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Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • tel: 3378191 ext. 352, 353, 354/3362207/3362271

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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AT THE OPENING OF AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS
ORGANISED BY THE SINGAPORE CHESHIRE HOME AT THE HILTON HOTEL
ON TUESDAY, 25 AUGUST 1981 AT 6.00 PM

81-SR-9

It is only in recent years that we in Singapore have begun to show more than desultory interest in the old, the sick and the disabled. Their problems impinged only the fringes of our consciousness and in so far as we were made uneasy by their problems we quietened our distressed minds by donating what we could on flag days organised to collect funds for this or that disadvantaged groups.

Thanks to the dedicated endeavours of a small but persistent body of welfare workers and to the generosity of Singapore donors many sick, old and disabled citizens have not been condemned to the kind of misery and neglect to which they would otherwise have been reduced. Unlike in many Third World countries, Singapore is free of beggars or of destitutes who live, breed and die in city pavements.

But it is not enough to leave the care of the disadvantaged, whether through old age, chronic ailments or through incurable infirmity to the generosity of the charitably inclined. In addition to charitable organisations which I hope will continue to enlist citizens who find satisfaction in working to alleviate the distress of the less fortunate, we should also, as a nation, approach the problem of age and disability in a more systematic and effective way.

For example old age is part of the life cycle of every individual and it is an illusion for the young and the healthy to think that they can somehow escape this inevitable condition. Every young man, short of premature death, must end his closing years as an old man and as life expectancy goes up in affluent

Singapore an individual will spend as many years as an old man as he did as a vigorous youth.

There is a belief that the old, the sick and the disabled should be the total responsibility of the Government and of charitable organisations. Both Government and charitable organisations have of course certain responsibilities in this respect but to leave it there is to evade another responsibility - family responsibility. I know that the term "family responsibility" is an unfashionable and somewhat archaic concept in permissive societies where the only thing that matters is the enjoyment of the self and responsibility towards others is considered an unpardonable restraint on an individual's freedom.

I do not want to romanticise "family responsibility". Carried to extreme "family responsibility" can become tyrannical. It can breed nepotism and work against the well-being of a community and nation. But in its more enlightened and constructive manifestation family responsibility is a necessary component of community and national stability.

The basis of family responsibility is a simple and logical concept. The parents feed, clothe and educate their children; care for them when they are ill and protect them until they are able to look after themselves.

In return the sons and daughters owe a debt of responsibility to their parents when the latter are no longer able to look after themselves and need the care and affection they bestowed on their children. To pass this responsibility on to the state or charitable organisations when the children are in a position to discharge this responsibility is morally indefensible and, in my view, should be made legally enforceable.

The state and charitable organisations should only step in where the children are clearly not in a position to discharge this responsibility. With more and more Singaporeans earning better and with government compelling Singaporeans to save more of their earnings the care of the aged, the sick and the disabled could become more and more the responsibility of the children. Of course with increased savings the old and the otherwise disadvantaged may have

the wherewithal to look after themselves but where they cannot their first recourse should be to family responsibility.

This would enable the state and charitable organisations to care for that residue of aged sick and disabled who cannot turn to family responsibility to alleviate their distress.

The Singapore Cheshire Home, if I am not mistaken, caters for those who have no families to turn to. It was established in Singapore in 1957 to provide a home for young and old who have no homes of their own. At the moment it has a capacity for some 80 residents but now because of the exigencies of development it has to move to a new location.

This exhibition of paintings and other art objects by Johnnie Johnson is with a view to helping to raise the \$3 million to build the new Cheshire Home. Johnnie Johnson, its Honorary Administrator is contributing towards the fund the only way he can - by using his artistic talents. Neither old age nor disability has handicapped him from serving his fellow men.

I therefore hope those who are not handicapped in any way and who do not lack financial resources but who are without his artistic talents will contribute no less generously towards this home.

The Cheshire Home can only take in a limited number of people but if Singaporeans rigorously discharge their family responsibilities then the Cheshire Home can adequately cater for those who have no families to turn to.

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