

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT A CONVOCATION DINNER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, HELD AT ADELPHI HOTEL ON
19TH JUNE, 1967.

Mr. Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are a number of events which happen only once in a man's life. He is born only once; he is dead only once. In between, he takes a first degree at a university only once. Then he can marry any number of times, have any number of children. But whether he makes life a rewarding response to an unending series of challenges or one perpetual grouse against ill-fortune: this is decided once he has made up his mind what life is about.

I would like this evening to address myself to the group of young men and women who have been bestowed with the intellectual disciplines and the social status which entitles them to expect in this society a higher standard of life. I would like to open for them a new vista of the kind of contribution which they can make to their lives and to their society. One is born, one takes examinations then eventually graduates from a university. Then one gets a job, marries, have

children, seeks wealth or fame, achievement or distinction. Then death is the great equalizer.

Can any one foretell what each graduate is likely to achieve when he is put to the test? Can any professor assess the future performance of his students? I am told in American universities that every year, they vote a student the honour of being "most likely to succeed". Is this possible?

Examinations are behind those of you who do not intend to go on for post-graduate work. They are like punctuation marks in one's biography. And in some societies like Singapore, the university degree represents the full-stop in intellectual growth, in the process of learning. In part this is because this is a parvenu society consisting mainly of migrants. In part it is because we have inherited these ideals born out of the values of a past society. In the past, the success story from rags to riches -- besides striking it rich either in the tin or in the rubber -- was via a scholarship, which meant the Queen's Scholarship, for one man or two who, every year, through sheer academic excellence had the gates opened for him to Oxford and Cambridge, and then back to the highest pinnacles which the local citizenry could then expect.

The tragedy was not that academic excellence was the norm but that the emphasis was completely only on academic distinction. In this case, it was an examination distinction which often ended with the winning of the scholarship.

And it is often a surprise to most of our own intelligentsia that there are other societies in which more rounded values vital to the growth, the strength, the continuity of a nation or a society are emphasised.

In the English-speaking world, there is the Rhodes Scholar. He is the ideal, the potential leader, a man of intellect and with great physical vitality, with qualities of leadership. But the strange thing is that I know of no Rhodes Scholar -- and the scholarships are given in all the English-speaking countries -- who has ever returned and become either the prime minister or the president of his own country. So obviously the most careful scrutiny of a young man in his 'teens' and his 'twenties' still could not produce the answer.

I am not familiar with the many systems which obtain in the various countries that have existed with high levels of civilised endeavour. But I am familiar with the British system. And the ideal is the man who gets a first at Oxford or Cambridge; he is also a blue, preferably in rowing or rugger and, best of all, at the same time President of the Union. But the strange thing is that no

such person who got a first, who got a blue, and was president of the Union, ever became more than Lord Chancellor of England in recent times. And no British Prime Minister in this century had achieved all three things.

So those of you who did not get a first, who did not excel in any of the major sporting events, nor in any of the other social activities should not lose heart. After all, quite a number of prime ministers in this world have achieved considerable eminence through no other reason than fortuitous circumstance!

But, those of you who do not consider life, or are not prepared to allow life to be, one great game of chance, will do well to remember this -- that learning never stops. As long as you live, you learn. As long as there is life in you, you change. For that is the essence of life. And even if you do not change much, even if the change in you is only fractional, the world is never the same today as it was yesterday. That alone requires change and different responses from you.

And the whole purpose of education -- from the kindergarten to primary school to secondary school on to university -- is to lay a foundation, to give a man that start, in the right direction. It depends so much upon the inculcation of good physical habits, the techniques of learning, and of social and personal values.

The Chinese have in their ideographs represent these by three characters: "Shen", the body; "Hsin", the heart or the mind, the "Te" meaning virtue, but better translated as character. How much of a man is innate, born, gifted, how much of it is cultivated, nurtured and disciplined -- educationalists, physiologists and psychologists will argue about this to the end of time. But it suffices if we accept these major premises: that if life is one unending series of tests and examination, varying in importance, varying in decisiveness on the rest of one's life. If the process of learning and living means to hold oneself in readiness for that moment when one is put to judgement, then education really turns upon the teaching of those habits which makes a man lead an effective life.

The danger in Singapore at the moment, with this repeated emphasis on the physical attributes of ruggedness, is that we may swing to the other extreme, to lose what we already have: great respect for intellectual and academic performance. It would be a pity if, in this pursuit for the other things which make up for a complete person, there is any downgrading of academic distinction. It will be a grave loss for we will give away something which we already have: high intellectual disciplines.

I do not know what the answer to our problems may be. And, I half suspect that there is no single answer, but a series of different answers for different aspects of that problem. It must lie in our being selective and discriminating.

