, I discovered that, like many other Malaysians, they are keen Manchester United fans, as am I. By contrast, my driver is a passionate Liverpool fan, and is delighted that the Liverpool team will be visiting KL in July. And Cardiff City – who sadly this week narrowly failed in their bid for promotion to the Premiership - is owned by a Malaysian, with a Malaysian Chairman. So I feel it a professional necessity for me to keep up to speed with the football results – or so I tell Gail when I sit down to watch the live English Premier League games which are much more plentiful on Malaysian TV every Saturday and Sunday evening than in the UK!

Next year's big sporting highlight will, of course, be the Olympics. A couple of months ago we held a big event together with the British Council to celebrate the 500 days to go staging-post, bringing together representatives from the schools which have been taking part in our International Inspirations initiative as one of the Olympic legacy projects. Marc Woods, a paralympian gold-medallist gave an inspirational speech during the celebrations. As the Olympics approaches we plan to stage more events in Malaysia focussing perhaps on sports such as badminton and cycling where Malaysia stands a good chance of winning its first Olympic Gold Medal.

Time doesn't permit me to dwell on F1, a sport with a huge UK participation in all aspects and which is also very popular in Malaysia: it was great to see Jenson Button on the podium after the Malaysian Grand Prix. Another very popular sport is golf, which I watch every morning as I eat my breakfast overlooking the 3rd green of the RSGC. A Chinese interviewer asked me whether I missed the skiing in Switzerland to which I said that I did, but I had taken up golf which was probably the nearest Malaysian equivalent. I wasn't quite sure how to respond when she asked me to describe the main differences between skiing and golf!

A fourth area is Science/environment where the High Commission has been very actively promoting a number of different projects. I would single out for note the 10 year ecological experiment in the Maliau Basin, Sabah called SAFE (Stability of Altered Forest Ecosystems) which the Royal Society, in association with Sime Derby and Imperial College, is undertaking in areas where palm oil production and virgin forests exist side-by-side. The Royal Society kindly organised a helicopter to take my wife and me to participate, alongside Prime Minister Najib, in the opening ceremony. Unfortunately low cloud cover meant that, unlike the Prime Minister, we never made it into the valley and eventually having run out of fuel we had to land in an airfield which hadn't been used since the Japanese left!

My number one priority has been to push forward the Trade and Investment links between the UK and Malaysia. Last year our visible exports were up 18% to £1.2bn, with services probably taking that figure over £2bn. In terms of British companies in Malaysia, one of the most notable is Dyson who manufacture all of their vacuum cleaners, hand dryers and bladeless fans in Johor. Gail and I spent a fascinating afternoon watching how the products are put through their paces by ladies trying to break the machines by dropping them from random angles!

In some other sectors UK companies also have a clear leading position. Firms like Shell and Petrofac are also major players in the Oil and Gas sector as are HSBC and Standard Chartered in banking and Tesco and Jardines in retail. Over 100,000 Malaysians are employed by British companies. One of the innovations I have introduced is to set up the High Commissioner's Premier Club for the top 15-20 British firms in Malaysia, to give regular political and economic briefings and networking opportunities as well as the chance to meet VIP visitors.

Looking ahead, we are seeking to win business for UK firms in the Klang Valley Mass Rapid Transit, Malaysia's largest ever infrastructure project valued at £9bn. We are also keen to promote the UK services sector, including legal services, and see the EU/Malaysia Free Trade Agreement negotiations as a potentially important driver for this. We are also working to attract more Malaysian investment in the UK.

The sixth strand I wanted to highlight is Defence. I have already mentioned the important visit by the Defence Secretary in January, who met his opposite number as well as the Home Affairs and Prime Ministers. Britain and Malaysia are both members of the FPDA (alongside Singapore, Australian and New Zealand) which organises exercise twice a year and is about to celebrate its 50th Anniversary. There is also an important bilateral component to the relationship. In the last few months we have organised training in Malaysia in several defence related areas. There is also an important defence sales agenda which we hope to be taking forward in the coming months.

Last, but not least, I wanted to draw attention to the Royal connections which exist between our two countries. Following my presentation of credentials to the Agong, Gail and I have had the honour of calling on the Sultans of Johor and Negri Sembilan and are looking forward to meeting more members of the Malaysian Royal families on our travels around the country. The Duke of York is also a frequent visitor to Malaysia and I am sure will be making another visit before long.

The Agong and his wife were, of course, invited to the Royal Wedding and interest in the wedding in KL, among the British, Commonwealth and Malaysian populations, was intense. Gail and I were asked to appear live on Malaysian breakfast TV the day before when Gail somehow managed to talk authoritatively about a dress that nobody had yet seen! There was a sell-out of 600 tickets for our own Royal Wedding party in the KL Intercontinental Hotel that day, during which we watched the wedding in large screens, had a wedding breakfast and danced the night away to a saxophone band!

Conclusion

We have looked at some of the different facets of the rich UK-Malaysia relationship – high-level visits, education, sport, environment/science, trade and investment, defence and royal connections. But I am a strong believer in maxim sometimes attributed to Aristotle that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. I see my role as building on the people to people links and goodwill which exist between Malaysia and the UK and creating a framework in which links in all areas can flourish.

This is partly about reversing any feeling of neglect, reviving old friendships, and trying to position the UK as Malaysia's partner of choice in a whole range of areas. A great piece of news is that Foreign Secretary William Hague announced 8 days ago that as part of a strategic network shift towards the emerging economies the FCO would be adding diplomatic staff in Malaysia. We also have exciting local plans, as part of the FCO's diplomatic excellence programme, to enhance the image the High Commission presence.

But I am also very conscious of the vital part played by all individuals and organisations of goodwill, including the British Malaysia Society, who want to see the relationship flourish. We are entering a really exciting phase and I am so glad to potentially have a further 1222 days in which to see the bilateral relationship go from strength to strength!