

27 SEP 1983

PRESS RELEASE

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

Acc. No.	NARC
83 0051	38

Release No.: 36/SEP
09-1/83/09/16

83-SR-8

**SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS), AT THE DINNER IN CELEBRATION OF
THE 60TH BIRTHDAY OF PRIME MINISTER, MR LEE KUAN YEW
HELD AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 1983**

When I was first approached to deliver a speech on the occasion of the Prime Minister's 60th birthday I readily agreed without quite realising the enormity of the undertaking. At that time I simply assumed that all that was expected of me was that I should say something appropriate for the occasion, hopefully slip in a few words of wisdom and if the muses were on my side inadvertently say something memorable as well.

Now if it had been a person other than the Prime Minister these rather vague guidelines would have been sufficient. It was only when I got down last week to brooding over the impending birthday speech that it suddenly dawned on me that I had perhaps embarked on a dangerous and possibly suicidal mission. A birthday speech by tradition should contain nice and preferably truthful things about the person concerned. However my long association with the Prime Minister had taught me that he is not a man who takes kindly to what he regards as calculated flattery and since all that I would say had to be calculated, I was clearly inviting trouble.

So to prevent any possible misunderstanding let me assure the Prime Minister that everything I am going to say to his face tonight I am prepared to repeat behind his back as well.

This was not my only difficulty. So much has been said and written about the Prime Minister the past 30 years or so, that anything I say would be a rehash of what others had already said and written. I therefore decided to pin-point on what I think is the single dominant quality that makes him the outstanding personality that he is and which provides the motive force for much of his political actions and thought.

When I am preparing a speech, being a very unsystematic man, I relapse into what can charitably be described as constructive wool-gathering. This includes glancing at the indexes of randomly picked books and flipping through books of quotations. It was while doing the latter that I came across (I like to think through Divine guidance as well) this arresting aphorism by Napoleon. It goes like this:

"An army of rabbits commanded by a lion is superior to an army of lions commanded by a rabbit."

This was the kind of quotation to set even a neuron depleted brain like mine cerebrating with unaccustomed vigour. I knew at once that the theme I was searching for lay hidden somewhere in that aphorism. Napoleon is here saying something very significant about leadership, a trait which one automatically associates with the Prime Minister. I am well aware that leadership is a quality which has in recent years been brought into disrepute in Western democracies and is suspect in certain esoteric circles in Singapore as well. It is argued by some intellectuals (or rather by mediocrities with intellectual pretensions) that the concept of leadership conflicted with the ideal of equality. These intellectuals argue that since all men are created equal there should be no leaders and led. Should some people be brighter, more honest, braver and more hard-working than others and therefore achieve leadership

positions then this breach of egalitarian principles should be promptly corrected. You do this the way you handicap horses. The fastest horse is handicapped to give the slow-footed horse a chance to win. The object is not to encourage the peak performance of a good horse but fair play towards a mediocre horse even if this means discriminating against the better performer.

Consequently in many democracies the principle of meritocracy as well as of leadership is highly suspect and strongly resisted. In the West political leaders in particular are made objects of popular scorn and relentless denigration.

Am I exaggerating things? Let me in substantiation give you two quotations - one from the United States and the other from Britain, two democracies which were once respected and admired but which lacking strong and wise leadership have now become objects of scorn, so much so that even passing donkeys are not afraid to pick up a fight with these once respected lions.

In answer to a question a few years ago why Mr William Simon, a former Treasury Secretary had turned down an offer to serve in the Reagan Administration, Mr. Simon replied: "Public service in the United States has become so unattractive, indeed, ugly, by a combination of factors - the press, conflict of interest laws, the ethics in government business - that it seems that anybody who has any expertise in any subject is deemed to have a conflict if he is put in any allied activity in Washington.

Mr. Simon was and probably still is the head of a major New York investment firm.