Other societies have discussed when it is that you should assess the quality of a boy or girl -- at 11 plus, 12 plus, 13 plus? I do not know. But I do know that somewhere along this road, before a boy's mind is set and settled, while he is still plastic in his attitudes and values, you have to make a realistic assessment of his intellectual and his physical potentials. In each case, it must be in order to cultivate to maximum fruition whatever qualities he has for best performance and fruition.

But, in any society, there is that 5% who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally. These qualities are not necessarily equated with the social or professional success of the parents. This is where our problem begins.

In other words, out of an annual birth rate of some 60,000 babies, there will be some 3,000 specially endowed future citizens. Let us multiply this by 2 in order to be quite safe that we have not left out somebody who really has these gifts.

Let us make it 10%. It is on this group that we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide that yeast, that ferment, that

catalyst in our society which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain its pre-eminent place in the societies that exist in South and Southeast Asia -- and the social organisation which enables us, with almost no natural resources, to provide the second highest standard of living in Asia.

But there is no such easy answer. For whilst you can ascertain the physical and mental potential of a boy or of a girl, there is this other factor which also determines performance -- character. Character is that indefinable crucible which holds body and mind together in something called the "human personality": self-control, self-discipline, unselfish motivations, integrity of conduct, grit and stamina, courage in adversity, are some of its attributes.

Nobody is sure how much of this is innate, how much of this is trained. Nor are we certain that it is possible, by training, to remedy defects and deficiencies.

National Archives of Singapore

I can do no better than to refer to a book I read recently by a French Catholic who found himself in Buchenwald. And he described the curious transformation that human beings undergo when put under stress -- a revelation of the stuff that a man is made of. People who occupied places of distinction

in ordinary civilian life, when put under conditions of great stress, broke down and vice versa.

But no single anecdote, I think, illustrates the problem more vividly than this. He recounted the fortunes of a great surgeon who occupies a position of great eminence in civilian life. He was fully aware of what he required by way of his diet. Yet he could not control his craving for cigarettes, and he bartered precious calories for cigarettes. He knew that he would die but he went on doing it. And he died.

There was nothing wrong with the intellect. But there was something wrong in the mechanism which modulated the whole human personality.

He recounted another instance of an eminent scientist who knew that if he slept too close to the fire in the hut, the tendency would be, ultimately, to sleep nearer and nearer the fire. And, one morning, it would be too cold at 5 a.m. when the roll-call would be taken, and he would be stricken with the cold and die. Yet, slowly he gave way and slept closer and closer to the comfort of this fire. And he contracted pneumonia -- as he knew he would -- and he died.

I would like to mention one other factor which determines your performance: the motivation one acquires in life. Why do you do these things? Is it because you want to be rich and wealthy; to be more endowed with all the material comforts of life than your neighbour? What is it that propels you to do what you are doing?

I have observed that the man who is motivated for reasons of self, lacks that source of strength and inspiration which the man who is motivated by ideals, of what he must do for his community and his people, has in an emergency or in a crisis.

Let me urge you to make your life as meaningful, as stimulating, as much a joy as any existence on this earth can offer a person. It depends upon your approach to life and its problem. Simply put, I would divide people into two categories: "Triers" and "Quitters". These attitudes are crucial, whether you make your life a stimulating experience or a dreadful chore.

Let me give you an instance in our recent history by way of example.

My colleagues and I were dedicated to the idea of a reunited Singapore and Malaya. We strenuously resisted the proposition that Singapore should go it

alone. Yet we found ourselves, against our own rational thinking and judgement, faced with an independent Singapore on the 9th of August 1965.

There were two approaches to this problem. One that of the quitter: that this is too vulnerable, too exposed a situation; two million people with no natural resources, not variable. It is too daunting and unrewarding a task -- a hopeless proposition.

But if you are a “Trier”, a “Stayer”, then you will feel: What a great challenge! ... It is not without its grave anxieties; but also holds great excitement of the possibilities: to mould a nation out of a migrant and, as yet, unrooted community; out of plastic but active digits. Here is a compact situation, a population with great skills and enterprise, with a good infrastructure, sophisticated leadership at all levels, a strategic location, and with a head-start in the methods of modern living over the rest of Southeast Asia. What could we not do to set the pace in social and economic advance?

To those of you who are more robust in your approach to life and its problems, I say: The whole of life consists of an unending series of tests. The difference between those who succeed in a decisive way and those who do not, is

the ability to judge when is that moment of supreme test when the outcome must decide the issue for decades to come.

It does not matter if you fail your terminal. It does not matter if you throw your marks away in your intermediate year. But it does matter when you are being tested for your supreme performance when you are an under-graduate: you know when to expect the finals.

But in life, you will not know when that awful moment will come. And on that capacity to judge when it is coming, to be ready to meet it, depends whether this community continues to flourish and survive, to prosper, to set an example of what is possible under very trying and unfavourable climatic and natural conditions.

For to you who may occupy positions of influence in our community, your life challenge has just begun. The future is what you make of it.