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SPEECH BY THE FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND
MINISTER OF EDUCATION, DR GOH KENG SWEE, AT THE
ESTABLISHMENT DINNER AT MANDARIN BALLROOM, MANDARIN
HOTEL ON TUESDAY, 25 SEP 84 AT 8.30 PM

More than thirty years ago, a group of returned students looked at colonial Singapore and decided they had a mission to change the system. They then applied the lessons they learnt in British universities, set about building up a trade union following and, in 1954, formed the People's Action Party. It was an act of reckless folly. Mercifully for them and for Singapore, they did not receive the punishment they richly deserved.

If I were a deeply religious man, I would ascribe our escape to a benevolent God. As it is, I will leave the verdict to a future historian. You may ask :- "Why was our entry into politics reckless?" The answer is that we totally misread the situation, as indeed did many others. We did not understand that the mass base was firmly in the grip of the Communists, ably led by the underground Singapore Town Committee of the Malayan Communist Party.

The People's Action Party was immediately captured by the Town Committee and we were their prisoners. We were like innocent virgins roaming a brothel area. Misfortune could hardly be avoided. Such were the modest - if that is the right word - beginnings of the PAP. I will not tell you of the nine-year struggle waged between the Communists and us. This story will be described in all its drama in a forthcoming book by Dennis Bloodworth.

A long searing fight of this kind must leave its imprint on the contestants, both on their individual characters and the political institutions they operate - the party and the mass organisations. I want to tell you something about this and you will understand better why we are what we are and govern Singapore the way we do.

A person who has had a narrow escape with his life soon sees merit in the habit of prudence. This is exactly what happened to us. Machiavelli said :- "Men are fond of innovations, and liking the first taste, fail to see the poison within". Having failed at the beginning of our political career to see the poison within, we are always on the look-out for poison in new situations.

Prudence does not mean that one must always take counsel of one's fears. In the course of our political struggles of the first decade, we learnt that in a desperate situation, which confronted us all too often, timidity leads to disaster. Safety can be won only by daring. As Shakespeare aptly put it:- "Out of this nettle, danger, we plucked the flower, safety."

We also learnt that experience is a harsh task master. Deciding on policy and determining a line of action is different from engaging in a debate. Cabinet government is not a debating society or an academic seminar. These are intellectual exercises. Views are aired and if done with style and elegance, the participants go home happy. In government, you have to live with the consequences of your decision. If you make a mistake, the results are painful. In political life, there is no alibi for failure.

Dealing with real issues in this way can be a humbling experience. One result is the circumspection with which we hold an opinion on a given issue. The serene confidence with which western journalists and liberal academics prescribe solutions to our problems is a source of constant wonder to us. Especially is this so when their advice usually looks to us like a prescription for disaster.

Our close encounter with destruction at the hands of the Town Committee has led us to take two practical measures to secure our future. First, the Party Constitution was amended on 23 November 1958, to introduce a new class of members - Cadre Members - who have the right to elect the Party's Central Executive Committee. The Party branches had been heavily infiltrated and when the open break came in 1961, more than 90% of branches defected. If we had not changed the Constitution, they would have expelled us from the party instead of setting up Barisan Sosialis.

Next, we pre-empted the commanding heights of the political terrain by establishing an extensive network of grassroots organisations - the Citizens' Consultative Committees, Management Committees of Community Centres and Residents' Committees amongst others. They are now a normal part of Singapore's social landscape. Their origin can be traced to our desperate struggle with the Town Committee.

Experience in the first traumatic decade and the happier years after that has determined the style of work of the old guards. Some aspects are generally known, others are not. I will describe three main features. First, in our perspective, long-term benefits take precedence over

short-term costs. We are willing to take unpopular steps if the long-term advantages to Singapore justifies the policy. We can do this for two reasons:- first, our track record; second, the ability of the Prime Minister to carry the public on difficult and unpopular issues.

When faced with a nasty problem, we meet it head on. Experience shows that difficulties cannot be wished away. Postponing action in the hope that time solves everything usually makes your predicament worse. A case in point is the controversy over unmarried women graduates. It touches the raw nerve of those concerned - men and women graduates. Many wish that the issue had never been raised. But consider where we are heading for. In the decades to come, between two-thirds to three-quarters of women graduates will have no hope of getting married unless social habits are quickly changed. Those who want nothing done should demonstrate either that it is acceptable to condemn most of our best educated women to spinsterhood or that the problem will solve itself. Neither of these propositions will bear serious examination.

The third feature of the old guards is that we work as a close-knit team. This is not surprising as otherwise we could have hardly survived our early travails. We were also lucky to have as our skipper a man of outstanding qualities. I recall several occasions when all seemed lost. There appeared to be no answer to the terrifying dominance of the communist open front organisations in full cry. Yet he will come out with some devilish strategem to spring upon the enemy and confound them - more of this in Dennis Bloodworth's book.

I have described the traits of the old guards not out of nostalgia but because we are now in the process of handing the torch to the new guards. Not all the old guards are happy at the way it is being done. Some say we should allow leaders to emerge from in-fighting at the grassroots. I don't see how this can be done when, under the Party Constitution, the party branches are deprived of any power to control the Central Executive.

I want to say something about the new guards, not by way of advice - which I don't like giving in public - but to draw attention to some basic differences between their situation and the old guards'. From this, it will follow that they cannot follow the style of work of the old guards. They will have to find their own way.

