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SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

Speech by Mr. Wee Teon Boon, Acting Minister
for Culture, at the opening of Festival of
Books at the Victoria Memorial Hall, on 14th
June, 1969, at 10 a.m.

19

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning to declare open the Festival of Books organised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore. The Council was formally inaugurated in February 1969 with the object of promoting reading consciousness amongst the people of Singapore and of working out solutions to the problems of the Singapore book world. I am glad to note that the Council has wasted no time in getting down to work right away and has made this Festival of Books its first major project in its first year of existence.

The theme of the Festival is a deceptively simple one. It is **READ MORE BOOKS**. This is a theme that needs to evoke a response in every man, woman or child in Singapore, for every single person can gain from it. For the young child in particular, the reading of books starts him on a wonderful voyage of discovery - discovery of the physical world around him, discovery of himself and of his relationship to all those. It is no wonder that our younger children are the ones who flock to the National Library in their hundreds and thousands, lured, not by the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but by the splendid variety of children's books that they can enjoy to their heart's delight.

It is a matter of much regret that this initial enthusiasm for reading generally wanes as the child grows older. For the child or student at school, the reading of books may appear to be an altogether too familiar drudgery. Yet the older child needs books as much as, if not more, than the younger one. He needs to read not only to make him a better student, or popular with his teacher, or successful in his examinations. He needs to read widely in order that he can stretch his mind, stir his imagination, develop his sensibilities, and prepare himself for his adult life as a citizen, worker and parent.

And so we come to the adults. Preoccupied with the business of raising a family, doing well in a job, succeeding in a career, the adults are the ones most likely to say that they have neither the time nor the need for books in their lives. Yet people will always make

time available for what they feel to be truly important in their lives. And books and reading do have a vital role, in the first place, in assisting us to do better in our work, to be more productive, more efficient, more skilled. Last week a Sunday newspaper told the success story of a young farmer, who started a tiny poultry farm at the age of 16 and now has a flourishing business. What started him off on his road to success? He set about reading - reading all he could about poultry farming, learning about modern methods of poultry management, about poultry diseases, about poultry breeding - and of course, intelligently and diligently putting into effect what he learned from his reading. Such an inspiring success story can be repeated many times over and deserves emulation by others fixed with similar ambitions to improve in their jobs, professions, or business.

Reading is relevant not only to the scholar working on a new interpretation of history or to the scientist at work in his laboratory; it is also relevant to the manufacturer in search of new markets, to the trade unionist across the negotiating table, to the engineer designing a new bridge and to the housewife planning meals for her family.

Reading makes a special contribution towards our understanding of the world and its peoples. Reading can help to dispel ignorance, prejudice, fear, and hostility towards those whose customs and beliefs differ from ours, whose language may be unknown to us, whose skin may not be the same colour as ours. In our own multiracial society, reading can help towards a breaking down of such barriers amongst different ethnic groups, to the growth of understanding, which leads to tolerance and mutual harmony, to a realization of common values and a common pride as Singaporeans.

The theme of the Festival of Books is a theme particularly appropriate to the 150th Anniversary of Singapore's founding which the Festival also celebrates. In order to transform our society into a modern, well-organised, disciplined and industrialised society, we need Singaporeans of a new breed - Singaporeans who are well-informed, alert and adaptable to change, and who are always willing to learn more. It is these qualities that reading can help to instil in Singaporeans, whether young or old, and which will help Singapore flourish in the future.

It is my hope that this Festival will generate more enthusiasm and provide the impetus to the public to read more books, use more libraries and buy more books.

14TH JUNE, 1969.

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