In December last year the Time magazine reported that Americans were appalled by the poor presidential and

Congressional material offered for their choice. It said that something had gone wrong with the machinery for gleaning presidential material. It noted that in the 18th century with a population of only three million living on the edge of the wilderness, America produced in rapid succession giants like Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Franklin, the Adamses and Lincoln among others. The press then was just as savage as it is today but, suggested Time, the electors faced with great hardships and dangers were more independent minded and therefore chose their leaders carefully. They did not regard elections as public entertainment or treat their chosen leaders as a compound of clowns, crooks and imbeciles.

The situation is no better in Britain. When Lord Chalfont retired in 1981 from the Times with which he had been associated for over 20 years he wrote in his farewell article that the threat to British democracy came, not from the Soviets, but from what he called the "cancer within". He attributed it to the "fashionable contempt for anything which contains a suggestion of patriotism, authority, tradition or dignity. The police, the judiciary, the monarchy and parliament have become objects of derision and targets of third rate comedians aspiring to be satirists." He attributed this systematic corruption of values in part to the mass media. "There are," he said, "some editors, producers and journalists who arrogate to themselves the role of magisterial arbiters as though there were some kind of symmetry between those responsible for the preservation of an orderly system and those who are bent on destroying it... The sleep of reason is a false repose. Those who succumb to it often awake in a barren landscape, not easily distinguishable from that of a prison camp. Many persons have taken their people that way; none has yet come back."

What this corrupted form of democracy seeks is that lions should be led by rabbits. In fact the more fanatical among them strive for a nation of rabbits led by rabbits.

As against this concept of democracy there is ranged against it a Soviet democracy where an army of rabbits is commanded by extremely hungry and incorrigably predatory lions. There is no room for mediocrity in what the Soviets describe as democratic centralism - which is a concentration of power in the fewest number of people - possibly one. Only the toughest, the slickest and the most ruthless live long enough to make it to the top and to make sure that lions indeed hold sway over a nation of rabbits.

I agree with Napoleon that if the contest is really between a nation of rabbits led by lions and a nation of rabbits led by rabbits the former must win. Fortunately there are signs that Western democracies under the lash of growing unemployment and calculated humiliation by third rate nations are tentatively turning to strong leadership to recover their sinking reputation.

This lengthy prologue is by way of introduction to my main theme - the unique quality of Mr. Lee's leadership. First he does not accept either of the styles of leadership described by Napoleon.

Nor does he accept the so-called Western progressive prescription that in a true and caring democracy rabbits should be led by toothless rabbits. His is a different approach. He believes in strong leadership; in a leader who leads from the front in contrast to the leader who leads from the rear - much like the wild-eyed street politician during the French Revolution who rushed up to a startled citizen and asked "Where is the rioting mob? I need to know because I have proclaimed myself its leader."

The Prime Minister in addition to strong leadership also believes in meritocracy - that a people deserve to be ruled by the brightest and the best in the country. His criteria for the "brightest and the best" is not, as his

critics charge, confined only to a person's academic qualification. As important and sometimes even more important are such qualities as honesty, sharp intelligence, physical and moral courage, patriotism, devotion to ideals, selflessness, doing one's job as well as one can and much more. The number of academics Mr Lee has dropped from parliament should make clear that academic accomplishments, valuable though they are, by themselves, cut no ice with him. At best they are no more than prima facie evidence that certain people are presumed to possess certain abilities. It is a claim that must be put to test by performance in the rough and tumble of the real world of sinners and saints.

I have known the Prime Minister and worked with him for nearly a quarter of a century and his style of government is to put the right man in the right place - or no place at all if he does not merit it. For example though I have been a Cabinet Minister for 24 years he has never put me in charge of the nation's finance because that is not one of the things I do best - and that, believe me, is an understatement. In any society we need all kinds of people with many kinds of ability - from Prime Ministers, professionals and artists to bricklayers, carpenters and roadsweepers. A Singapore run by PhDs only would be my vision of purgatory. Equally a government run by roadsweepers can be no less be a terrifying place to live in.

