

**TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT A
MEETING WITH PRINCIPALS OF SCHOOLS AT THE VICTORIA
THEATRE ON 29TH AUGUST, 1966.**

First, I want to explain the purpose of this meeting. I have not come to address you. I have not come to give you a lecture or give you instructions. I have really come to discuss a problem with you, a problem which can be solved only, when ultimately not I, the Ministry officials or you understand it, but when the teacher understands it. Because the most important digit in what we are trying to do is the teacher.

There are two factors in the formative influences of a young man or a young woman's life: one is the home; the other is the school.

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We cannot do very much about the home, but we can do something about the school. I am anxious that we should do what we have to do very quickly, or I am afraid time will run out on us. If our society continues to be what it is – a relatively passive society – always protected, first by the British, then by the Japanese and then the British and then the Malaysians who fortunately also had

the British to help them, otherwise it might have been a different story – then this society will panic.

There are two ways of survival. The human being has usually two types of responses. One is the individual survival. In a migrant society such as ours with no deep roots, no history, no tradition, the normal instinct is for individual survival. And the individual survives by being meek or, at least, by being on the surface meek, self-deprecating, self-effacing. You know, when the Japanese are coming in, people quickly sew up flags with a red ball in the centre, quickly push it out of their windows and close the window tight and peep through the window holes. That is personal survival. You bow deeply to the Japanese sentry and you bow deeply to your office supervisor and so on. You accommodate and you carry on. And, in the end, you feel degraded because you have lost your self-respect. But that is not so worrying. I think, in the end, we are destroyed as a people. Because, as has happened in so many other parts of the world, when people with lower standards of life take you over, there is always a desire to cut you down to their level and break you up whether culturally, linguistically, or in the matter of literature, the arts, the sciences or in your economic well-being. When you get more numerous numbers overwhelming smaller numbers, and the people who are physically more powerful have captured you, then they have a tendency to destroy, just as when the barbarians came near to Rome they just

destroyed all that went before them because it was an insult to them that these people whom they considered weaker and feebler than themselves had this civilisation. This is a real problem for us. This is one aspect of the problem.

The other is that this community has no in-built reflexes: loyalty, patriotism, history, tradition. You catch a Frenchman; you catch an Englishman or even an American. His is a new society. But, he can tell you all about George Washington; he will tell you about Abraham Lincoln. He has history. He will say, "These are the great events in the life of my people." And he can tell you of the battles fought and won, and he can sing you songs and they are songs which everybody knows. Whether it is "God Save the Queen" or "the Star-Spangled Banner", they are moments when your whole society responds as one, acting in unison, responding in unison.

We do not have that, because this society was never designed – and its education was never designed – to produce a people capable of cohesive action: to identify their collective interests and with the ability to act in furtherance of them.

This means that if we go on, if we just do nothing – just carry on and let it be – then at the end of ten years, time has run out and you are exposed and

vulnerable. Your population still cannot identify the future of the individual with the future of the community. And you will still have them believing, "I'll be a smart chap; I'll find a way out. Whichever army comes in, whoever is in charge, I'll find some way out for myself".

I am not interested in that because I do not believe that this is possible.

Let me put the problem in another way to you because I have spent over one year sorting out this problem. This is a new problem. We are presented with it, and either there is a solution or there is no solution to it.

If you raise an army here and maintain a standing army as the British are doing of some 50,000 to 60,000 then I say Singapore will go bankrupt. Apart from going bankrupt, we will also land ourselves into a military coup straight-

away. Because no regular army in Asia has ever been built up and been demobilised. It has a momentum of its own. As you grow, it grows bigger; as its appetite grows bigger, it begins to swallow the whole.

The Indonesians have about 400,000 men under arms. That is common knowledge. But of that number, perhaps about one-quarter, perhaps less, are

operational. In other words, they have the logistic support to move from A to B – either over land or over water – perhaps 20 to 30 thousand.

And there are countries in the world where, because of the tight social organisation of the society, they are able to withstand much larger neighbours.

This is a fact.

The Fins, over five million people, stood up to 200 million Russians; so it was with the Swiss and the Israelis. There are only 2.7 million Jews in Israel, and they are surrounded by 200 million Arabs, not all in one country. They are divided into many Arab States, but they are all agreed to destroy Israel.

I am not for Israel. I am just stating a fact. I feel very sorry that a country should be found in that position. But that is a position in which we have found ourselves, similar to Finland, Israel.

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But the Israelis can, at the drop of a hat, raise an army at any time. They have a fighting force of about 400,000 to 500,000 out of a population of 2.7 million. And they are all growing trees or doing things in factories and so on. But every boy, every man, every woman is a fighting digit.

