



SPEECH

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Round Up Reply by Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean in Parliament

20 Jan 2006



Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, first of all, let me thank Members of the House for sharing their views and comments on this very important issue of National Service.

Sir, I am heartened to hear Members of the House expressing their very strong support for National Service and to hear that their support is shared by their constituents. Indeed, it is such support for National Service and the commitment shown by our NSmen that make our nation's defence work. As I said, 700,000 Singaporeans have served National Service or are serving National Service and, without their commitment, we will not have the modern thriving Singapore that we have today.

Sir, let me address now some of the specific issues that Members have raised.

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As I have explained earlier, National Service has served a critical need and that is, in my view, the first principle of National Service. Firstly, criticality, secondly, universality, and thirdly, equity. That critical need is national defence and we should not be trading that off against other forms of service, whether it is in the social sector, in the arts or in sports, because they do not rank in the same way as that necessity for national defence.

MINDEF feels that we can apply the principle of National Service which is to compel a person to serve only if it is to serve a critical need. We cannot apply that principle to compel a person to serve in the arts or in sports or in other areas. That would not make sufficient sense and would not be a strong enough justification.

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Many Members talked about the need for flexibility. Sir, indeed, MINDEF does agree that we should apply flexibility and allow Singaporeans, as far as possible, to fulfil their individual goals. But this flexibility has to be exercised within that principle of equity. If we do not exercise flexibility within the principle of equity, then a sense of unfairness will prevail, and again the commitment to National Service will be undermined.

Let me give some examples of flexibility though Members may not consider these to be flexibility. The Enlistment Act provides for an enlistment age of 18 years old and as Dr Loo pointed out to me just now during the break, we had people, certainly during Dr Loo's time or even my time, classmates who were drafted at the age of 18 years old, regardless of what they were doing. They may be studying but they were required to do National Service while they were studying – part-time in the Police National Service and in the Special Constabulary. While the rest of us were studying and could enjoy life, they had to spend two nights a week doing National Service, even during examination period, as Dr Loo reminded me.

Today, MINDEF does exercise flexibility. We do not insist on young men being enlisted immediately after their 18th birthday. And we do grant deferments to allow them to complete their 'A' levels or polytechnic diplomas before enlisting for National Service. This, in fact, also contributes, in a sense, to equity because we allow them to proceed to the same level of education before we require them to serve.

However, deferment cannot be free for all. The concept of National Service does involve making a sacrifice or postponing a person's individual gratification or pursuit of his own personal life goals to serve the nation when the nation needs his service. So the concept of self sacrifice and postponement of personal gratification is an inherent part of National Service and it is not possible to have a system where the person's personal gratification is completely fulfilled and yet, at the same time, he serves National Service. These two things are not completely compatible.

But more importantly, we must bear in mind our fundamental principle of equity, not just in terms of whether one serves National Service or not, but also in terms of when one serves National Service. A deferment policy can be flexible only to the extent where equity is maintained. Otherwise, as I have said, there will be a loss of morale and commitment if it is perceived that some can get deferred to pursue their personal goals while others have to serve. As far as possible, we also want pre-enlistees of the same school cohort to enlist for National Service at around the same time. This helps in terms of bonding - the cohesion of the units and their fighting spirit - and also ensures equity in that they all bear similar interruptions to their studies or careers.

Sir, Mr Tan Soo Khoo cited an example of the flexibility that MINDEF has exercised in allowing deferment of a few months for the World Cyber Games. So indeed, MINDEF is flexible. But Mr Tan Soo Khoo, on the other hand, also criticised MINDEF for being inequitable for allowing Mr Stanley Aw to be deferred for the World Cyber Games but not other people to be deferred to pursue personal goals in their studies and so forth. Therein lies the dilemma that we have to face and we have to deal with this all the time in MINDEF, to try to balance flexibility with equity, and we try to do it in the best way that we can. Unfortunately, different persons, particularly individuals who are affected by not being allowed deferment, will often feel that we have not been fair to them, that somehow or other, we should have let them go. But in the end, we have to look at the totality of the cases and decide in as fair a way as possible, in order to be fair to all those who serve.

