

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE  
OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON "EDUCATION AND NATION-  
BUILDING", HELD ON 27TH DECEMBER, 1966, AT THE  
CONFERENCE HALL, SHENTON WAY.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting arises out of the discussions I had with you in August this year.

As in August, I have called you together not to address you but to discuss certain problems with you. These are problems which I face and which, indeed, the whole community faces, and which can be resolved only if you and I first identify what they are. Even though we may not agree on how we are to resolve them, we must, at least, be agreed on what are the difficulties facing us.

It is a time for re-assessment -- a re-assessment of the content and the objectives of our education and a re-formulation of our policies and our methods.

Over the last decade, the problem was how to give every boy and girl a place in school and some education; how to build the schools; how to train the teachers to man the schools; how to arrange for the children to be given places in the schools teaching the languages their parents want them to learn.

Now, we must take stock first, of what we have done and ask ourselves what it is we must now do. And, if I can sum up in one heading, the objective which you and I will probably be agreed upon is that the accent must now be on quality and not on quantity.

We have the schools: we have built them. We have the teachers: we have given them such training as have been available. Our population increase has stabilised and we need not be building as fast as we were doing before nor recruiting teachers as furiously as we did before.

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This year we passed, in Parliament, a Budget with provision of \$143 million as annually recurrent expenditure for education alone. This sum has nothing to do with the cost of schools: that is development expenditure. This amount is recurring annually. Every year in December, we must meet and vote for sums which must be spent principally for salaries of teachers; principals; Education Ministry officials. \$143 million as compared with \$129 million last

year. And every year, this increase must be in the region of 15% not only because all teachers automatically get an increase year by year but also because the numbers must also grow as more secondary schools are completed to take in the bulge which has entered the primary schools.

Now, we do not grudge this money but we must get its worth returned to us in good citizens who are robust, well-educated, skilled and well-adjusted people. Finally, the end product is the good citizen, the man or woman who has had the maximum of nurturing of his or her natural talent to fit him or her to earn his or her livelihood in our society and who can bring up a family and care for them.

In this Seminar, you will be occupied with a great deal of what I would call professional expertise: teacher-training programmes -- whether this should be full-time or should be in service training; re-training -- whether re-training should be by way of refresher courses periodically in a teacher's career; teacher-student ratios -- whether, in primary school, 1:35 is not too much; what it is that our society can afford to achieve -- perhaps, 1:25 in a secondary school; the control, of course, of malpractices that have crept into the system -- limitations on the amount of time a teacher can expend for private tuition or for private gain; the problems of supervision -- of inspectors or advisers (if the term inspector

evokes unpleasant connotations); audio-visual aids; the raising perhaps, of the retirement age for senior masters and principals so that a valuable quality, experience, which is in very short supply is not lost.

They are important problems and I have spent some time reading through a number of reports both of commissions that we ourselves set up and of those that were set up by other governments. There was one, for example, which was set up in Malaya sometime before independence. And I have read also of the problem of teachers and education in other parts of the world. And, throughout the world, there is the problem of how to fit in new concepts.

An egalitarian society demands that everybody be given a chance for the maximum provision of his talent; demands for more places in schools and in universities. And this increase demand has inevitably, been accompanied by some fall in the standards that were possible.

If we had had to educate only those who could afford to educate their children, then standards would have been different. But one of the striking phenomena of the world after the Second World War was that after whole masses of human beings throughout the world were involved in a global conflict, everybody then asked himself, "What is it I was asked to fight and die for?" And

the answer is: for democracy; for a better life -- and a better life for everybody not just for a select and a privileged few. And so it is that even in very advanced countries like Britain, Europe and America, there is a pressure on educational facilities. They are expanding their schools, particularly their secondary schools and their universities and technical institutions.

Now, we likewise responded to this pressure. And I think it behoves us first, to identify the faults and the flaws that have crept into the system -- sometimes despite the most careful of precautions being taken -- and then, to decide what it is we must do.

First, let me pose this question: What is the objective? What must you give to the boy and the girl who goes to school in order that he can come out, at the end of the process, well-equipped to meet the problems of finding a livelihood in his community?

