

NATIONAL DAY RALLY 2012

SPEECH BY MDM HALIMAH YACOB, MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH & SPORTS, 26 AUG 2012 AT UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE

1 Every year on National Day, I ask myself what it means to be a Singaporean. Is this a place only for the rich and successful or is it a place for Everyman and Everywoman? Do we give people second chances or do we write them off as failures just because they take the road less travelled?

2 Singapore has not departed from the principles upon which it was founded. It continues to give opportunities to everyone, provided they are prepared to work hard.

3 Take Ms Chong Hui Xian, my resident in Bukit Batok East, who studied at a neighbourhood school, the Yusof Ishak Secondary School. She had scored only 151 points for her PSLE and was posted to the Normal Technical stream. She then proceeded to ITE College East and then to Ngee Ann Polytechnic. She did well, won prestigious awards, and got into NTU to do accountancy. In her third year at NTU now, she will soon be starting lessons at Jonkoping University in Sweden on a five month attachment programme. Hui Xian has been actively involved in community service so as to give back to society. I am very proud of her.

4 We were poor when we became independent in 1965. Many of us remember the muddy roads, the rickety buses, the chalky blackboards in school. After independence, Singapore did many things that others had not even dreamt of doing. We welcomed foreign investments, for instance, while others shunned them for nationalist reasons. We dreamt big. We gave people hope. We built a remarkable society.

5 Still, 47 years since independence, we also face many challenges. We have to continue dreaming big, give people hope, build an even more remarkable society.

6 We have to ensure that a widening income gap does not make it harder for able but poor people to do well. The Prime Minister in his National Day Message spoke of a fair and just society, with opportunities for all, an inclusive society with a heart.

7 Our meritocratic system must provide opportunities for all Singaporeans, regardless of their background, to pursue their dreams. Every Singaporean must get the proper education and training to succeed. Every talent – not just the purely academic – must be nurtured.

8 We must also help those who, due to personal circumstances or through no fault of their own, are unable to help themselves. Maintaining social mobility in a mature economy will be a challenge. But we must persevere to help low-income families. Failure to do so will lead to social segregation and instability.

9 Once on a public holiday, I took a taxi to attend an event. The taxi driver told me that his goal was to make sure that his two sons in primary school entered university so that they could have a better life. He worked hard and spent a significant portion of his income on tuition for his children. He had missed the boat himself but was determined that his sons would not.

10 In the year I have been at MCYS, I have visited many VWOs. I have been inspired by their dedication. They have kept hope alive among the most disadvantaged of families. I have met many of the families too and I am inspired by their tenacity.

11 We tend to think the needy are helpless and we must solve all their problems. We are wrong. Sometimes we can do more harm than good by not respecting their desire for dignity.

12 For example, I know an old lady who collects old newspapers in my constituency. I had asked my RC members umpteen times to ask her whether she needed any financial help. The answer is always no. I have asked her personally too -- several times. The reply is always the same – an emphatic NO. I have learnt to respect her wishes and her desire for pride and control over her own life.

13 But for those who need help, we are committed to doing more for them. We will continue to improve our approaches, for not all are able to access the opportunities available. Some families need dedicated support and intervention. We are putting in more resources to strengthen our social services sector.

14 But the government cannot walk alone in doing this. It needs to partner social service agencies to better understand the specific needs of poor families and develop relevant services for them.

15 We also need community support, particularly among our youth. You may have heard of Food Bank Singapore, a not-for-profit organisation, started by a brother and sister team, 33 year old Nicholas and 34 year old Nichol Ng. Food Bank links people in need with companies and individuals with excess food to give away. Caring Singaporeans looking out for one other is the most powerful individual expression of our nation's values.

16 Let me conclude by sharing with you the story of 27 year old Nurulsiyah Mohammad Taha. Nurul was born with spinal muscular atrophy and she is one of our paralympians. She is one of the best boccia players in the world. Boccia is a form of lawn bowling. She has won several awards, including coming in first at the 2011 National Disability League.

17 Nurul has also excelled in her studies. She studied at Raffles Girls School and then went on to National Junior College, graduating with a Bachelor of Accountancy Degree from SMU. She is now working in IRAS.

18 Nurul and Hui Xian represent the true Singapore spirit that we must value, nurture and grow.

19 My fellow Singaporeans, we have a compelling vision: “to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality,” as our Pledge says. But to better achieve this vision, everyone has to play a part. None of us is a passive bystander; none of us can be a mere spectator. We are all co-creators of our common future.

20 Happy National Day.

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