

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (LAW)
AND M.P. FOR POTONG PASIR, MR. S. RAMASWAMY, AT THE
7TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER OF THE SEMNETT COMMUNITY CENTRE,
ON SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 1970, AT 7.30 P.M.

I am very happy to be present on this occasion of the 7th anniversary of the Semnett Community Centre, representing seven years of continual community service.

Today, I would like to highlight two highly relevant aspects of the "high pressure" community living that is rapidly becoming the way of life of the people in land-scarce Singapore - that is, the social aspect and the environmental aspect which become highly strained as a result of population compression. In going about their public duties, management committee members of community centres and others must constantly regard these problems as the background against which they must focus their day-to-day activities of serving the local needs of the people. Unless these long-term objectives are fulfilled, the aims of social transformation and nation-building are likely to be self-defeating.

The Semnett Community Centre lies in the midst of private residential estates and high-rise Housing Board estates - a very mixed bag indeed. Where people living in the private sectors are concerned, it could well be the case of being able to "do what they like because this is a democratic country" because comparative privacy is still possible in those private houses built 20 years ago when land demand was not as acute as it is today although such attitudes are not desirable.

Where closely-packed living is a way of life such as in the newly completed Housing Board estates, it is a different matter. Give and take is then the more practical and realistic philosophy for the people to adopt. Where people have to literally rub shoulders so closely and frequently in their daily lives, whether they like it or not tortious liability in its various forms is bound to be incurred not once but many times, both through ignorance or innocence and through necessity because of close contacts. Alternatively, these all-too-frequent infringements of civil rights can develop into an inter-neighbour cold war.

These are some of the social stresses that are bound to arise from compact living. Whatever the origins, this calls for tolerance. It is only on the basis of cultivating good neighbourliness that corporate living can become meaningful and fruitful.

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The other aspect is environment, which in the case of community living, is essentially man-made, such as playgrounds, community centres, corridors, automatic lifts, etc. It is needless to say that these can, too, easily become neglected - over-used and under-maintained, they become health hazards and dangers to human lives.

Under the stresses of compact living, the environment must be respected by all tenants. In order to be a source of enjoyment and gracious living, maintenance of the environment should be everybody's business. This, therefore, calls for the highest standards of civic consciousness. For example, everyone must make it his scrupulous duty not to litter. Exceptions can be tolerated in rural environments, but in built-up areas like Housing Board estates a single culprit can sabotage and frustrate the co-operative efforts of the rest of the community.

The benefits of healthy environments under modern conditions cannot be over-stressed. On the other hand, the difficulties of ensuring healthy and clean environments should not be under-estimated. It must be the end-product of co-operative efforts. It has, therefore, to be achieved on the basis of a "vigilante society" with a view to arresting signs of slackening social discipline whenever it arises before it assumes unmanageable proportions, because human nature being what it is, people tend to become complacent and take community well-being for granted. This should not be the case, because the leftovers and residues of modern living if not disposed of even for a single day can easily reach epidemic level. Therefore, the ideal tenant particularly in these circumstances is the reasonable man, who is constantly aware of his moral and social obligations and respect the feelings and rights of his neighbours, who must in turn reciprocate in mutual terms.

It should, therefore, among other social objectives, be the duty of the Sennett Community Centre to cultivate this ideal being as far as possible, and amongst as many citizens as possible, or at least to approximate to this norm. If this present generation have to be persuaded to cultivate more gracious living, it is gratifying to note that the younger generation will and can acquire these qualities more naturally. Cohesive living will be systematically and progressively ingrained into the minds of the young through the realities of life in multi-racial schools and Housing Board estates and through national service. Social responsibility will be built-in features of the younger generation.

I have no doubt that members of the Sennett Community Centre will think and act along these lines and thus help the Republic achieve closer social cohesion. May I offer my congratulations on the occasion of the 7th anniversary of this community centre.

APRIL 4, 1970.

(Time taken: 1630 hours)