

Singapore Government

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Speech by Mr David T E Lim, Minister of State for Defence and Information and The Arts, at the SMMWU Annual Dinner and Dance, at the Neptune Theatre on 29 December 2000, at 8.00 pm.

Mr John de Payva
President NTUC & Secretary-General SMMWU

Mr Joseph Tan,
President SMMWU

Mr William Soo,
Chairman of the Dinner and Dance Committee & Vice-President SMMWU

Members of the SMMWU,

Friends, ladies and gentlemen,

1. Firstly, let me wish all Christians a very blessed Christmas, all Malays and Muslims Selamat Hari Raya Adilfitri, all Chinese Xin Nian Kuai Le, Wan Shi Ru Yi, and to everyone present tonight a very happy and fulfilling new year!

2. It is indeed a distinct characteristic of Singapore that we should be celebrating so many different festivals over such a short period of time. We have grown up as a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-racial society. And today we live together in peace and prosperity.

3. Tonight is your night. The year 2000 is almost over. It has been a very eventful year. No doubt, the new year will bring new challenges, and I hope for each one of you personally, new achievements and milestones in your lives. I would like to take just a few minutes to share with you a story and 3 learning points from this story that I hope you will take with you into the New Year.

4. My story is about a conversation I had with the Chairman of major chemicals company, about whether or not to invest in Singapore. This took place several years ago when I worked with the EDB. My job then was to try to persuade US companies to invest here.

5. The Chairman of this company asked me a simple question: “If we invest in Singapore, can you guarantee me that your policies will not change over the next 20 years?” He was planning to make a very large and long-term investment, and was concerned that once he had sunk his money in, changes to our policies might make it more costly for him to do business in Singapore, and make his investment unprofitable.

6. But the EDB, and Singapore, does not make promises unless we are sure that we can keep them. I could not promise the Chairman that our policies would not change. Indeed, over the years we have changed our policies, both to look after the welfare of our workers, as well as to stay competitive.

7. What I said to the Chairman was this: “Sir, I cannot promise you that our policies will not change over the next twenty years. But I ask you to look at Singapore’s track record over the last 20 years. We have kept faith with our investors. Our policies have changed, but our investors have benefited. That’s all I can promise you – that Singapore will continue to strive to be competitive, and that our policies will continue to support your investment”.

8. My first point is that this relationship between investors and Singapore is also the essence of the relationship that we have between employers and employees in Singapore. Over the past four decades, the unions, and your union leaders, have played a critical role in building up the trust and goodwill that enables government, employers and workers to sit together and work out solutions to the challenges we face. Through such a tripartite approach, the solutions we work out benefit not just the investors, but also our workers, and give all of us a better and higher standard of living.

9. My second point is we can build on the solid foundation of this relationship to confidently meet the challenges of the future. Globalisation and IT will change fundamentally the nature of jobs. Employers cannot guarantee jobs for their employees. But in good faith, they can and should ensure that employees are given every opportunity to improve themselves, and to realize their potential. Likewise, employees must keep up with the needs of the company by upgrading their skills and adjusting to new competitive conditions. If they do not do so, they cannot expect their bosses to give them big bonuses or even to keep their jobs.

10. This two-way relationship of trust is fundamental for both employers and employees to do well. It is built up over time, and depends on good communications between employers and employees. This brings me to my third, and final point.

11. Unions, such as the SMMWU, can continue to play a value-adding role in this communication process. Firstly, unions can help to alert employees of the new types of skills that are needed in their industry, and encourage workers to attend training courses to upgrade their skills. Secondly unions can also help to alert employers of the needs of workers in coping with changes and challenges, and help employees bring up their needs. Thirdly, apart from skills training, unions can study and propose new ideas for more flexible work arrangements. For example flexible working hours will enable more women to enter the workforce, and help all workers achieve a better balance between work, family life and community services.

12. Ladies and gentlemen: We cannot predict the future. But our Singaporean way of tripartite co-operation has brought us through many challenges in the past.

If we continue to act in good faith, we can build on this foundation of trust and good will, and together meet the challenges of the future, and together enjoy the benefits of peace, progress and prosperity.

13. Let me wish all of you this happy outcome, as we celebrate together this evening.

Thank you.

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