

10 DEC 1997

PRESS RELEASE

Release No. 42/NOV

16-0/97/11/24

97 - LHL - 16

**SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE SECOND POLYTECHNIC FORUM
ON "EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE 21"
AT 9.00 A.M. ON MONDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 1997
AT NTUC PASIR RIS RESORT**

An Eventful Year

Last year, at the First Polytechnic Forum, the Prime Minister discussed some possible scenarios for Singapore – different ways the future could unfold for us, and what challenges we might face as a result, as an economy, a society, and a nation.

The Prime Minister spoke in September 1996. At that time, the region was booming. All our neighbours were doing well. The scenarios he painted, of how things might go wrong, seemed hypothetical and remote. These were contingencies for the distant future, not things to worry about immediately.

One year later, we are still doing well. But it has been a far more eventful year, for Singapore and for the region, than anyone anticipated. It began with our General Election campaign last December. Tang Liang Hong stood as a Workers' Party candidate in Cheng San GRC. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the dangers of Chinese chauvinism and racial politics became a hotly contested issue. It reminded us that the old pulls of race, language and religion were still

alive. We have made much progress in nation building. But these fault lines in our society remain, dormant but not disappeared.

The clash with Tang Liang Hong and the Workers' Party over Chinese chauvinism unexpectedly caused strains in our relations with Malaysia. After the elections, Tang had fled to Johor Baru, claiming that his life was in danger in Singapore. The Senior Minister made a statement in an affidavit for a court hearing, that this could not be, because Johor Baru was notorious for muggings, shootings and car-jackings. Later Tang's Malaysian lawyer publicised SM's statement in Malaysia. This triggered a violent emotional outburst against SM and Singapore. The tension continued for several months, even after the SM twice apologised for his words.

This episode showed how delicate relations with our neighbours can be. A tempest may arise suddenly, even when things are apparently going well, and there is no intention of causing problems. The recent traffic jams at the Causeway is another small example. We must understand and accept this as being inherent in the bilateral relationship between Singapore and Malaysia. We must manage this relationship sensitively to avoid causing unnecessary offence, and cooperate pragmatically for mutual benefit wherever possible. Yet we must stand up quietly but firmly for ourselves and for Singapore, especially when challenged.

Then came the haze. We have experienced haze before, but not so severely. Forest fires in Indonesia burnt out of control. The smoke spilled over to neighbouring countries. Beside ourselves, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines, were also affected. The smoke even reached Australia and Sri Lanka.

We could not isolate ourselves from our neighbour's problems. We

worked with them to tackle the common threat. We provided Indonesia with satellite photographs of the fires, and personnel to help man the command post in Jakarta. But a quick solution was impossible. When our neighbours run into difficulties, whether environmental, economic or social, we must expect to be affected.

The biggest development for the region, which has still not run its course, has been the financial instability which began in May in Thailand. It spread to Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and even shook stock markets in the US, Europe and Latin America. It has grown into a major crisis of confidence. Exchange rates and stock markets have fallen dramatically in several countries. Investors have sold their holdings of shares and currency to protect themselves against possible future losses, further pushing the markets down.

This regional crisis holds many lessons for us. First, how the countries ran into economic problems. They borrowed excessively from abroad, and then used the money for unproductive investments, especially in property, causing a property bubble.

Second, how the loss of confidence spread from Thailand to its neighbours. Indonesia's and Malaysia's economies did not have the same serious weaknesses as Thailand. Yet they too were dragged in. And once confidence was shaken, exchange rates and stock markets fell, the banks and companies were weakened, and previously manageable problems became more serious.

Third, how important it is for governments to handle the crisis decisively and convincingly. Investors watched closely as events unfolded, and reacted swiftly to fresh developments. It was not just the initial problem which mattered, but also how the governments managed the crisis. Awkward or indecisive

handling can further erode confidence and worsen matters. On the other hand, prompt and resolute actions to address the real problems and carry out fundamental reforms helps to restore confidence and convince investors that the country is on the mend.