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We have used the quantitative test: the examination and the performance in an examination has brought out what I would call the 'literate' as against the educated person.

The literate person can read; he understands words and he may even understand phrases. But, in most cases, he only reads the comic strips, tit-bits. He is a passive viewer of television, of the cinema and worse, these habits go on even in the university.

I was discussing some of these problems with some professors of medicine who remarked that their student read only medical journals dealing with the particular field in which they are interested and beyond that, perhaps the newspaper and comics.

The idea of a cultivated mind, of a person creatively working his own intellect, is something which we have lost. "Choose, from the following, what is the right answer to the question ..." So, the mind hops. It opts and say, "Ah, yes. This must be it ..." It is all reasoning on how to overcome the obstacle of the examiner to get the necessary number of marks.

How do we move away from the technique of 'cramming' for the purpose of passing an examination to the process of giving a boy and a girl something which will be self-generating? I do not know ultimately, at what level our economy will reach its new equilibrium, post-Malaysia, post-Separation. The ideal is to give every boy and girl at least 10 years of schooling. It may well be

that we can afford only 8 or 9 years for the time being. It depends on how our economic growth continues. But, whatever it is -- whether it is 6 years in primary school plus two years in secondary school, or whether it is 6 plus 4 -- at the end of that process, you must leave the boy and the girl with something to start a life-long cultivation of mental and cultural habits. The person who can pick from where he left off in school and who can continue his interests in life is the person you must educate. He cannot just have passed examinations.

But, there is one special feature in our society which does not exist anywhere else in the world. This is the fact that, in one tightly-knit urban community, we have people of diverse racial, linguistic and cultural stock. There are minority problems in Russia and even in China or in India, but you have, usually, people of the same language-group living together in one territory. So that when the Russian talks about the problems of the minorities, he is referring, perhaps, to the Caucasians. And there are millions of them: people who live together in groups speaking their own languages. But here, we have them all in one tightly-knit community.

Even in Switzerland. The country can, more or less, be geographically divided into French-speaking, German-speaking, Italian-speaking. Even in Canada, Quebec is a French-speaking city surrounded, perhaps, by English-

speaking provinces. But here, you have a unique situation -- all thrown into one milieu.

And we have decided -- and I think rightly -- that to each must be given what he already has; and unto each that extra that will provide the common denominators between all of us.

I do not believe you can provide these things by legislation alone. It is not possible. What will the common denominators between the Chinese-speaking, the Malay-speaking, the Indian-speaking and the growing body of English-speaking? It is very difficult to project one's mind so far ahead -- 20, 30, 40, 50 years' ahead. But you must try to give them common denominators or you will have a situation in which there will be no communication between sectors of your own society.

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And one decision we made -- again, I believe rightly -- is that in this situation, a person who is a mono-linguist, competent only in one language is a problem to himself and to his society. If you know only one language, whatever it may be, Chinese, Malay, Tamil or English and no other language, then in this society, you will find yourself a problem -- for yourself and for your society. And invariably, you will find that with a knowledge of another language -- which



means an understanding of a different culture, a different civilisation and more windows in the mind -- come inevitably, tolerance and understanding. The chauvinist, the bigot, the extremist very often is a mono-linguist. His mind has no windows into other worlds.

Now, that having been said, we have now to find a solution which will be practical for the majority of our pupils. What is it to be, for example, for the Chinese school children?

Bi-lingualism is a must for everybody. But can everybody become tri-lingual? Perhaps not. I do not know the answer. But if the average cannot become tri-lingual, cannot become competently tri-lingual, then what is the common denominator? These are questions to which answers must be found slowly and not be pre-ordained. In the end, some working balance will have to

be found.

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Today, as a matter of observation -- not whether I believe it is right or wrong, just as a statement of fact -- the lingua-franca in the market-place and in the shops often is Malay. It is the language in which the various different groups find some common communication. And, at higher levels, when one begins to discuss economics, politics, technical problems -- whether it is in civil aviation or shipping -- the common medium is English. But I have had, on many occasions, reason to discuss the sterilising effects of a completely English-type education which deprives the child of that spiritual line with his past -- a failure to identify his formal education -- what he learns in school, in an English-language school -- with his own social and cultural background.