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Members have also suggested that we should take into account the talents and contributions that NS defaulters can make to Singapore when dealing with them. They are concerned that if we are too harsh, such NS defaulters may not want to come back and Singapore may end up losing their talents. As I have explained earlier, universality and equity are two of the fundamental principles of National Service. NS defaulters, regardless of talent, must be dealt with in an equal manner. We will be seen as being unfair if we were to treat talented NS defaulters more leniently than others. Besides, the fact that they are talented and can

contribute to Singapore does not detract from the fact that they have defaulted on their NS duties. Everyone, regardless of talent, must play their part in our nation's defence. And I cannot put it more eloquently than Mr Iswaran did just now.

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Members have also made the point that post-graduate studies are more important today and so forth. But there is nothing to stop Singaporeans from going on to post-graduate studies after they have finished their National Service. In fact, many Singaporeans do and more Singaporeans do today than they did in the past. The important thing is that you should complete the service obligations before you move on. In fact, one could argue that you should complete your service obligations early so that you can proceed with the rest of your career without interruptions, because after you have finished your graduation, you may get a \$1 million job offer - as many of our Singaporeans do - because you are very talented and able. You may get a very attractive offer to do your post-graduate studies. So it is better for Singaporeans to finish their National Service as early as possible before they move on to the next phase of their life.

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Mr Sin Boon Ann also asked whether those with special talents can serve in a different way or be deferred from NS so as to fully develop their potential. I think Dr Tan also asked similar questions. MINDEF has exercised flexibility, for example, in allowing pre-enlistees who are top athletes who are chosen to represent Singapore to defer their enlistment for a few months in order to train and compete at key games. These deferments are for limited periods and for specific purposes and the pre-enlistees will be enlisted once their deferment period is over. You must recall that Melvyn Tan actually was granted deferment for a finite period and was asked to return on the completion of the finite period of deferment. Any such deferments are finite and the person has to return to perform his National Service when his deferment period is over or he will become an NS defaulter, and must face the consequences.

Sir, I was at the SEA Games recently in Manila and I was with many athletes. I had a very loud and indignant response from a former national athlete who is now in the management committee of one of our sports associations. He was quite indignant and quite outraged that those who did not serve their NS could get away so lightly, and he was quite insistent that everyone has to perform his duties. He had just, incidentally, completed his ICT before

rushing off to Manila to be with the team. Sir, these are the kinds of people and the type of commitment that we need in order to maintain our defence.

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Dr Tan Cheng Bock asked about citizens who left at a young age. Basically, Sir, the parents have to decide. And as Mr Iswaran has pointed out just now, many Singaporean parents who have young children who live abroad want to retain their Singapore citizenship, want to retain their roots with Singapore and have urged their children to do National Service. I think that is the right way. We cannot be such that we want to keep our options open all the time and then, at a later stage in life, we jump whichever way the options appear best. And then, we want not to be able to do National Service, but then to be able to come back and enjoy the fruits of those who have performed their National Service dutifully.

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Mr Tan Soo Khoon asked about Permanent Residents and their liability for National Service. Perhaps, I should take this opportunity to expand on this subject a little. Permanent Residents are liable to serve National Service under the Enlistment Act. First generation Permanent Residents who are able to contribute to Singapore economically immediately upon the grant of PR status are administratively exempted from National Service. Second generation PRs, who are sponsored by their parents for PRs and those granted PRs at a young age based on their potential to contribute to Singapore in the future, are required to serve National Service. If NS-liable PRs fail to register or enlist for National Service, they would also be treated as NS defaulters. However, PRs have the option of renouncing their PR status. We cannot stop them from doing so since they are PRs and not Singapore citizens. Upon renunciation of their PR, they would no longer be liable for National Service.

Mr Chew Heng Ching asked about MINDEF's policy towards PRs who have renounced their PR status without serving NS and subsequently, changing their mind and wanting to study and work in Singapore and are prepared to serve their National Service. He argued that some of these PRs may be talents who would be able to serve to contribute to Singapore.

Sir, PRs, who are liable for National Service, are like Singaporeans in many ways. Many of them studied alongside their Singaporean counterparts in our schools and they benefited from living in Singapore like Singaporeans. So, like Singaporeans, they are expected to play their

part in defending Singapore and the fundamental NS principles of universality and equity would apply to them. After all, they have benefited from the security provided by the many batches of NSmen who served diligently before them. Unlike Singaporeans, such PRs can renounce their PR status without serving NS. This is fair for those PRs who have decided that they do not want to make Singapore their home.

