



THE DOHA DEBATES

Clearing the air

Now in its sixth series, the televised discussions of The Doha Debates recently proved the ideal format for a frank examination of the future of Dubai

by Mark Summers

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IN the last six or so weeks few cities in the world can have been the subject of as many newspaper column inches or television reports as Dubai.

Ever since the emirate's high profile holding company Dubai World requested a now infamous "standstill" on repayments of debts owed to international creditors, pundits across the globe have been keen to paint Dubai as a microcosm of the unregulated hubris which has brought the global financial system to its knees.

In the weeks since the first coverage of Dubai World's problems Dubai has been under the microscope, with the eventual announcement that Abu Dhabi would help its neighbour with financial support and the opening of the newly renamed Burj Khalifa tower, making headlines around the world.

Coverage has tended to be split between two camps, with the Western media in particular seeing Dubai's current economic troubles as payback for recent years of imprudent growth and commentators within the region pushing back against what many see as an over-the-top caricature of an emirate which, like most places in the world at the present time, is having to cut its cloth in the midst of a global economic downturn.

In one widely read article the journalist Simon Jenkins, a former editor of British newspaper *The Times*, dramatically predicted that "the towers of Dubai...will collapse", that "sand will drift round their trunkless legs" and that "animals will inhabit their basements."

The article, he says, attracted strongly worded complaints and criticism from people based in Dubai and the Gulf.

There had been little formal interaction between the two schools of

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thought on Dubai and its current woes, until, that is, the topic was recently the subject of the latest of the highly successful Doha Debates series.

Now in its fifth season, the Doha Debates prides itself as a forum for public debate in the Arab world. The debates are held in the Qatari capital in front of an audience largely made up of students from the country's growing number of high-profile universities – who are given the chance to put their own questions on pressing issues to public figures who have in the past included speakers of the stature of former US president Bill Clinton.

The latest debate, filmed in Doha



and screened on satellite news channel BBC World, was held on the motion ‘This House believes Dubai is a bad idea’.

Jenkins was joined by human rights activist Sharla Musabih, an Emirati who has been living in the US since running a Dubai-based centre for abused women and children in making the case for motion. Opposing them, and offering a spirited defence of Dubai, were UAE-based economic analyst Nasser al Ghaith, and Mishal Kanoo, deputy chairman of The Kanoo Group, one of the largest independent groups of companies in the Gulf. A lively discussion was moderated by award-winning journalist Tim Sebastian, formerly of the BBC’s HardTalk programme.

Speaking to *The Gulf* before the filming of the broadcast, Kanoo could not hide his irritation at the fact that Dubai’s recent financial woes were being used as an excuse for a debate



Simon Jenkins, former editor of British newspaper *The Times*

‘This was a property boom in the most ostentatious way’

on the emirate’s very existence.

“To be honest, part of me is really insulted by the motion [of the debate],” he said.

Kanoo said the world’s major economies have had far longer than the UAE to learn how to regulate their economies.

“Why would you expect a country that is literally 38 years old, younger than I am, to be on a par with those large countries, those economically developed countries?” he asked.

Mr Kanoo reserved much of his ire for the British press in particular, alleging that UK newspaper *The Guardian* had run 74 negative stories about Dubai in the space of 17 days, following the news of Dubai World’s troubles.

“I thought, ‘you know what, if I travel today and I come back, the doors will be shut’. Which of course is not the case; we still have functioning businesses and entities which are still profitable in Dubai.”

Dubai’s other defender in the latest of the Doha Debates, Nasser al Ghaith, said the emirate’s growth in recent years had been a much-needed success story for the Middle East.

“Dubai represented what is possible in the Middle East. It showed how to make everything from nothing, because Dubai had no oil revenues compared with other states – like Iraq or Algeria – who made nothing from everything.”

“We could hear about success stories in the Far East, with the Asian tiger economies, we could hear success stories in South America and even in Africa, but we needed a Middle Eastern model, and Dubai was at the forefront of that pursuit.”

However, even as a supporter of the emirate’s recent development, Al Ghaith identifies a critical fault-line.

“Dubai until 2003, was a very good model which was based on a sound economic basis,” he says.

“Unfortunately what happened in 2003, is the [creation of the] so-called real estate adventure model. It was a real estate adventure which was heavily dependent on borrowing.”

The construction of ever more outlandish real estate projects, particularly as the first effects of the global financial crisis began to bite elsewhere in the world, made Dubai vulnerable to a backlash, according to Jenkins.

“The form of [Dubai’s] self-confidence was so in your face, this wasn’t just a stock market boom, this was a boom in property in the most ostentatious way.”

But if many in the region feel the likes of Jenkins have gone too far in their criticism of Dubai, there is a growing consensus that the emirate would reap the benefits of greater transparency and a more robust exchange of views.

Panel members who agreed to speak against the motion, including Mark Beer, chief executive of Dubai’s British Businessmen’s Group, had to be replaced after they pulled out at short notice, while five journalists representing Dubai newspapers and magazines also withdrew. It was the opinion of organisers that they had decided the event was too contentious.

Kanoo said canvassing a wide range of opinions would help make Dubai stronger going forward.

“I think if I am given the maximum spectrum of opinions I will be able to come up with something that works best for everyone and more importantly as the city of Dubai allows me to progress further and faster.”

Ultimately the optimism of Kanoo and Al Ghaith carried the day, the Doha Debates motion that Dubai is a “bad idea” defeated by a margin of 62 to 38 per cent after an audience vote.

“Let’s face it, even today, with all the negative press about Dubai, if you ask the average person in the Arab world ‘where would you want to go to set up your business?’ or ‘where would you want to go to prosper?’ I promise you Dubai will still be high on his list,” said Kanoo. ■