

SPEECH BY DR. LEE CHIAW MENG, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY,  
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, AT THE NATION-WIDE ORATORICAL  
CONTEST TO BE HELD ON 9TH JULY, 1968 AT 7.30 P.M. AT  
THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL

In the face of recent development and changes of our education structure, the theme for this annual nation-wide oratorical contest is most appropriate. I must congratulate the organizers for having chosen such diagonally opposite themes for the tertiary and secondary levels.

2. We are all aware of the imminent changes in the education system to place more emphasis on technical and vocational training. But, any changes cannot be a success, unless the people support and accept them. The difficulty will be to break down and overcome the prejudice of the society against the blue-collar jobs. This is, by no means, peculiar to our society; this social prejudice exists in most countries, particularly in developing countries in this region. For the white-collar consciousness is a political and social consequence of the colonial rule from which we have gained independence not too long ago. It requires more than formulation and planning by the Ministry of Education to break this prejudice.

3. But success in any education system is much more than curricular changes. The young generation must be motivated and their energies must be channelled and guided into constructive efforts. Students have played a very important role in causing political instability.

4. I hardly need stress to an audience such as you, the relevance of these areas of speculation to the situation not only in this region but in almost every country to-day. Reflect, for example, upon the remarkable tenacity with which student unrest has manifested itself. In the first quarter of this year alone, student demonstrations have erupted in some twenty countries over 6 continents, in as far north as Japan, diagonally across the Meridian to as far south as Brazil.

5. Now, despite differences in the immediate circumstances within which these demonstrations must have taken place, their common feature in terms of viewpoints is that these have been, without exception, demonstrations for change.

6. I do not wish to go into the sociology of the phenomenon, but permit me to summarize with the hypothesis that the terrifying force of knowledge in the young, untouched by the wisdom that belongs to age and experience, confronted the inertia inherent in the complex pattern of inter-relations among social, economic and political institutions peculiar to each of the countries concerned, reached flash-point and exploded with characteristic violence.

7. Singapore has been comparatively fortunate in this respect. Leadership in all spheres has shown awareness and an acumen which has come to be described as pragmatic. Practice has come to be based on an important principle - one which accommodates change.

8. But I address you and your generation as the potential leaders of to-morrow when I submit that we cannot afford complacency at this point of our development. Interestingly enough, studies of student unrest show that most are students of the arts and humanities, most are economically liberated, bright and idealistic. Could it be that the curricular of these subjects are out-of-place in the social context within which they are studied? We must bear in mind that subjects like literature and history carry within them strong culture-bias and value-systems. Are they out-of-place in the technocracies of the near future? I feel that they are equally important, but there must be constant modernization directed by the aims of creating social involvement.

9. Finally, I must say I have been looking forward to a very interesting contest on subjects which are very dear to my heart.

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