Therefore, there is the necessity for preserving for each child that cultural ballast and appreciation of his origin and his background in order to give him that confidence to face the problems of his society. He must know from whence he came and how it is that he is where he is before he is able to meet the problems and make the decisions which he must make to adjust himself and his family in the society in which he has decided to make a home.

Finally, after having settled all this -- content, methods, what ratios you have to give of classroom time and extra-mural activities for a robust, educated person -- you come back to your most important digit -- the teacher. For a school is only as good as its teachers.

To teach is to communicate and to communicate, you must have a command of language. And, in our situation, we want in a child eventually, a command of at least two languages. And I was extremely disturbed reading through some of our Reports -- one by Lim Tay Boh, an Interim Report, another a Final Report; and another on technical education -- to see the recommendation that large numbers of our teachers, who are already in service, should be made to try and improve their own command of the language in which they are supposed to instruct.

There are people who have been recruited into our education service to teach English when they never had a 'C' in English. There are people who are now teaching Chinese who did not get a 'C' or credit in Chinese. If you have not a command of the tools of thought, how on earth can you begin to transmit?

I do not know how these things came to be. But I am even more astounded when I discover that for years now -- because it was part of the idea of 'Malayanising' -- the English that our student-teachers are being taught is being taught not by people who are conversant with the language but by Asian graduates of the English language. You, therefore, get the thing 3 times removed.

First, somebody must have learnt the language; that people must have learnt the English language from the people who use it; namely the Englishman. He must know his language better than anybody else! But we get an Indian graduate from an Indian university to teach our teachers English. The chances are the Indian graduate never had an Englishman as a teacher. So, that is already one stage removed. He then teaches our student-teachers English: that is two stages removed. The student-teacher then goes to school and becomes a teacher and he teaches it to the pupil -- that is three stages removed!

Now you can imagine for yourself what it would be like if all the parents, of, let us say, a country like New Zealand decided that a new age had come and they wanted their children to learn Chinese because it is the language to culture and science and technology. So, a New Zealander probably goes to China and learns Chinese. Then he goes back and teaches Chinese to New Zealand

student-teachers. Then the student-teachers go to the schools and teach Chinese to New Zealand student. I am quite sure by the time a New Zealand student passes out even with a credit in Chinese, he will find great difficulty in understanding Chinese as spoken in China by Chinese; and definitely, he will never make himself understood in Chinese to Chinese!

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of effective instruments of communication. A capacity for expression -- and accurate expression -- of ideas and thoughts is vital in any communication. And we have to ask ourselves now what it is we can do -- accepting the fact that these things have happened -- to try and remove these deficiencies.

The same problem of language is taking place in English schools as in the Chinese schools. Because in the Chinese schools, they are unable to impart -- except for a very few schools run principally by the missions where they have teachers in the second language probably speaking that language as their mother-language -- they have failed to overcome this language exclusiveness. So, in the English schools, our policy of giving the child a second language has not succeeded in producing other than a smattering of understanding of its written forms. The capacity to communicate is not there.

Now, answers must be found to this.

A language consists of three things. First, it means listening and understanding sounds as distinct from written signs. That was the way man first learnt to communicate with each other -- just through sounds: the capacity to discern and to comprehend the meaning of sounds. The second thing is to make use of these sounds in order to convey your meaning and your ideas to others. They are two different processes. The first is easier than the second: to listen and understand is more difficult than to speak. And the third -- which comes only at a very advanced stage even in the history of peoples and civilisations -- is to be able to reduce all into writing. Your sounds are reduced into writing and you can keep them in a permanent form and you can communicate with one another just by the written forms. These are three different things. And, in none of our schools have we produced the command of the language in the way in which man first learnt languages.

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Many tribes till today can only speak to each other. They cannot write. And yet we are teaching, in the Chinese schools, boys and girls who can barely understand an Englishman talking because they have, often, been taught by a Chinese teacher of English who himself or herself cannot speak the language as an Englishman. The child cannot understand when he hears and, if he cannot

understand when he hears, how is it possible for him to be understood when he himself makes those sound? He has dropped the first two stages and moved on to the third! He can read the newspapers and, with the aid of a dictionary and the grammar book, understand what is written there and he can write a short letter. How it is we have achieved this, quite contrary to the way which human beings have learnt how to use a language in actual life, I have never ceased to marvel at!

