

Two seas; two islands!



H.E. Dr Trevor Matheson

David M Robertson

The New Zealand ambassador responsible for the GCC says there is much in common between the two nations; they are kindred spirits.

When? November 14

Event? World Cup qualifier

Venue? Wellington, NZ

Diplomacy and trade relations are often all about relationships and building the right connections. They say you also create your own luck. Dr Trevor Matheson, Ambassador of New Zealand (NZ) for the GCC States, has more than once found himself in the right place at the right time.

With a doctorate in geography from the Australian National University in Canberra within reach, he was called to see the NZ High Commissioner in Australia towards the end of his studies. Little did he know that this 'meeting' — during which it was suggested he consider a diplomatic career — was with the soon-to-be appointed head of the NZ Foreign Service.

Approaching the end of his first overseas assignment, which leveraged his interest in trade and aid for the micro-states of the Pacific, the 'Trade' portfolio was added to the Foreign Service remit; he did not require much encouragement to "volunteer." Subsequently working on NZ's behalf at both the GATT Uruguay Round and the Doha Round of the World Trade Organisation, the ambassador credits his bosses, Tim Groser

and Mike Moore, at this time as mentors. Both would later take prominent positions in the NZ Government.

His posting to the GCC has coincided with the negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement with the region and NZ, which he hopes "will be concluded" in discussions taking place at the end of October. It has also been a time when GCC States have been encouraged to 'look east' in developing business relationships; one that has taken on increased relevance, Dr Matheson says, as the fallout from the global economic crisis is fully digested.

Sporting diplomacy

As Bahrain and NZ prepare to do battle on the football pitch, with scores all square, I ask the ambassador if this winner-takes-all match is regarded as the most important sporting event in the next few years for NZ as it is in Bahrain. [NZ will host the 2011 rugby World Cup finals.]

"In a country where soccer is somewhat beyond sports like rugby and cricket, getting to the World Cup finals would return football into the consciousness of New Zealanders," says Dr Matheson. The ambassador recalls the "great days" when NZ qualified for the World Cup in 1982 and getting to the finals again would boost "the inroads the sports has made, particularly among woman, in recent years."

Much of this increased popularity, the ambassador says, "is down to people taking a greater interest in sport for health reasons." He adds that "in soccer size does not matter; it is less of a contact sport where success is not determined by size, unlike rugby where size does count."

However, there are opportunities for countries such as Bahrain to excel in the smaller version of the game, 7s. "Adding this version of rugby to the 2016 Olympics will allow the spread of the rugby code around the globe. Without the contact associated with the 15-a-side game, the sort of attributes required on the soccer pitch for success — skill, speed and tactical awareness — are same for 7s."

Complementary economies

If the saying 'opposites attract' has any substance, then the economic relationship between the two countries would be one made in heaven; each lacks what the other has!

"The US\$3 billion trade with Bahrain and the other GCC States is very much two-way," says Dr Matheson. "Slightly in GCC's favour, the 60/40 split sees NZ importing petroleum and downstream products such as plastics. Going the other way are dairy and meat products, but increasing wood and processed food."

He notes that NZ "accounts for around one third of the world trade in dairy products. While only five per cent of this market is traded internationally, our share of this trade gives us influence."

As someone who has experienced both the highs — the euphoria of the Uruguay signing ceremony — and the lows — the fiasco of the aborted Seattle Round — of trade agreement negotiations, I ask what countries such as NZ and Bahrain can really expect out of such deals.

"I'm not comfortable with the notion of 'free trade'; it's more about 'duty-free' trade and the elimination of trade-distorting subsidies, to create a level playing field where there can be fair trade," the ambassador says.

He believes, quite strongly, that resolving such trade issues requires a greater social emphasis by policy makers. "Many of the economic migration issues seen today could be addressed through a more open trading environment. African countries, for instance, have the capacity to greatly expand their agriculture sector; without open markets to trade there is not the investment."

This then creates a vicious circle where countries cannot feed themselves, people seek other locations for work and countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece are bombarded by economic migrants. "If investments were made in their home countries, there would be better employment opportunities at home."

In many respects, New Zealand offers a reference model for many developing economies. With only 4 million to feed, the country exports 95 per cent of its dairy production, 90 per cent of its meat production and 80 per cent and 75 per cent respectively of the fruits and apples grown. Other countries endowed with natural resources for sugar and banana production would have the same opportunities if, primarily Western nations, "did not employ subsidies to keep farmers on the land."

Expanding trade ties

While the focus in trade negotiations and agreements is often distracted by trade in goods, Dr Matheson believes there are real and substantial opportunities in services and investment when a more liberalised trading environment is secured.

You will often find people from NZ working in a professional capacity within financial institutions, accounting firms and the energy business. "In this part of the world," says the ambassador, "you'll also find NZ nurses within the healthcare industry and, increasingly, designers within architectural companies."

Here in Bahrain, New Zealanders have played a prominent role in the education system; and not only in the supply of teachers. Bahrain Polytechnic has a strong New Zealand link as experts from down under have worked with the government to build a vocational training institute.

Kindred spirits

There are certainly more similarities between the land of 'Two Seas' and the land of 'Two Islands'; both have small populations, are not well-endowed with natural resources and have big neighbours, "with whom we do not always get on," says Dr Matheson.

"Both countries are trying to find their way in the world — a very competitive world — utilising what skills they possess to create an economy based upon knowledge."

When asked what it is about NZ that makes the country an attractive partner, the ambassador highlights "the principled nature of our foreign policy and, as others say to us — we do not preach to them!"

While he does not say it explicitly, when you are 'small' — his mother hails from the Cook Islands which only has a population of 20,000 — you often place a greater value on respect, not just for yourself but for others.



A few of the Ambassador's favourite things:

Favourite NZ city: Notwithstanding that home is always best — and home for the ambassador is Rotorua — Dr Matheson cites Christchurch as his favorite city. When the city was founded, he says "The Regents from Christ's College at Cambridge brought with them a town model; everything is planned, right down to the river Avon running through the centre of the city." In some respects the city is more English than many cities back in England!



Favourite NZ area: The Bay of Plenty is a natural choice for the ambassador. Like his home city, the Maori culture has a very strong presence in this area that runs alongside the Pacific Coast Highway. Well-known for its citrus and kiwi fruit, the sandy beaches attract swimmers and kite surfers throughout the year. It's also within easy reach of snow-capped peaks and the lakes of the Taupo region.

NZ food: New Zealand cuisine has a very homely nature to it; restaurants are often located in ordinary-looking homes. "Over the past 20 years, though, the cuisine has taken on board a much more Pacific Rim style. The food associated with the motherland, England, has been fused with influences from Maori cuisine and the islands of the Pacific, as well as migrants from Asia," notes the ambassador. "This style, though, is not yet fully developed; there's much more to come before it reaches its full potential."

Sports: As one might expect the ambassador played rugby in his younger days. Today he's more likely to be seen on a golf course. He's a big-time fan of sport played at the highest level, whether that's English Premier League, NBA basketball, rugby or horse racing. In fact, when a student, he did dabble in owning a racehorse but soon realised the cost of horse-breeding could easily result in bankruptcy!

A perfect day: "When I feel I have achieved something positive, not just for my country but also on a personal level," Dr Matheson says. "When you have wonderful meetings, such as the one I have had on my visit to Bahrain with the Minister of Labour, you feel a sense of accomplishment — as with the feedback we received from those attending the informal evening for New Zealanders at the Diplomat Hotel with the All Whites."