But what about those who subsequently want to return? Would it be fair to allow them to do so unconditionally? After all, their initial action of renouncing their PR status to avoid serving National Service calls into question their commitment to Singapore. It would also not be fair to Singaporeans who have to serve their National Service. This is why we currently take into account, together with other factors, the fact that such ex-PRs have failed to serve National Service when they subsequently applied for a student pass or Work Pass to study or work in Singapore. And there is no automaticity for them to be able to be restored. Such ex-PRs who refuse to do NS should be considered in that light.

Should we be more welcoming of ex-PRs if they offer to serve NS again? As ex-PRs, they are no longer liable for National Service. That is a technical legal issue. And, in fact, they cannot be drafted for National Service. By renouncing their PR in order to pursue their personal goals and then later offering to return to serve National Service, they are, in effect, trying to choose when to serve their National Service. This is an option which is not open to Singaporeans. A Singaporean cannot say, "I suspend my Singapore citizenship. I go abroad to study and then I come back and reclaim my Singapore citizenship." He cannot choose when to do NS. He has to do NS when the nation calls. So we have to look at PRs in that light.

We recognise that some PRs may decide not to do NS and renounce their PR. But each year, a substantial number of PRs answer the call and do serve NS. If we freely allow the return of those who have chosen not to do NS, we would also be unfair to those PRs who have answered the call of duty when they were asked to do so.

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A number of Members asked about alternative punishments for defaulters who come back and there have been a number of creative ideas proposed. If I may reiterate what MINDEF is proposing to do. We are proposing to amend the Enlistment Act to increase the fine from \$5,000 to \$10,000. But we do not believe that the fine is sufficient compensation as replacement for a person who has failed to do NS. What we intend to do is that for those who return after a relatively short period of default, we will not object if they were only fined. They will continue to serve their National Service after that. But for longer periods of default, we will press for jail sentences - initially, short jail sentences and, subsequently, longer jail sentences.

Some of the Members asked: what message are we sending to defaulters? Are we sending the message, "Defaulters, don't come back." I think the message to defaulters is: if you have defaulted, do come back as early as possible to settle your account and do your National Service. And best of all, do not default. Do your National Service duties like 700,000 other Singaporeans have done.

Sir, several Members have argued emotionally that we should be more accepting of National Service defaulters, particularly those who have reached an older age. In order to maintain the institution of National Service, we have to apply National Service universally and equitably. Unfortunately, if we do not do that, the whole concept of National Service and the commitment of our young men who serve National Service will be undermined. This is the greater good that we have to maintain.

Several Members have expressed sympathy for Melvyn Tan. Sir, I ask them to consider: who will shed a tear for Singapore if there is no Singapore for such people to return to, because the institution of National Service has been undermined, young men do not serve, no one defends Singapore and Singapore is no longer there for them to return to? Who will shed a tear?

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Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, National Service is a key cornerstone of our security and prosperity. It has, over the past four decades, come to be accepted and embraced by Singaporeans as a key milestone in every male Singaporean's life. Sons follow fathers into National Service. And I wish every Singaporean had a mother like Dr Amy Khor to explain to their son why National Service is important and why he needs to do it.

I am heartened by the strong support that Singaporeans have shown for National Service and the commitment that NSmen have for National Service. These bode well for the future of Singapore.

Sir, anyone who has led men, or who have done National Service, knows how strong the spirit is in our National Service units. They strive for each other. They want to do well for each other. There is a great spirit of comradeship, and that is because they know we are all in it together. So we must continue to ensure that those who fail to serve National Service are dealt with appropriately in order not to erode the support for National Service.

Melvyn Tan's case has highlighted an inadequacy in penalties for those who have defaulted for so many years that they are no longer able to discharge their National Service obligations

in full. Perhaps MINDEF should have acted earlier. I concede that. But MINDEF will now be acting to address this inadequacy by asking the Prosecutor to press for jail sentences in serious cases of NS defaulters. This will help to send a clear signal that defaulting on National Service is not acceptable.

Sir, I would like to, once again, thank Members of the House for sharing their views and comments and for their strong support for National Service.

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