While we have established our authority to govern, they have to win their spurs. They can do this in two ways. First, if Singapore enjoys a long period of tranquillity in the years to come, they will win public respect and confidence by the way they manage their Ministries, explain policies to the public, handle debates in Parliament and deal with constituency affairs. Singapore is a small place and the public well-informed.

The second way provides the real test of their mettle. This will happen if the Republic runs into a major crisis. I naturally hope that this will not happen. The young guards have no experience of handling crisis situations and hence their ability in crisis management remains untested. For the time being this is of no great concern as the Prime Minister will still be around. I think

we have put together a good team, people with good minds, sober habits and upright character.

The nature of the electorate is changing. With the passage of time, the generation of the old guards will disappear with the old guards. A new generation is emerging and in five years' time, they will form 70% of the electorate. This generation has never experienced hardship. Some of my colleagues when making this statement seem to imply that the new generation has thereby committed some gross misdemeanour. Of course this is not true.

Since they have not gone through hard times, as the old generation had, their response to Government policies will be different. Indeed their expectations of life must be different. Their willingness to accept present sacrifice for future benefit will not be the same as that of the old generation. These are the facts of life and it is no use bewailing them.

The upshot of all this is that the style of government must change and probably, to a significant degree, the substance of policy as well. But the ends of policy are immutable. They are, first, to achieve prosperity for the Republic and her citizens and second, to ensure the survival of the Republic as an independent sovereign state.

Achieving prosperity is a matter of generating good rates of economic growth. We have been spectacularly successful in the past two decades and barring a major calamity such as a world depression we should get by in the

years ahead. I will therefore not discuss this subject as the issues are well known to all of you. On the other hand, people are less well informed about the survival of the Republic as an independent sovereign state. As a result, people take our existence as an independent state for granted even though they know that there is no natural law of the universe which lays down that this must be so till the end of time.

In weighing the odds of peace and war, we must go beyond the foreseeable future into the indefinite future. The history of mankind shows that man's capacity to inflict injury upon himself seems to be boundless. Edward Gibbon in his "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" gave this definition of history. "History" he said, "is little more than a register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."

Gibbon's study covered a span of more than a thousand years, a period which saw Europe's decline into barbarism after the collapse of Roman order - hence his dismal judgement of human frailty. We cannot look as far ahead as a thousand years, nor need we do so. The issues which I have described are well understood by our citizens.

National service imposes not only a great sacrifice of time and money on the young men called up. It is also unpleasant as military training in the combat arms aims to push the soldier to the limits of human endurance. Yet in every election since National Service was introduced, its abolition has never been an election issue. Opposition parties may be deficient in many ways, but they understand

that calling for the abolition of National Service will not gain them votes. The average Singapore citizen may not be a towering intellect versed in the latest doctrine on military deterrence. But deep in his heart, he knows the dangers that he faces are real and not hypothetical. A kind of folk wisdom has grown on the need to defend ourselves.

What are the implications of this to the establishment? First, we must never lower our guard. This means keeping the SAP at as high a level of efficiency as 60% of our GNP will allow. It also means channelling sufficient high quality manpower for defence purposes. This need is clear enough.

The second requirement is a more subtle and less tangible one. If we regard the SAP - its combat and support elements in the Army, Air Force and Navy - as the hardware of deterrence, we also need to complement this with appropriate software. Here I am not thinking of tactical and strategic skills at higher SAP command and staff, ie of generalship. This can be regarded as an essential part of the defence package. I am thinking of the attitude of the civilian population, more critically that of members of the establishment. The crucial element here is their character, ie their nerve and resolve in a crisis, and their understanding of what is at stake. We must never forget that our existence as an independent sovereign state cannot be made to depend on the sufferance of others. The most dependable guarantee of our independence is a strong SAP. A strong SAP, in turn, depends on the political will to make the effort and pay the price.

Having said this, I must go to my next point, which is that while we must prepare for war to keep the peace, we must not get paranoid about this. The worst policy is to arm ourselves to the point where our neighbours misread of our intentions. We are not Israel and S E Asia is not the Middle East.

And so as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of nation-building we find the Republic in good shape and the people in good heart. We enjoy full employment, the overseas reserves are abundant, economic growth had been strong even during the long world recession of 1979 - 82, personal incomes have been rising, human skills are improving as we learn new technology. This seems an auspicious moment for a major step in the process of leadership self-renewal.

Ours is in a unique political situation. In other democracies what we are doing is unnecessary, in fact, unthinkable. The opposition parties stand ready as alternative governments. This cannot be said of our opposition parties. Where countries are governed by military juntas, the generals in charge keep a close watch on other generals, even colonels, not to groom them for leadership but to forestall a coup d'etat. In both situations, the incumbents are too preoccupied with hanging on to office to worry about building a succession. Even in communist states where everything is supposed to be planned, they do not plan leadership succession. Instead leaders hold on as long as possible, resulting in rule by gerontocracy.

It seems right that we are preparing for the largest replacement exercise of MPs and Ministers at the next general election. More than two dozen candidates had been selected after meticulous screening. To the old guards who are stepping down, may I say:- "Thank you for your contribution. It has been greater than you imagine. You will be leaving in good company. I will be with you." To the new guards soon joining us may I say:- "Welcome to you. Some of you will discover before long that you have joined a Holy Order that expects total commitment from you. That will be your moment of truth. You will then regard the present condition of the Republic not as a pinnacle of achievement but as a base from which to scale new heights."
