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**SPEECH BY S DHANABALAN,
MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,
AT THE OPENING OF INTER-ROLLER ENGINEERING LIMITED'S
NEW FACTORY IN JURONG ON TUESDAY, 18 JUNE 1991 AT 11.00 AM**

Most of our industries are now fully mechanised, but few are automated. Even fewer invest in R&D or have R&D capabilities. Many are still unaware of the tremendous scope for R&D in automation projects for Singapore industries.

Take the construction industry. In the Japanese construction industry, mobile robots are very much in evidence. Each screeding robot for concrete slab finishing can do the work of three workers, and with high accuracy and quality. There are also robots that can climb the exterior walls of buildings to inspect loose tiles, paint walls or wash windows. There are robots that can paint the underside of bridges, and robots that can travel inside pipes.

However, our construction industry does not use many robots. Perhaps this is because foreign-made robots are not designed for local conditions. Foreign-made robots are also more costly. They are, therefore, not cost-effective at our present level of labour cost. But imagine the possibilities if these same robots are adapted to our needs and made cost-effective through local R&D.

Things may change soon. I understand that the local construction industry is looking into several projects involving greater mechanisation and the development of robots. The Singapore Contractors Association Limited (SCAL) is now considering a plan to develop a concrete screeding robot. Other

projects include the development of a tile-laying robot and the development of a wall-painting robot. The Construction Industry Development Board and SCAL are also identifying more operations within the industry which can be further automated or mechanised.

The construction industry must formulate a strategic or long term programme for increased automation initiatives. With more projects coming on stream and a shortage of labour, an industry-wide programme to automate can help lower labour dependency in the industry.

The Government has taken several steps to encourage R&D in Singapore. One is EDB's Industry-Wide Automation Development Scheme which supports the R&D of individual organisations if it benefits the entire industry. Several companies are also involved in R&D with the support of the National Science and Technology Board. Two other Government research institutes - the Institute of Manufacturing Technology and the Institute of Micro-electronics - have also stimulated interest in R&D among local companies.

Now, what has all this to do with today's opening ceremony? It is relevant in that Inter-Roller Engineering is among the few local automation companies to invest heavily in R&D and in the acquisition of technology. The company has linked up with Toyo Kanetsu KK (TKK) of Japan to manufacture and install materials-handling system using the latest technology. Under a training agreement with Toyo Kanetsu KK, 30 of the company's engineers will be trained in Japan over the next four years. The trainees will gain hands-on experience in projects using the latest technology.

The company has also set up a Systems and Development Division. This will evaluate, test, and adapt new technology to the needs of local industry, and develop new materials-handling automation systems.

Inter-Roller's achievement is commendable. I hope that more of our local automation companies, will see the inherent potential and embark on R&D. How we respond to this challenge will determine the future growth of our industries and services.

I now have great pleasure in opening Inter-Roller Engineering's new factory.

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