Of course all what I have said so far is nothing new. So what is new? What is new is that Mr Lee's style of leadership is concerned with something far more important than with merely creating more and more industries, building more homes, more schools, hospitals, roads, banks and generally making Singapore one of the most prosperous cities in Asia. These are for him means for more worthwhile ends. He is concerned not merely with the physical transformation of Singapore but with the transformation of the mind, character, habits and outlook of Singaporeans as a whole.

The material prosperity which he has made available to Singaporeans is for him merely the means towards creating a Singaporean of whom he can be proud and one who would earn the respect of the world.

The average Singaporean is by origin an immigrant. For about a century and a half he has lived, thought and behaved in a manner proper to a colonial subject - a mixture of obsequiousness and low cunning. His guiding star was money and the bric a brac of ancestral culture he brought with his bundle of clothes was his only pretence to a self-esteem of sorts.

Suddenly with independence this rootless people found themselves having to carve out a prosperous and secure future in a small island with little or no natural resources and a population which of necessity had to remain alarmingly small in a continent where most countries consisted of teeming hungry millions and billions.

In the circumstances only by developing to the fullest the potentialities of each of the two million or so Singaporeans could they lay claim to an honourable and secure place for themselves under the South-East Asian sun.

To cut a long story short the greatest achievement of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew is not the physical transformation of Singapore but the transformation of the mind and character of the average Singaporean. The docile, self-centred, money grubbing and rootless colonial slave of a few years ago has under his leadership and in a very short time been transformed into an uncringing Singaporean who is today reaching out confidently for a place in the 21st century. Today, more than ever before the apologetic immigrant has acquired a sense of his worth; has taken root.

It is often said by less perceptive critics that Mr Lee does not care for human beings; that he measures progress in terms of factories, buildings, and quantifiable wealth. None of these would have been possible had there not been a transformation in the mind and character of the Singaporean as well. People with a slave mentality and with unpacked bags could not have created the clean, prosperous and dynamic Singapore we see today.

Far more than many people realise Mr Lee's basic concern has been and still is first with the quality of men and only after with machines, bricks, mortar and the Singapore dollar.

This aspect of his leadership has gone unrecognised because transformation of a people's mental attitude and character require a special kind of tough leadership which could be mistaken for one without human sympathies and feelings.

The transformation of slave minds into free minds required what I will call inspired toughness. Here I hope, Mr Prime Minister, you will bear with me if a Bible-quoting atheist like me amplifies his point by referring to a bit of Bible lore. When Moses liberated the Hebrews from Egypt he did not as he could easily have done, lead them directly to the Promised Land. Instead he dawdled about in the desert, I believe, for some forty years. Predictably there was a lot of murmuring and even threats from the Hebrews who did not at all enjoy the hardships of desert life and also because they believed that stupid Moses had lost his way.

But wise Moses had a good reason for his Long March strategy. He wanted to purge the Hebrews who had submissively endured Egyptian oppression of their slave mentality and rid them of their craving for the flesh-pots of Egypt by exposing a generation of Hebrews to the rigours of the desert and generally toughening them up.

The Prime Minister's toughness has, I suspect, the same Mosaic objective. Like the Hebrews the Singaporean for whom political freedom came less than two decades ago must learn that the only true road to the Promised Land is through the desert. All those countries who, in the post-war years, believed that they could reach the Promised Land in air-conditioned luxury coaches have at last woken up to the terrible fact that they have in fact journeyed from the Promised Land into a sun scorched desert.

In short, if I correctly read the Prime Minister's mind, his goal is not a nation of rabbits led by lions, or a nation of lions led by rabbits or, worse still, rabbits led by rabbits but, as befits the Lion City, a nation of lions led by lions. Only such a Singapore can, in a world of roaming hungry predators, be assured of a secure and honourable existence. His main concern is to create Singaporeans of quality since the numbers game is not for us. He knows full well that as with great adversity, prosperity too, if improperly enjoyed, can transform lions into fattened rabbits.

These are some of the reasons why I for one sincerely wish him a happy 60th birthday and just in case I myself run out of birthdays by then a Happy 70th birthday as well.

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