We do not have to achieve those standards – not so high. But if in ten years we have begun the process in which every boy and every girl understands what is his interest in this and identify Singapore's survival with his survival, then we have bridged the first phase. If we have not done that, at the end of ten years you must become a dependency of some other country. You have to.

I do not think this is an exercise in futility. If it were, I would just pack and say, "Well, find something else to do".

What is the problem? The problem is to turn out a different product from our schools. Part of the difficulties we are experiencing is because of the rapid expansion of universal schooling in the primary schools.

To produce the schools and the teachers just to take in the babies that were being produced, standards went down, particularly in the Government schools. The Mission schools and the aided schools were not so bad. They maintained

their standards because they did not expand. They did not take in these large numbers. They just stuck to their numbers.

And if you watched the National Day Parade – as I did – then you will know that it was the schools that did not expand, that kept a core of its professional teaching staff and, what is more important, had a group of dedicated senior masters and principals that could produce the clan in their contingents.

The situation is now different. We are not expanding any more. The population has stabilised itself and we are no longer building more primary schools. We will have to build some more secondary schools, but not primary schools. And from now onwards, we begin to jack up the standards.

In my experience – both as a pupil in school and in universities, and subsequently in trying to teach people at large, simple political ideas, the most important person is the man who is in charge of the boy. The Principal is important: he maintains discipline in the school, but he cannot substitute for the teacher, the form-master, the chap who is there, who commands the respect and the affection of the class, who gives of himself. You know, to really teach – just as to really make a speech to an audience which is ignorant and to whom you have to tell the simple A, B, C of currency or reserves backing, why our currency

could be sound if we do this and do that – you really have to give of yourself. It takes it out of you, the effort in nervous energy.

And the tragedy is that if we go back to these digits, we see we have produced a group of teachers now who are undedicated because of the nature of recruitment. Whilst this is being corrected, I am asking the Principals to try and make a contribution, make the extra effort ... I am assuming that those who are good enough to be promoted to Principals must have had some dedication. Otherwise, it is sheer lunacy to put a man in charge of a school. This extra effort must be made.

You know what we want to do. Often, we may not succeed in doing it the first time properly. And I do not want you to believe that these are orders we are giving. No: this is a two-way process. You are on the ground; you are running the school.

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You know, the boys take the oath. I myself have read the oath; I had not seen it before it was circulated. But I thought to myself, in the English and even in the Chinese which I read, it is a bit too long for a primary school boy of six or seven. The idea is right. But it can be improved on, and it must be improved on. But at the same time, some teachers think it is all a joke. It depends on the

teachers. If the teacher thinks it is funny, and just goes through, recites it, the boys will think it is just a waste of three minutes time, just mumble, mumble, mumble and it is over.

I am not quite sure this flag-raising and flag-lowering is the best way. But anywhere, this is what the Ministry has thought of as a start. We will wait and see. It may be that we should do it only once a week. When I was in school, once a week – we didn't raise the flag – we had to go to the school hall where the principal addressed us for 20 minutes or half an hour. And the principal had less to tell me then than what, I am quite sure, you have to tell your boys and girls because the situation is different.

But whatever it is, ultimately the result that we want – and I am sure you must want this – is to produce a community that feels together You know, on certain things it responds together: this is my country, this is my flag; this is my President; this is my future. I am going to protect it.

Secondly, we cannot produce the kind of pupils we did before. All of them went in for qualities which led to individual survival. You ask any bright boy what he wants to do. He wants to be a doctor. Why? Because then he can go anywhere in the world; he will still be a doctor and make money. Or, if he

can't, he will be a lawyer because he also makes money. But you ask him to be an engineer or an architect or to do something, he says, "Then what happens? If the country collapses, I can't get another job elsewhere." That must change.

You have to build in reflexes of group thinking: the survival of the community, not the survival of the individual; which means a re-orientation, a re-shuffling of emphasis, of values. Eventually, we must produce the kind of men and women who can run this tightly-knit society and who have the determination to do it. We must have qualities of leadership at the top, and qualities of cohesion on the ground.

Supposing now, I am given superhuman powers. I say, "Look, here is Singapore with this limitation: 2 million people. What kind of schools, education would I have?" I will tell you what I think I want to do if I were endowed with superhuman powers.

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I would like first, at the very top of your society, to rear a generation that has all the qualities needed to lead and give the people the inspiration, the drive to make it succeed. This would be your elite. And, if you go to any country, even young ones like Australia, they have special schools.