Singapore remains an oasis of relative calm and quiet confidence in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty. Fortunately for us, the storm has passed us by, this time. It is because we have focussed on fundamentals, avoided excesses, and invested in those things that count over the long-term – productive infrastructure, an effective and credible SAF, and a sound education system which produces good citizens and a hardworking, competitive workforce.

Preparing for the Future

What do the events of this year have to do with the topic, "Education in Singapore 21"? I think this has been an excellent "education year", because of the many lessons we should learn from the events that have taken place. The same events will not repeat themselves, but the forces which caused them will remain the underlying reality of South East Asia for a long time to come.

Your education should give you not just academic or professional learning, but also the ability to analyse events, to understand the fundamental forces that cause them, and to appreciate how they are relevant to our future. If we learn these lessons well, our shared experience of troubles will educate a whole generation of Singaporeans, and help to bond us together.

Looking ahead, whether Singapore survives and prospers will depend, first, on our making a successful transition to a knowledge-based society, and second, on achieving a strong sense of social cohesion and rootedness among its

people.

Education is not by itself the complete answer to these twin challenges, but it must be a major part of the answer. Education does not set the agenda for the future, but it moulds the people who will determine the future of the nation.

Through education, our young will acquire the skills, mind-sets and values to be productive, valuable workers in the global economy, and to develop strong bonds with their country and fellow Singaporeans. The education system must fit our young for the future.

Moulding the Singaporean

How do we judge the success of our education system? Not just by the number of A's our students get in major national examinations, or by the high standing of our students in international comparisons of science and mathematics achievements, although these are important. Equally important is the quality of the people the education system produces – their integrity, character, and intelligence; their attitude towards work, their ability to be team-players, and their sense of responsibility and commitment to society. This is the traditional Asian concept of education, embracing balanced development of the whole personality – moral, cognitive, physical, social and aesthetic.

For those who go on to become leaders, Singapore expects even more of them. Many of these leaders will have studied in our polytechnics and universities. They need to be not just educated persons, but exceptional people. People who not only understand the constraints and vulnerabilities of Singapore, but have committed themselves to come up with creative solutions, surmount these challenges, and rally Singaporeans to work together to make this a better

home worth fighting and staying for.

Towards "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation"

The "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" vision is the Government's effort to improve our education system fundamentally, to mould Singaporeans who are ready for the future. The next century will bring a whole new set of problems and circumstances, some of which we cannot even imagine today. You will need to throw up your own leaders, identify your own problems, and discover ways to solve them.

We cannot provide you with set formulae for success, or comprehensive answers to problems that you will meet. What you are learning today is what we now know. But what exactly you will need to know in life we cannot yet tell. We can only fit you out to the best of our ability with the skills and knowledge, the values and instincts, to help you to deal with future challenges. The teacher is a guide for the first stage of your journey of exploration.

Our schools and tertiary institutions must become learning organisations, not teaching factories. Teachers and lecturers should continually seek to improve, to pick up best practices elsewhere, and to challenge students to find better solutions. These changes in our education system need to be supported by a national environment that promotes a learning mindset, and a society which upholds the fundamental values of equal opportunities and meritocracy. This is the way to become a learning nation.

Investing in Our Future

The "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" vision requires us to re-think our

formula for educational success. Over the last two years, the Ministry of Education has launched several major initiatives to achieve this goal –revamping career paths for teachers, teaching creative thinking in schools, introducing collaborative learning, stressing national education, making more use of IT, and giving schools more resources and greater autonomy.

These changes will take several years to work through. But their end result should be a quantum improvement in our whole education system. We will focus our resources on three areas: teachers, infrastructure and technology.

Teachers are central to the whole process of education. All our plans depend on our having teachers who understand and share these objectives, and will get them across to pupils in the classroom and through school activities. Whatever pupils pick up by using computers and the Internet, they will still need teachers to guide them to distinguish right and wrong, to think independently and creatively, to work as a team, to develop a strong sense of social responsibility, and to be good citizens.

To achieve this, teachers must be not just competent professionals who know their subjects, but dedicated people who give their hearts and souls to teaching, to inspire their pupils and leave on them an imprint for life.

