



# SPEECH

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## **Speech by Minister of State for Communications & Information and Education Dr Janil Puthucheary at the N.E.mation! 11 award ceremony at National Gallery Singapore on 19 Feb 2017**

20 Feb 2017

Hi, good afternoon, everybody. It feels a bit like a girls' school here today. I went to an all-boys school, so you can imagine I'm actually quite nervous. But to the one young man –I saw you in the corner of the video –you were looking slightly embarrassed. I think I would be as well. In one of my portfolios dealing with digital economy and the future of our technology industry and our Information and Communications Technology (ICT), one of the things I am always asked is what I can do to increase the number of women going into the tech-related new digital economy. I am going to tell them I do not need to do anything anymore. It is happening already.

But thank you all for inviting me here today. Students, families, teachers, (and) partners from MOE and MINDEF and other agencies. I think we have some media people here as well.

Thank you for having me here today. I look forward to seeing the results. I do not know them yet, so it is not like I can reveal them. But I thought I would say a few words, partly because I think that is what they expect of me, partly because I have a few things I would like to share with you. This 'Never Again' – Total Defence. These are not hashtags. Well, these are hashtags, (but) these are not just hashtags. These are markers of some deeply held beliefs that we have, deeply held positions that we have, deeply felt. You know in Singapore we don't like to say we have ideologies. When you say 'Never Again' and 'Total Defence', it is about as close as we can come to having an ideology here in Singapore, given how we started as a nation.

There are nations in the world that do not see Total Defence or their defence in the same way. They believe we live in times of unparalleled peace, prosperity and stability in the world. They have not committed their entire societies. They have not thought about civil defence, psychological defence, social defence and economic defence. To them, defence is military and that is all there is to it. And even then, they have considered reducing their ability to

defend themselves momentarily over time,. over the last 30 or 40 years after the war, where frankly speaking we have enjoyed unparalleled peace. But, they have assumed it will go on forever.

(Over) the last few months, the instability in the world has shown us that we should not take these things for granted. Some other countries are starting to realise this, and (are) having to pay the price of decades of perhaps looking the other way and pretending otherwise. But we do not. We do not do that. When we say 'Never Again' and we talk about Total Defence, we mean it and we understand that this is something our country went through in its origins story, if you like. In how we were created, how we existed as a nation. The origins of what led to the circumstances around 1965. It had its roots in the British Colonial era, the war, the Japanese occupation, (and) what happened afterwards when the British came back. These all played out over the next 20 years until 1965, (when) we had our independence. And after our independence, many other things happened which made us think about how we could protect our independence, what we needed to do.

This seems like a very weighty subject for a group of secondary school students and their families. But the reality is that today, the expectations of secondary school students have changed very, very differently over the last 51 years. The idea that a group of secondary school students could put together such high quality animation, that they could do animation at all, that they could work with videography equipment and digital equipment. When I was in secondary school, these were things to be done by adult companies, by Lucas Films, people working in these big movies that I would go and see in Cathay and other places. And now they become expected normal skills that we are hoping our secondary school students will pick up.

Expectations around defence and what happened to our country many years ago were not quite the same. I am somewhere between you and the generation that lived through that war. When I was in secondary school, in fact as soon as I started secondary school, the idea would be that I have the expectation that not only will I have the ability to go around myself on public transport (and) that I would look after myself, but that I would have a job. And I did. And I earned pocket money working as a cashier, working as a storeman to get some extra money. That was the sort of expectation we had of ourselves.

When you go back further one generation, the expectations of the people who were not very far removed from your age, living through those very tough times... I recently read a biography of Mr Othman Wok, who was one of our first Cabinet ministers and Minister for Social Affairs. He is now in his nineties. But at the time of the war, at the time of the fall of Singapore in 1942, he would have been about 16 or 17 (years old). Not very far off for some of you. I think he was 16 in 1941, but by the time of the fall, he was probably 17 by then. I beg your pardon, I think he was 16 and then 17 later on. He was born in 1924, if I remember correctly, October 1924. We fell in February 1942. What was he doing? Well, when the Japanese were threatening the peninsular of Malaysia, the invasion started or looked like it was starting, he was in school. He was in secondary school. He was due to sit his Cambridge leaving exams. And actually, his last exam was the same day the bombs started to fall on Singapore. So imagine that, the day that you are taking your exams, your O levels, and the

bombs are starting to fall. I don't imagine he ever collected his cert. Never even found out whether he got the right answers or the wrong answers. But in the few months leading up to that, he and his scout schoolmates volunteered to be trained as despatch riders. So they trained under the British Officers. If the communication lines went down inside Singapore, and you had to get a message from a front line command post to a medical post, from the logistics post back to your command base, the idea was that he and his schoolmates would be trained as despatch riders on their bicycles or runners with messages. He never actually had the chance to do that, but they were ready to do so. When the immediate invasion came, one of the things he had to do, at the age of 16, was to keep his younger sister safe from the Japanese soldiers. When after the invasion was over, the occupation was going, and he finished school, one of his jobs was as a clerk in the harbour board, and he recalls walking past a field of Chinese prisoners, one of whom was his classmate from Raffles Institution, and how he would sneak water to this person who was sweating under the sun, dehydrating slowly, risking his life and safety. How he would sneak out of his work as a harbour clerk on his night shift, and cut free the labourers who had been tied up as punishment for some of the transgressions they had under the Japanese occupation. How he would sneak water and cigarettes to the British prisoners-of-war.

