

EMBARGOED TILL DELIVERY

71 0052 50

Speech of Mr. L. P. Rodrigo, Parliamentary Secretary,  
Ministry of Home Affairs, at the Rotary Lunch at the Adelphi Hotel  
on Wednesday, 11th August, 1971, at 1 p.m.

When George Thomson suggested that I talk to you on National Day, I did not think that he expected me to treat the subject as one did when one gave a talk on Empire Day two decades ago.

When we talk about our National Day at this point of our country's growth, we inevitably talk about our involvement in the development of our country.

And today we talk about such involvement after having chartered our course into the near future so that ours is an involvement for the attainment of objectives and not a rhetoric of mere hopes.

I realise of course that even the near future in this part of the world is beset with its share of imponderables, but it is not in the nature of our people to yield themselves entirely to the dictates of destiny because of such imponderables.

Two events in the second half of the 60s have contributed to our most important achievement which is the national capacity for nation building.

The separation from Malaysia and the announcement of the British withdrawal from Singapore by 1971 drove us towards mobilising and disciplining our manpower for economic viability and a defence capability. In my view, the achievement is much more in our having developed a capacity to overcome overwhelming odds than the fact of our having established the basis of a new economy and military strength for our defence purposes.

For the 70s this national capacity for nation building must be developed and refined through sustained performance and increasing competence in the programmes of national construction which we have planned for the future. These programmes will offer considerable scope to this capacity to develop. Our industries will move towards sophisticated technology and in time indigenise such technology in the country's industrialisation.

However, if we are to achieve a sustained application of this national capacity for nation building, we should be alert to issues which are distractions and irrelevancies.

The British withdrawal from Singapore amidst the major decisions of super powers in South-east and East Asia concerning their role in the area may invite strategic probing into our capacity and determination to fashion our national destiny the way we want it. Asian power balances which had reckoned upon this military presence and had found equilibrium are now disequibrated. It appears that the region will show unrest until a balance of power in Asia is attained. We must acquire and demonstrate a sensitivity to these probings so that they may be deterred and distractions to our nation building capacity avoided.

One other distraction is the disgruntlement of the more articulate members of our intelligentsia. Complaint is made of official sensitivity to and intolerance of criticism. While credit is readily accorded to the ruling power for sound government, the complaint is against its style. Complaint is also made in having to support government policies. These varieties of mild distress may be said to constitute the dissent syndrome which has emerged because on the one hand Academe has been prodded to articulate and on the other,

the political arena is without significant issues. Race, religion, language and issues relating to them have been regarded by rational critics as materials which should not be employed in political argumentation, and we have had racial harmony as a result. The citizenry has seen improvement in their living conditions and are disinclined to yield to political persuasion to the contrary.

Indeed, the sheer critic finds life unwholesome these days. He is reduced to griping over the loss of opportunity to gripe.

Dissent without constructive alternative is a luxury we cannot or want to afford. If dissent is accompanied by political alternatives it should become the pre-occupation of the political party.

Meanwhile the Government has to fulfill its undertaking to the people of the country.

The energy and competence of our youth today form the bulk of our national capacity for nation building and any effective distraction to it will that much dissipate this capacity. We are generally known as a hardworking people who inherited such qualities from our forefathers. However, theirs was a less exposed and distracted world. Our youth today is liable to be inundated by the froth of moral permissiveness spilling from affluent and disenchanted societies. The disturbing problem is therefore how to insulate the nation building capacity in our youth from adulteration.

I think what we need to do is to undertake overt measures to strengthen the family unit. Insistence of a family gathering round the table for one meal a day at least has the effect of providing opportunities of communication and forging stronger family ties. Flat dwelling and the convenient access of cheap food served by hawkers tempt parents to solve the lunch problem for their children by the daily distribution of 30 cts. per member who then disperse for their favourite dish. The disintegration of the family unit must be avoided if our youths are to be imbued with qualities which issue from our responsible parents.

As we forge into the 70s I reckon we will encounter other distractions and irrelevancies to our national capacity for nation building.

Some will arise from within our society, some will have foreign origins and some others may have a foreign origin with local nurture. With regard to the last, I refer to the issue of so-called unalienable and alienable rights. These are questions which the world of liberal democracy has charged with the passion of human idealism throughout the years and which westernised minds in Asia find difficult to qualify without compromising their intellectual integrity.

I hope that our pragmatism on all issues touching the welfare and security of our people will gradually find unmitigated acceptance by succeeding generations of leaders as the keystone in our capacity for nation building.

=====

11th August, 1971.