Finally, apart from language, the capacity to communicate you must give to the pupil. You must fill him up; fill his life and mind up with values and concepts which will serve him well when he has to face the problems of making a livelihood in his community.

I have no desire to pre-determine what our educational content must be. Much of it depends upon the development of our economy. But one thing I am quite sure of: that if we keep on producing in the secondary schools what we have done in the primary schools and just carry on as we are, we are going to produce a generation of misfits.

Every parent today hopes that his child will go through secondary school, go on to pre-university class, go on to university and come out the complete

cultured and educated person and go on to top jobs, Division I jobs, in our society.

Can this be possible -- even in the most advanced and developed of societies?

Our Commission on Technical Education recommended as early as 1961 that there should be only 20 per cent of secondary schools which are of the academic type and leading on to the University (and not all the 20 per cent will make the University.) 8 per cent should be of a commercial type, 7 per cent technical and 65 per cent vocational.

I don't know whether this will be right or wrong in actual percentages: it depends upon how our economy develops. But assuming that it does, I still do not believe that more than, at the most, 10 per cent of our population will ever reach pre-university standards. If you can get one out of ten in your population reaching the level at which students in advanced countries reach when they enter the universities, then indeed we have done well. And even in the most advanced of countries, it is only one in three hundred of the total population who goes on to university.



Now the net result of just carrying on into the secondary stage what we do in the primary stage can be emotionally and psychologically disastrous. Because the boy and the girl begins to adopt attitudes towards certain jobs which soil the hands.

We have had instances now of people who, after leaving school and entering the Works Brigade, refuse certain jobs offered because they are considered to be socially undesirable jobs. You give them a job as a parking attendant to mark time until they can get into an office and everyone is prepared to do that. It is an easy job: it is a soft population, in other words. So the girls wrap themselves up with gloves and long hats to keep themselves fair while they mark out the chits for your parking fee. But if you tell them there is an opening in road-building or brick-laying, having been to secondary schools, they invariably turn the jobs down!

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Now this must pose very grave problems in the future unless we re-orientate the values we give them. For, if the community succeeds and the economic growth succeeds, then 80 per cent of the population will consist of people who have, at some stage, to use their hands to handle implements, not so much to use their hands to handle pens. It must be so, whether you drive a truck or break the road with a pneumatic drill or you repair ships or you repair cars. In

short, your problem goes back to the values that your teacher must have, to transmit to the pupils. These are emotional attitudes and values. And, in my own assessment, this is the most difficult of all our problems because if the teacher, by reason of the method of his recruitment -- namely, by way of incentives, on the alternatives open to them as .... How much do I get as a trainee-teacher? Eventually, what do I get when I reach 50 compared with one, joining the Army or the Police; two, trying to get some loan from somebody to try and get in some university abroad, having failed to get in to the university here against other competitors ..... And we have drafted in, a whole group of people whose motivations are purely economic. And it must be so. For otherwise, the rapid expansion could not have been possible.

The answer must, in the end, be found in a proud and dedicated profession. Teaching is not a job. It is not a vocation. The capacity to transmit knowledge and skills demands dedication of a very high order, for nowhere else is the giving so great in return for what you get for what you give.

I am constantly reminded of this because I have never ceased to be a student, I have never ceased to learn. It is partly because of the defects of the education system I went through. And, every day, either by myself or with a teacher, I learn how to use some other language -- whether it is Mandarin or

Hokkien or Malay. And when I went to a University recently, they said “Ah! we will show you our latest equipment: a language laboratory.” And I thought to myself that it was an awful shame that I did not have a language laboratory when I started to learn these languages. I would have saved myself so much effort! This language laboratory was in a very advanced university and I discovered that the laboratory consisted of a whole host of gadgets which enable one teacher to try and teach effectively a group of about 50, 20, 25 students. That, in fact, if I had attended such a language laboratory, my progress would have been slower.

