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LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA: Looking ahead with optimism

By K.C. Boey

April 17:

DIFFERENT style, same recalcitrance? That might be the public perception going by media representation of a "historic week" of visits from the region to Canberra.

Within a week when Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono came and went pledging to champion Australia's cause in Asia, media contrast of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi might have left many perplexed.

Up close, guests at business and other non-Government engagements would have thought they were meeting a different person. The Prime Minister was charmingly frank and engaging. Abdullah showed warmth, "even a playful intimacy", in his dealings with Australia, in the estimation of one guest. Another thought he was a good public performer, a "TV-type performer". He ran his own question and answer session, directing them to the seven ministers and one deputy minister he brought on his visit.



"The mood was good," says Professor Anthony Milner, dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University. "The Prime Minister had a very good sense of humour. He was almost teasing." In all seriousness, Milner heard the Prime Minister tell Australian captains of industry and others to get on with business, and to leave political problems to the political leadership.

On Milner's account, Abdullah was frank and open about problems, which Milner saw as sign of a mature relationship. The visit was an "extraordinary success".

Media interest was on whether an invitation was forthcoming for Australia to attend the inaugural East Asian Summit in Kuala Lumpur in December, which Abdullah made clear was a decision not for host Malaysia alone but for foreign ministers of Asean.

The positive headline that came out of the visit was a pact that International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and her counterpart, Mark Vaile, signed, to start negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement.

"The decision to begin negotiations on a free trade agreement was the highlight, while the other announcements and decisions provided clear evidence of both the scale and the health of the relationship," says Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia James Wise, who travelled to Canberra and Sydney.

"Both Datuk Seri Abdullah and (Prime Minister John Howard) said frequently and clearly throughout the visit that the areas of cooperation and shared interests far outweighed any political differences between Australia and Malaysia. "They also underlined the need to focus on the future, which holds enormous potential for the relationship, rather than be distracted by past differences." Abdullah nominates as the biggest success of his visit, the readiness to expand economic and education cooperation.

Canberra announced the establishment of an Australia-Malaysia Institute, which it committed to during the election last October.

Abdullah witnessed the announcement of health and education initiatives between Australia and Malaysia. Among these was the announcement of the inaugural Prime Minister of Malaysia Melbourne Scholarship by Asialink, a centre at the University of Melbourne for the promotion of public understanding of the countries of Asia and of Australia's role in the region.

Among Asia scholars, the establishment of the Australia-Malaysia Institute is significant. As Asialink director Jenny McGregor tells the New Sunday Times, "People-to-people links are critical and do create relationships that endure beyond and despite the vagaries of political and economic tides".

The hope is that the institute will add to the intellectual curiosity about the region that scholars such as La Trobe University Professor Robin Jeffrey worries is lacking within Government. Jeffrey is immediate past president of the Asian Studies Association of Australia.

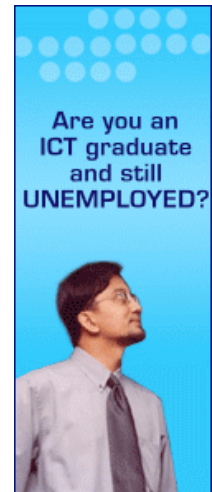
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Of the seven bilateral "second track" organisations that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has established over the past 25 years to enhance people linkages, the absence of a council for Malaysia was notable for Professor Julian Disney, director of the social justice project at the University of New South Wales. Disney notes, however, that this has come more out of a sense of familiarity with Malaysia. So too the head of the institute, Adelaide lawyer Michael Abbott. As Disney says, Australians feel less of a cultural gap with Malaysia, the two countries having shared legacies of British institutions. Former diplomat Rawdon Dalrymple worries that now the Government needs Asian language and Asian studies people for the huge expansion of the intelligence apparatus, there are few young people with the relevant background and skills, with the abolition of a nation-wide Asian languages school study programme.

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