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**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN
MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
AT THE PUB STAFF UNION
30TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER & DANCE
AT NEPTUNE THEATRE & RESTAURANT
ON 19 OCTOBER 1997 AT 7.30 PM**

Thank you for inviting my wife and I to share in your 30th Anniversary celebrations.

I understand this Anniversary celebration is a significant one for the PUB Staff Union (PUBSU). It will be your last one before you merge with the PUB Daily Rated Employees Union (PUBDREU), as advised by NTUC. I am sure it was not an easy decision for both Unions in view of your long tradition but I believe it is a correct one. In this way, you will be able to pool your resources to better serve your members who are after all working in the same organisation.

In today's competitive environment, your members will be playing an even more important role in the development of Singapore's water resources and supply of electricity. They will have to learn new skills and make use of the latest technology to provide a higher level of service to your customers.

Singapore has long recognised that our most important asset is our people. Government can provide the hard infrastructure, like ports, airports, roads, and

power stations. But, we need outstanding planners, designers, engineers, and IT experts to plan, design and manage such world-class infrastructure. We also need innovative and productive operators and technicians to ensure the smooth running of these facilities and systems. Finally, we depend on caring and efficient managers, sales executives and front-line officers to provide good customer service. That is why we have, over the last 32 years since independence, invested heavily in educating and training our people.

However, in spite of all these efforts, we are still short of skilled manpower and talent in various fields. That is why, as the Prime Minister explained at the National Day Rally, we must now make a concerted effort to gather the best talents to Singapore to strengthen our team. Foreign talent will bring with them valuable expertise and experience that will contribute to the growth of our economy and "make S'pore a cosmopolitan, global, open society where people from many lands can feel at home".

Since PM raised the subject in August, there has been considerable discussion in the media and among the people. Many welcome the move. However, some are concerned that they will be worse off when more foreigners come to Singapore. Several Union leaders were reported to have told NTUC Secretary-General Mr Lim Boon Heng that workers were "a little bit cheesed off" by the Government's proposal to bring in more foreign talent.

They feel that they will be worse off as the foreigners compete with them not only for jobs but also school places for their children. They are concerned that the influx of foreigners will raise the prices of limited resources like houses and cars, and generally increase the cost of living. There is also the concern that the influx of foreign talent may cause social problems because of different cultural values.

Such reactions are not unexpected. We should address these concerns and we will. But, in the process we must not over-react. Let us stop and think. Are we not ourselves descendants of foreigners? For many of us present this evening, our parents or grandparents were immigrants themselves. When Singapore was a colony, the colonial government actively encouraged traders and labourers from China, India and Southeast Asia to do business and to work here. Attracted by the prospects of a better life, our forefathers came to these shores. Their blood, sweat and tears transformed both their lives and the destiny of this country. Modern Singapore is a nation of immigrants and their descendants. Our forefathers came to Singapore not intending to settle but to make a living and eventually to return home, when things improved. "Home" was some village in India or China or elsewhere in South East Asia. As they settled down and raised their families here, a sense of belonging gradually emerged. Today for them, "home" is Singapore.

In the same way, we hope that some of the foreign talents that come to Singapore will stay on, start to sink roots and eventually become citizens of this country. When they do, they will help make Singapore a more attractive and dynamic place and all Singaporeans will be able to benefit from the energy and fresh ideas generated by them.

Even if the foreigners do not choose to become citizens, they still contribute to Singapore during their stay here. Without them, many of our successful companies would not be able to operate or to do so well. SIA hires talent from all over the world for its various operations. There are more than 40 computer professionals from countries such as Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, UK. In their SATS kitchens, they have people from Austria, Germany, India, Japan and Switzerland. SIA's Engineering Company recruits aircraft engineers from as far away as Canada, Pakistan, Seychelles, and

technicians from China, India and Myanmar. 25 per cent of SIA's pilots are expatriates who come from UK, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa. Another key operational area with a significant number of foreign staff is Cabin Crew, where more than 400 crew are foreign recruits. They come from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and India. Altogether, foreign nationals make up almost 16 per cent of SIA's total staff strength. Without them, SIA would be struggling to get off the ground. By co-opting foreign talent and blending them into the SIA family, SIA has been able to compete with the best and biggest airlines in the world and come out ahead.

Let me give you another example. When we first decided to set up the S-League, many people told me that we were crazy. It would not succeed, they said, because Singapore is too small, our talent base is too narrow and we simply do not have enough talented footballers. Nevertheless, we decided to proceed. After all, that is what they said about Singapore when we became independent in 1965, that we would not survive, that we were too small, no natural resources etc.

Our first task was to make sure that the football standard was good and matches were exciting. We needed to have at least eight to ten teams to make it an exciting league. This meant we had to find about 200 players of a suitable standard. Unfortunately, the observation about lack of footballing talent was true.

We decided to bring in foreign players. We allowed each club to hire as many as five foreign players. This in itself caused some concern. How were we going to develop our own talent if almost half the team is made up of foreigners? Would they deprive our local players of the chance to perform? We also did the same for foreign coaches. The same doubts surfaced. How were our local coaches going to learn etc?

We decided to take a long-term view. We believed that the presence of the foreign players and coaches would benefit the locals, in several ways. First, by their presence and through their skills, they would be able to create greater interest and excitement in the league. This would give the league a better chance of success. Once the league takes off, as I am confident it will, our local boys can look forward to a full-time career in football, first as players and later as club managers. Without the foreign contingent, our first fully professional football league could not have taken off.

Secondly, by playing and training alongside and against the foreign players, our local players and coaches will be challenged and motivated to raise their football skills and experience. In this way, we can build up our own talent pool and raise the standard of Singapore football, something which is long overdue.

Rather than look upon foreign and local players as opposing forces, I look upon them like the two legs of a footballer. You can play football with one arm and as we saw with a Tiong Bahru player this season, but you cannot play football with one leg. One cannot work without the other. You need both legs, one leg to kick and the other leg to balance. It is this combination of local and foreign talent that will eventually make the Singapore-league a success.

Even those countries which do not lack depth in footballing talents have decided that foreign players are good for them. The English Premier League, probably the most successful league in the world, has opened its doors to foreign talent, from Italy, Brazil, Norway, Netherlands, France, Nigeria etc. Manchester United, probably the best supported club in the world, is not short of local talent. Yet, it was a foreign import by the name of Eric Cantona who was one of their most popular stars last season. This season, their local players like Ryan Giggs

and David Beckham still have to fight for a place in the first team with players like Jordi Cruyff from Holland, Ole Gunnar Skjollskaer from Norway and Karel Poborsky from Czech Republic, and look what it has done for them!

There is a lesson in this for us. Yes, the presence of foreigners will mean more competition. But if they bring to us special skills and teach us better ways of doing things, if they motivate us to excel and make better use of our own talents, then surely the smart thing to do is to include them in our team to compete with others. If as a result of our own insecurity and suspicion, we exclude talented foreigners from Singapore, we will be the losers when they compete against us from outside.

Tonight, as we celebrate 30 years of your success and look forward to many more good years for your members, my message to you is a simple one: Let us open our hearts to all those who wish to come and live and work here. Better still, let us help those who so wish to transplant themselves and sink roots into our soil. By helping them, we are also helping ourselves.

May I congratulate you on your 30th anniversary and wish you all the best in your new adventure as you lead the staff and workers of PUB to meet the challenges ahead.