What is the ideal product? The ideal product is the student, the university graduate, who is strong, robust, rugged, with tremendous qualities of stamina, endurance and at the same time, with great intellectual discipline and, most important of all, humility and love for his community; a readiness to serve whether God or king or country or, if you like, just his community. And every society produces this type or they try to. The British have special schools for them. They send them to Eton and Harrow and a few very exclusive private schools which they call "public schools", then they send them on to Oxford and Cambridge. And they have legends which say that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.

The Australians are trying to do it. Recently, Prince Charles went to this school in Geelong. This is their equivalent where they try to build the complete Australian with great vitality, outdoor life, resourcefulness. Even caught in the bush, he will learn how to survive, and he will have great qualities of discipline and heart. That is your ideal.

And, from time to time, such people are produced. The Americans produce them; the Russians produce them, the Chinese produce them. The Germans produce them; the Indians produce them, but with this slight difference:

that the Indians have never placed the emphasis on the physical side. They have always placed it on the spiritual side.

We should try to do that. Not every boy is equal in his endowments in either physical stamina or mental capacity or character. But you want to try and get all those with the potential to blossom forth. That is your spearhead in your society. On them, depends the pace of progress.

You know, this government at the moment – the whole of this Administration – is running on I would say the ability and drive and dedication – not on the basis of what they get in salaries, you know – of about 150 people. You remove these 150 people, if you can identify the 150; whoever wants to destroy this society, identifies these 150 people and kills them, the push will be gone. This is a very thin crust of leadership. This has to be spread quickly, more and more.

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Then you have your middle strata of good executives. Not everybody can be a leader, can be a general, can be a Prime Minister, can be a top scientist or a physicist. And you can be the best general in the world or the best prime minister in the world, but if you do not have high-quality executives to help you carry out your ideas, thinking and planning, you cannot succeed. So you need

the middle strata of good executives. And then, finally you have your broad base.

In any army, in one battalion, you have 60 to 70 officers, one to two hundred sergeants and corporals, and the others, about 500, are privates. It must be. This is life. And the quality of your privates determines the quality of your army as much as the quality of the generals does.

And I am as much interested in the bottom as I am in the top of this pyramid. But we must accept the fact that this is life.

If I were given superhuman powers, I would say, "Right, then I form these schools". Not just one. I will probably form three or four; and boys and girls, all who have potential, near-geniuses, people who can read your poetry in three languages if you give them the training, give them the character that goes with it. Then you have this middle strata.

Then – which is what Singapore has not reconciled itself to – there are people who are just average. But even that average, we must nurture. That average person must be one who has a sense of discipline: in himself, and social discipline. He respects his community and does not spit all over the place.

There are societies in the world where things have dropped so low that your social discipline has collapsed. Recently, I went through a capital where the Army had taken over and they decided to smack down a whole row of shanty-huts built on pavements and roads. The structure had collapsed. The State was no longer able to control the politicians who were in a hopeless mess. So, people built all these huts all over the place. The Army came with gun and cleaned it up. They were ashamed of it. But they did not solve the social problems. Because the people still had nowhere to go. They probably slept on the pavements and they excreted on the pavements. The society had collapsed. And this has happened in a number of places in Asia. Because that bottom layer of average boys and girls was never given the care, the attention and the inculcation of good responses, good habits, good attitudes.

How do you produce this sort of structure; top leaders, good executives, well-disciplined and highly civic-conscious broad mass? I say it goes back to the school and the teacher.

And the school or the teacher is a very personal thing. We have expanded all these schools so fast, you might as well now call these schools by numbers –

School No.75 or School No.85. We are taking names of roads and streets for schools. They have no special character.

To me, just reading the Cabinet paper from the Ministry of Education of our requirements for secondary schools and about there being no need for more primary schools; my mind goes back to the day I went to school. And to me, the school was the beginning and end of life, with the teachers who were in charge of me.

You know, the school must have character; it must belong. You cannot have anonymous schools and anonymous teachers – which was what we tended to do because we were expanding so rapidly.

You take Raffles Institution, change it and call it Beach Road School.

You have lost something. That is why the schools that did not expand too rapidly, Chinese High School, Chung Cheng, Nanyang, Catholic Boys' High School, St. Joseph's, ACS: they maintained an esprit de corps. The boys were proud for it.

And, because we expanded so much, the Government schools went down so low that we abolished the inter-school sports because there were no sports masters.

