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**SPEECH BY MR PETER CHEN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE,
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND MINISTRY OF TRADE & INDUSTRY
AT THE FRENCH ALUMNI GRAND GALA DINNER
ON 25 OCTOBER 2000 AT 7.40 PM AT THE
LES OISEAUX RESTAURANT, MARINA MANDARIN**

Dr Eric Teo, President of The French Alumni,
Your Excellency, Mr Michel Filhol, Ambassador of France in Singapore,
Distinguished Guests,
Members of The French Alumni,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here tonight to address a very special group of people in Singapore who have a distinct linguistic ability. Rather than follow the beaten path of going to an English speaking country for further studies, the members of The French Alumni chose to go to France. You now share a unique experience of having lived and studied in France.

2 I am pleased to note that the French Alumni members, have been successful in their careers. Many of you occupy key positions in the private and public sectors. With your French experience, you provide a natural bridge between

Singapore and the French community here. I understand you have played an important role in forging and enhancing better relationship between France and Singapore.

3 France is economically the world's fourth largest power in international trade, after the United States, Japan and Germany. It is one of the world's top investors on the world stage. The professional knowledge, social experiences and language proficiency that you have acquired in France will be an important asset to Singapore in meeting our globalisation challenges and plugging into the French-speaking world.

4 However, technological advances alone in this fast changing world create a risk of the dehumanisation of society. While the speed of communication has increased astronomically, the individuals ironically run the risk of losing the art of communication. Language is the key to all communication.

5 Language is however more than a tool for communication. It is a medium for the understanding and enjoyment of other cultures. Only with understanding can we hope to break down the barriers and prejudices between different peoples, different nations and different cultures. We sometimes like to think that we are uniquely successful in the way we do things. But once we have gained access to another culture through our understanding of another people's language, we are amazed by our discovery of the convergence of wisdom amongst different peoples. Unknowingly to each other, we may have in fact made the same observations and discoveries about life and human experience. We note, for example, the similarity in the many proverbs and idioms of the different languages. Indeed there are a great deal of borrowing too. Many English expressions have their origins in French. And the French today are fearful of the invasion of the Anglo-Saxon Americanisms into their language.

6 There are other curiosities. Very often, the same purpose is served equally effectively in a different way in another society, or the same thing known by a different name in a different culture. For example, the French drive on the "right" but we say that they drive on the "wrong" side of the road. We complain that their contents page is quite often found at the end of a book or that the letters on the spine of a book is "upside-down". Et cetera. For those of you in the technical stream, you will remember the bewilderment when you first read about Mariotte's law. You wonder why this supposedly fundamental law of physics commonly known to every secondary school student in France had never been taught to you in Singapore. The mystery is unravelled when you realise that it is none other than

Boyle's law. I suppose a young French student will be equally stumped if he is asked to enunciate Boyle's law.

7 The point is that two peoples may be referring to the same thing without realising it. Without knowing the other's language, each side will not know the other party's culture, norm and society. This gives rise to unnecessary misunderstandings. Divergence exists, and there will always be divergence. But the mutual understanding between two peoples will promote the convergence of ideas and values. At the very least it may result in an agreement to disagree.

8 Not being much of a linguist myself, I do envy the members of The French Alumni. You have the facility of the French language and have also gained an insight of French history, and you can understand the French perspective. You may even have some French *savoir-vivre* rubbed off onto you. That is not a bad thing at all because France has a vibrant culture and has been a leading light in the areas of arts, philosophy and humanity, besides science, medicine and technology. It is not surprising that The French Alumni does not comprise only engineers and business managers but also artists, musicians, architects and language specialists. With such diversity in talent amongst its members, who is better prepared to contribute towards deepening the cultural ties between France and Singapore?

9 France can be an inspirational source for us. We await the day when Singapore produces a Sartre, a Cézanne, or a Debussy. For now, it is heartening to note the increasing number of our secondary school students studying French as a third language in the Ministry of Education Language Centre (MOELC). The centre was established in 1979 with the objective of training young Singaporeans in foreign languages so that they can gain knowledge, experience and expertise in science and technology in foreign countries or meet the needs of the growing local tourist industry; and of producing adequate manpower to serve in the diplomatic service as well as in the industrial and commercial sectors in which foreign corporations play a significant role. Besides the MOELC, our junior colleges, polytechnics and universities also offer French language courses. MOELC alone has seen the enrolment of French language students rising from 898 in 1995 to 1102 in 2000. I recall the early days of the 1950s in Singapore when French was almost only taught in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Government of France and the French Embassy for their co-operation in the teaching and learning of French in our schools.

10 Despite the relatively small membership the French Alumni truly has a big heart. You have been presenting French Language Awards since 1992 to students

studying French in the MOELC, JCs and institutions of tertiary education. This year, you have in addition mustered your members' support to set up an Educational Fund as a means to returning to society and country what you have received. The country had made it possible for you to pursue a good basic education and helped to nurture you. Quite rightly so the French Department in the MOELC will be the first beneficiary of your generosity.

11 On this note, I would like to congratulate The French Alumni for its contribution towards a learning society in Singapore and the advancement of a better understanding and friendship between France and Singapore. On this auspicious occasion of The French Alumni's 20th anniversary, may I most sincerely wish you many challenging and fruitful years ahead!

12 Thank you.

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