These seem like extreme adventures, but this happened to someone who is still alive here in Singapore today. The expectations of what we might do at 16 or 17 (years old), or in your mid-forties are different. But what drives this kind of behaviour, the need to think of being ready, has not changed. He worked to get extra income for his family. Not only that, he would go round begging the cooks of the Japanese ships for extra rice, leftover rice, so that he could feed his family and the people in the village with him. You had to abandon dignity. You had to do whatever was necessary to look after yourself, your country, and your family. He was not much older than you. I did not grow up with those types of experiences, but there are people in Singapore who did, and it is very important to learn about these things and understand why it is they were prepared to do so, why it is they were able to do so.

That ability to do whatever is needed comes from our values, comes from our resilience, comes from our preparedness. But fundamentally, it comes from the type of society we are. We are a fragmented people. We know regardless of race, language and religions. We say this in our pledge. We have this in our constitution. We understand this as we look around at each another and you can see the colour of our skin, and we say we look past the colour of our skin because we are one people. But it needs to be more than that. We need to be together and united regardless of whether we are of Othman Wok's generation, my generation, or your generation. We need to be united as one people regardless of whether our grandfathers were in the war here in Singapore, or in Malaysia, or in India or China, or some other country. However many generations we have been here, once we are Singaporean, we have to stand together as one people. We have to be together regardless of what we see about our economic aspirations. If you want to earn lots of money in the Central Business District (CBD) and do finance and trading, or if you want to have a much more measured pace of life and become an artist, we are all still Singaporeans and we have to say that both points of views are valid. We have to remain united regardless of how we see our social aspirations. We have to be able to uphold this diversity and stay united as one people, and say that being together regardless of our diversity is what makes us strong. And the values we get if we work through those issues

is what gives us our resilience and our strength, and our adaptability to handle whatever life throws at us. Whether it is the Japanese occupation or the much less dramatic things that we have experienced since then. We talk about SARS, the financial crisis, various other disasters, but they pale in comparison to the reason why we celebrate, or honour, Total Defence Day, on the day that we do. Because it is not really something to celebrate. It is something to remember, and make sure it never happens ever again.

In the last couple of weeks, we have had a very painful reminder how that plays up. This is the issue of the name for the exhibition that we have at the former Ford factory. There was a little bit of a controversy about "Syonan-to" and the renaming. I am not going to rehash that, but I think that the experience of the last week should inform us and make us pause, and make us think. And I am going to give a challenge. I would like to suggest that the lesson we have learnt from there is something that we need to think about and take up as a challenge. And I give this challenge to the educators who are in this room. The people in MINDEF and Nexus who are thinking about National Education, but also parents, because a great deal of our education comes from our parents, whether they are deliberate about it or whether we know about it. And finally, also to all the young women and one man who are here, because one day you will be the next generation of adults passing on values and ideas to your children. Whether your own children, or you are going to be writing stories and making movies, and writing in the press and thinking about these things. My challenge is this. We can talk about something like the fall of Singapore and the Japanese occupation. We can talk about the facts. We can talk about the details of history. That is what we do. That is what we do in schools, that is what we do in our National Education curriculum, that is what we do in our National Library Board and our Heritage Board. But one of the lessons from the last week and the visceral reaction that happened with the naming of that, as well as the things I have learnt from reading Mr Othman Wok's biography, is that the facts do not matter nearly as much as how these change people's feelings and world view. The implications on personal issues, the implications on people's families. These are very, very important things. The experience of somebody living through something changes the way they view the world. That is one of the most important lessons over the last week, as I said, reading Mr Othman's book.

And in order to remain united and remain together as one people, we need to understand that how you view the world and how I view the world may be different. We step outside, it is the same Padang, it is the same road, it is the same building, the same Singapore. But what we have been through in our lives, what our fathers and mothers and families have been through in their lives, changes the way that we see those things. And it is not enough to just say, "Yes, Ok, you see things differently and I see things differently". It is much, much more important that we understand how other people see the world. And when it comes to our history, my challenge to the educators, MINDEF and Nexus: How do we take these skills that these young people have demonstrated – it is really quite excellent, technical skills, the ability to produce beautiful products, engaging and appealing – and move on to the next level, where being appealing and engaging is not really enough, and get students, young people, to understand the emotive implications of our history, of our national story? The way that it changed our parents, our uncles and ourselves, in how we view Singapore and the world. Because that challenge is going to be key if we are going to say to ourselves that N.E.mation!, "Together We Keep Singapore Strong", Total Defence, "Never Again". We

have to be able to get to that if all those words are going to be much more than just a hashtag. If they are going to mean something for the education of the next generation, we have to be able to get them to understand that this emotive implication on the personal, on the family is just as important as the dry facts or even the disturbing facts of the history that we have. We have to make history mean something on the personal level. That is my challenge, and I think it is important. And I think the ability to persuade secondary school students to engage in this subject and produce such wonderful animation is a great start. And the fact that they can do this means we can now move past the material and think about its implications. They clearly have the ability to do so.

So to all the students, you have worked very hard. I congratulate all of you. My challenge to your teachers and the other people notwithstanding, that is their job to do. Do not worry, you have done a great job, I am not suggesting we have to increase your curriculum just yet. Maybe for your juniors. No, I am kidding. But well done to all of you. I am looking forward to seeing the winners, I am looking forward to seeing all the clips. To the parents, I am sure you are just as amazed as I am at the abilities of (the) kids to produce some of these material today. Thank you for all the support and encouragement you have provided for your children. To the teachers who are in many ways the surrogate parent of our children when they are in school, well done and thank you for all your hard work and service, both in this particular project and in developing excellent animations, as well as in the total story of National Education and Total Defence. You play a very important role and for all that, we thank you.

So everybody, I hope you are having a good day. Thank you for inviting me here today.

**News Release:**

- Youths Share Their Take On Total Defence Through N.E.mation! (MINDEF\_20170220003.pdf)

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