Our teachers have generally done an excellent job, but we do not have enough of them. We have not recruited as many teachers as we need, or retained in service enough of those who did become teachers. Opportunities outside were simply too abundant, and the teaching profession could not compete.

The personnel situation improved last year when we introduced new schemes of service and promotions. The teaching profession is now attracting a

steady flow of recruits. We must keep it competitive, and build up the strength of our teaching force.

Quality is as important as numbers. Our small population puts a natural limit on the number of good teachers that we can recruit. Foreign teachers will help to supplement our numbers, particularly in areas where we do not have sufficient expertise, but they will never provide a complete answer to our needs.

Nevertheless, numbers do count. If we can continue to recruit steadily over the next decade, say 2,000 teachers per year of the right quality, then gradually we can improve our teacher pupil ratios. This will lighten the teaching load of teachers, and give them more time to plan lessons, upgrade themselves in regular in-service courses, improve their teaching practices through sharing and discussion with colleagues, and interact with students outside the classroom.

Next, we will improve our educational infrastructure. Our polytechnics are well equipped, especially the newer ones, as you know from your own experience. We have not stinted in providing all the facilities you need for a first class technical education. So are our universities, and the schools which we are now building. But our older schools, built over the last 30 years, are not all as up to date as the latest ones. The difference between the older and the newest schools is like that between the older HDB flats and the latest design-and-build blocks.

MOE will be upgrading or rebuilding all the schools and junior colleges to current specifications. Every school will have computer laboratories, larger classrooms, pastoral care and counselling rooms and offices, and infrastructure like power systems and computer networks are needed to support the new activities.

We are also building more schools, in order to convert all our double-session secondary schools to single-session schools. We should complete this by the year 2000. In the longer term, we may convert primary schools to single-session as well. Single-session schools can use the longer school day to pace out their curriculum hours, offer a wide range of programmes for all-round development of students, and foster stronger community ties.

Finally, we will make full use of technology to enhance the quality of learning. IT allows our teachers and students to extend their learning experience beyond the traditional boundaries of a school, makes learning more interesting, and brings it closer to the real world around us. Every pupil should leave school completely confident using computers. Early familiarity with IT will give our young a head-start for Singapore's competitive advantage.

Computers and IT can also help our teachers to be efficient and effective, and compensate to some extent for the manpower shortage. Hence the plans to put more computers in every school, and to provide every teacher with a notebook computer for doing his or her work.

I have spoken mostly about schools. But the same applies to our further education institutes – the universities, polytechnics and ITE. For most school leavers, school will not be the end of their education, but preparation for further education. 60 per cent of each cohort proceed for higher education – more than 20 per cent in the universities and 40 per cent in our polytechnics. Another 25 per cent will proceed to ITE. Many polytechnic students go on to get degrees, either immediately after graduation or after working for a few years. We will continue to invest in our further education institutions to keep them among the best in the world.

The vision of "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" will require us to spend more on education. We have to channel resources to those areas which will bring us maximum returns. We are presently spending 4 per cent of GDP on education. We need to raise this to 5 per cent of GDP. These are long term investments which we should make in good times and in bad, so long as we can afford them, unlike other items of more discretionary spending. By focussing on education, we will maintain and improve our lead over competitors. This will give us a long term advantage which will not be easily lost.

Conclusion

It is less than three years to the new millennium. Different countries will celebrate the new millennium in different ways. Some will hold millennium parties. Others will organise millennium exhibitions. Yet others will hope that their computer systems do not crash in the Year 2000.

Singapore should mark the new millennium by getting ourselves ready for it, whichever way it unfolds. By judiciously investing to educate our young to become thinkers and learners, we will maximise our chances and secure our future.

Individuals make a difference. As you set out on your careers, I hope each of you will think about how you personally can make a difference to Singapore. You have the potential and the responsibility to help other Singaporeans along. Make the most of this privilege.

**MICROFILMED
BY THE
NATIONAL
ARCHIVES OF
SINGAPORE
1999**

**NO
REPRODUCTION
MAY BE MADE
FROM THIS
MATERIAL
WITHOUT
PERMISSION**