Finally, what counts is the communication between the man sitting in front of me trying to induce me, by demonstration, to produce sounds as near akin to the norms of the sounds he can produce. One man, one teacher. You cannot improve on that. You can go to sleep listening to a tape recorder and I am told that if you do that and you are that sort of a mind, you might wake up learning without effort! But, in the end, to produce an aspirated sound as distinct from a non-aspirated consonant, you need a teacher who is there who listens and watches you and gives of himself.

This is the problem of education. In primitive societies, the mother, the father, the tribe transmits its little knowledge as to how to fish, how to hunt, how to cook what is hunted; how to sew. Through personal contact you transmit

something. But if one mother and one father have more than two children, then one cannot transmit to one. One must transmit to many. And finally, when you have highly organised communities, with all the esoteric arts and skills to pass on and not just simply how to catch a fish or cut a chicken but to learn all the various sciences and disciplines that human civilisations have created and without which human civilisations cannot continue, then you have this problem of transmission.

And, in the end, you go back to the type of person you recruit as a teacher and the kind of incentives that he or she must have to be a teacher.

There are two different skills. Performance in a particular science or discipline does not necessarily make that person a good teacher. You can be an Einstein and perhaps a group of near-geniuses around you might pick up working with you the skills and expertise which he developed. But getting an Einstein to teach first year mathematics to students in the university may not necessarily be the best thing. You may get the world's best singer but I often think the pupil is better off with somebody of lesser excellence in her performance but with more of the capacity to transmit the basic fundamentals.

For finally, just as a country is as good as its citizens, so its citizens are, really, only as good as their teachers.

And some norm must be found in which, whatever has happened in the past, future recruitment -- and this is an unending process -- must mean the recruitment of people who must be given that status, that pride in their profession, that will ensure the transmission of all skills that we have acquired on to the next generation for higher and improved skills.

Now we must be realistic in these matters. Your best performers are not necessarily your best teachers. That is a fortunate fact. For if your best performers are your best teachers, then the country may not be able to run because if you take them to go and teach others when they are supposed to be performing to make the country work, then so much the worst for the country.

But the problem is how to discover, without unnecessary wastage -- that is, discovering only after a man has been trained for the job and has spent many years doing the job that he is a misfit -- the problem is how to discover a group of people who were not the best performers in a particular skill or discipline but who are, in fact, the best performers in the job that we have in hand; namely, to transmit this to the next generation. This is performance: the teacher who can enthuse the pupils, who fires his imagination, involves him in the process of

learning and enjoying the learning process. I have had teachers who, when they took a lesson, we would read a newspaper or a magazine and teachers who really set out to teach. And it has been my good fortune to have had such teachers, or progress would not have been possible. Some of them spend hours working out the sort of vocabulary I will need, the things that they know I want to say and lessons are planned for me, beforehand. One works out model phrases; attends my meetings and my rallies and finds out the difficulties which I encounter in expression and then gives me the polished turn of phrase which I subsequently use with effect.

Now this means in the end, that you must give this group of people prestige and status. For this is a society which is parvenue. It is a new society. You have other incentives, other motivations in old societies, but in our society -- let us be frank enough to admit this -- the thing which moves people to conduct, which you want them to perform is reward, and the reward, which they want most is money. Money means status. For how else can you have a car? Or, if you have status, then you have two cars and if you do well in business, you have two houses, two homes. And so it goes on.

This is a problem which we must recognise.

Recently, when we came to decide just how much to offer for an Army career, this was very much in our minds. You go to a developed country, an established society. Grandfather was a soldier and a great general; father was a soldier and in the sons, one or two of them will be soldiers. There is a tradition to pass on, whatever happens. And you get certain societies, as in India, where your roles have been so pre-determined that they classify as caste groups ..... So and so will sweep the streets. Why? Because his father swept the streets, so he is an untouchable. And certain castes are warrior castes, certain castes are meant to do other things as scholars and administrators and so on.

Our society consists of migrants. We left our past behind seeking a fortune -- El Dorado -- the gold at the bottom of a rainbow, the jackpot. This is what brought our ancestors here. And the few that did find gold probably left, and you and I are here because our ancestors did not find the gold they wanted!

