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Speech by Dr. Lee Chiaw Meng, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Education, at the Annual Dance & Dinner of the Technical Education Society, on Saturday, 14th Feb. 1970 at 7.00 p.m. at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Hall

Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am happy to be present this evening and glad to have the opportunity to say a few words at this annual function of the Society.

Since your Society was founded 10 years ago in 1960, you have been thriving very hard to achieve your objective to promote technical education in Singapore. I have been informed by your President that during the past two years, the Society - among its other activities - has organised competition on workshop safety in schools, conducted a number of visits to the industrial establishments for its members and last year organised a very successful competition in woodwork and technical drawing among the technical schools. It was during the prize-giving ceremony of this skill competition last November that I outlined some of the philosophy and thinking underlying our approach to technical education and vocational training.

As your members are the main driving force in executing our programme, it is of great importance that you should understand and be aware of the policy and the rationale behind it.

In our present environment, in particular, due to our rapid industrialisation programme, it would be ridiculous to expect the training of industrial and technical personnels to be carried out within the industries alone. We are facing an acute shortage of skilled personnel, and we must produce sufficient manpower for the industries within a very short time lest our industrialisation programme would be affected adversely. I would even venture to say that in our context, we should consider manpower planning as one of the regulators for economic growth.

To overcome all these, we have to institutionalise our skill training programme, not only in the vocational institutes, but as from next year also at the technical schools. This, of course, is a significant departure from the conventional philosophy of "school education" and concept of vocational training. And, in fact, it has attracted many criticism and it is no secret that I have to act against the advice of some of my officials on this issue. This would be expected as practically all of us were brought up under a conventional education system.

There are many who will think that the only way to produce tradesmen and craftsmen is the apprenticeship system. I do not disagree that apprentice training is a good system, provided it is properly planned and executed. But definitely this is not the only route. There are a few good schemes functioning locally by major industrial concerns, but the majority are just exploitation of cheap labour. Let us do not kid ourselves that a young boy stands breathe and do odd jobs will suddendly becaome a skill craftsman after 5 years just because he is called an apprentice.

Let me quote the example of Sweden, a highly industrialised country with the second highest per capita GNP in the world. Almost all of their skill training is institutionalised in their 2-year "technical school" which takes in some 40 to 45 per cent of students leaving the 9 years compulsory school. Of the one million over persons engaged in the manufacturing industries, which is about 45% of their economically active population , only 5,000 indentures on apprenticeship training have been signed and executed. It means that only ½% of their tradesmen go through the mill in the conventional way. I do not think any one would dare to criticise their technological skill and advancement. Economically, we cannot compare with Sweden, yet, despite that, our education system compares favourably with theirs. We have 8 years common curriculum education up to secondary II level as compared with their 9 years compulsory education. Then, may I ask why can't we introduce vocational bias subjects within the school system, so that our school leavers can enter the employment market with some employable skill.

Each year there are more than twenty thousand school leavers entering the job market, very few of them have the skill and attitudes employers required. Few can be a direct useful participants in the Nation's industrialisation drive. Many are frustrated, prone to violence or roam about the street with long hair living as a parasite of the society, and at the same time, we are extremely short of young and skillful workers with the right attitudes.

I do not wish to upset the sacred cow of education, but we must get our priority right — Priority not just for continuous prosperity but also for survival. We must train sufficient craftsmen and artesans quickly to meet the acute shortage of the industries to ensure the economic growth is not adversely affected, and we must also continuously provide facilities for upgrading training not only to upgrade the technological skill but also to widen the horizon of the workers in the

industries. And for us, the shortcut is to institutionalise our training programme.

I am confident that with your full co-operation we will succeed.

Thank you.