I say we reverse that. There must be enough talent in the population. Build it up; reverse the process. Identify the school; make it mean something. A teacher cannot really perform his duty unless he feels he is doing something worthwhile. I want every school teacher in the classroom to feel for and with his flock of 35 or 32 children. If you do not feel that, you cannot give the pupil something.

I can remember the teachers in my life in primary school, secondary school and in university: those who meant something and those who meant nothing.

There were those who said, "Well, all right, boys take your book. We will now

turn to Chapter 7." Then he mumbles, mumbles, mumbles; one hour is past,

finished. He gets the same pay as the other chap. I have been to good

universities and there were some university lecturers like that, too. They were

not interested in the pupils. They were doing a job in order to do a great piece of research, doing a Ph.D. or something and doing a lecturer's job in the meantime.

They weren't interested in imparting knowledge. And some of them were very

brilliant men who subsequently received very high degrees, doctorates and so on.

But the people who made the impact on me were the able men who wanted to give something. They really spent time in the lecture room and, afterwards in tutorials, four, five students at a time, we discussed things. And he gave of himself. And at the end of a session, at the end of an evening, just before dinner when tutorials finished – you could see the man literally exhausted. He then went for his glass of sherry to perk himself up and then went to dinner.

We must produce that. And I say: we start now. Every Principal is no longer an anonymous principal: principals are not anonymous. I had several principals when I was in Telok Kurau and when I was in Raffles Institution. I went to two schools. I can remember the principals who cared and the principals who didn't care.

There was a Principal in RI who was a disciplinarian, but he cared. And those of you here will know when I say Macleod and will say "Yes, the chap really cared." He cared for the pupils. He caned them. He took a personal interest. He flitted in and out of class-rooms, and the teachers half loved him and were half terrified of being found wanting. He was just not Principal No.75 in charge of School, Beach Road. This was his school and he was going to mould a character of this school, and he did it.

And this is what I want to do. If I could do it overnight with superhuman power, I will endow first, every school with an identity and a character of its own. Next, every teacher must feel the dedication and must understand where all this is leading.

So I hope this morning first to convey something not so much by what I have said in words but by the thought behind the words: that I am extremely anxious about the generation that is growing up literate but uneducated. They can read; they can write; they can pass examinations. But they are not really educated. You know, they have not formed; they have not developed. They are not good digits for your community.

If I may sum it up, if you leave this meeting today feeling that you have not wasted your time, but with the feeling that this may be that something you have to worry about ... Because this is going to catch up with all of you if we fail, because you are all involved: you, your personal career, your pension, and more important, your future, your children. If you really feel that this needs thinking about I am not telling you that I have found the answer. But I am saying that answers can be found for this.

One good thing is that the pressure of numbers has stopped. No more primary schools need be built until the day when we decide we are rich enough to have every school running only one session. And we may. If we are lucky, work hard, in ten years' time, there will be in each school a playing field, gymnasium, school hall – all the paraphernalia required to build a complete citizen.

Now we start looking after the teachers. And Singapore responds to two things. It is a new society; it does not respond as much to sentiments. It can respond to reason, but only very few people can reason things out and can say, “Yes, this will lead there. I think he is right.” But they respond to immediate incentives and deterrents, the carrot and the stick. They understand that very well. I say we use it, even on the teachers and, if necessary, the principals and the school inspectors. It has to be done.

We are now producing better and better qualified pre-university types. I propose – this is very much in the thinking phase – to re-train all the teachers, those who want promotions. Pass post-graduate courses; make the effort, and weed out those who are really misfits in the teaching profession. Out they go. It is cruel; it is harsh. But the man who thinks he is in and the PSC is going to protect him, I think he has made a very great error.

A society, a community has the right to protect itself and it must protect itself against this sort of situation, and give rewards to the people who really make the grade, the dedicated who really give of themselves. Not just monetary rewards, you know. They are important, but there is recognition of the effort put in.

Finally, I would like you to tell me what you think. As I have said, this is a two-way process. Why? Because it must be. If you are purely negative, you just transmit – sometimes faithfully, sometimes distortedly, what is sent out to you, then I think as teachers you are not much use. You must have that creativeness as a human being, as a teacher, before you can bring it out in the pupil. And I would like to hear what you have to tell me.

Now, I would like you to treat this not as a Prime Minister talking to the Headmasters, but you and I, we are fellow-citizens, and this is a problem. You tell me quite frankly what you think should be done because this is most important. If you do not feel first, the spirit of the thing – why it must be done, the urgency, the importance of it – then all the best-laid plans and all the circulars will go astray and the flag-raising ceremony, the flag-lowering ceremony will all become a burlesque.

Now, how do we do it?

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