But that desire to look for gold is still there and we must recognise that. In other words, rewards must be commensurate. Otherwise, you are not going to get to this group.

In an established society like Britain, I have known of cases where a professor at a provincial university and sometimes, a big university like London, has given up his job in order to become a reader in Cambridge or in Oxford with

less pay but with other compensations. This is crucial: the matter of different motivations in the human being. And I know of an individual case where a man gave up his job to go back at a lower point in the hope of improving his chances of becoming a professor at Oxford and Cambridge. It means status. It means respect by the people he wants respect from -- his fellow-academicians. But I would be astounded if anybody gave up a job at the University of Nanyang to go to the University of Singapore for lower pay. It just wouldn't happen. It is not possible.

Now, within this milieu, we have to construct our hierarchy in which the top grades in the teaching profession -- the men who are going to run our educational institutions, whether it is the TTC or the top schools -- are people who command a status in their society. And for that status, certain perquisites must be given to the positions that they occupy in order that they can command the respect of their fellow-citizens.

These are the problems which I hope in the course of this Seminar you will discuss freely and frankly. For, unless we do that, we are never likely to begin to solve these problems.



I would like to end on this note: that, if as a result of your deliberations and discussions, we move on to the next stage -- the teachers -- and involve them in this process to ask themselves what it is they are supposed to do, what is their role, what is their function, why they are important to the community, then this Seminar would not have been a wasted effort.

We have about 18,000 teachers in all the four language streams. If I could get each one of them and speak to them one at a time, I would find it difficult to believe -- if I can tell him exactly what I am thinking and why I am thinking what I am thinking, and how it involves him if not as a teacher at least as the father of his children or the mother of her children, and how it concerns the society in which he must live -- I cannot believe that he will part from me without taking some of that concern and the intensity of purpose which has impelled me to spend so much of my time to study this particular aspect of our duties: the next generation.

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For, it is in the next generation that we can really show what measure of success a migrant community has achieved in giving to its descendants values, skills and disciplines which will ensure them an enduring and a worthwhile future. Any other way is hopeless and futile.

The old values of personal survival are passing off. The lesson is sinking home.

You know, in a migrant community, when you have no roots, you have no stakes in the country, you do not really make a bid as a group. You make a bid as an individual: how to be nice, how to get on, get a licence, get a permit, do business, make money. If the worse come to the worst, take your money and quit! So that whether it was the British or the Japanese or whoever comes, it does not matter. You just bow, make yourself amenable, get on. But there comes a stage when the community takes roots. And it took root with my generation when we asked ourselves, "What is it all about? Is it really just for that pot of gold? Assuming that we are given that pot of gold, what can we do with it? All right; so you add a swimming pool to your house. And in America, all wealthy peoples have swimming pools. What else can you add? What are the values that give satisfaction?" And, in the end, you come back to the crucial point: where is the permanence of what you are building? How do you make it endure and flourish? And then you have begun to ask yourself the first question: what makes a community a community? What makes a society different from just a collection of individuals? Because in that community, in all groups, in all sections, there are people who can discern and identify their group interests.

And so from a lot of migrants, Americans became a nation. And so, from a lot of Englishmen, the Australians are becoming a separate nation because there are people in that community who have discerned and identified where their collective interests are as a people in extremis: what is it that will happen to them, and to what they have built. And so they act accordingly.

And that process has started in Singapore. And our years of political education of why we should have merger and Malaysia; the political education that we had in Malaysia itself and our separation from it -- all this has telescoped into a few years what might have taken a whole generation to give birth: that this is ours to make and build or to lose and give away.

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I have decided that we shall make and build and never to give away. And those of you who believe likewise, then you are fit to be teachers. If you believe this is just to make for yourself and to give the country away -- it does not matter because you can go away -- then I say you have nothing in common with us. In the community, the one group that must have this desire to construct and to build and improve upon what we have built must be amongst those who are entrusted with our young.

At some other time, I would like to meet you again and I would like to discover that perhaps what I have said this morning has found more than just a temporary echo in your minds. More important, it must have pulled at the heart-strings of your life. And if it does that, I can think of no better guarantee of our continued well-being.

Thank you.  
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