

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW,
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SPA GRAND HALL, SCARBOROUGH, ON SUNDAY, 1ST
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When I received an invitation to speak at this Rally, I naturally accepted. Yours is the movement from whose experience we in Singapore have profited. Half the members of the Singapore Cabinet of ten were students in Labour Britain immediately after the last war. We imbibed the values and ideals which moved British toward a more just and equal society. They were ideals which the then British Labour Government put into practices not just in Britain, but throughout the then empire. In the decades after the war, these beliefs in freedom, social justice and fair play led to a systematic dismantling of the empire.

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One has only to look and see what is happening in Vietnam to know how different the lives of the people of Singapore and Malaysia could have been. In 1945, both in Vietnam and in Singapore-Malaya, resistance movements against the Japanese led by indigenous Communists were poised for a bid at power. the French, in a succession of coalition governments in which French socialists participated, were unable to extricate to themselves from the web of empire and

so Communist leadership by the Vietminh took over at the whole of the nationalist anti-colonial movement. Final defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was unavoidable. It was followed by more strife and tribulation in the southern half of Vietnam, until today there are some half a million Americans, and some Australians and New Zealanders, South Koreans and Filipinos, all embroiled in a messy, nasty, vicious war of attrition.

This same process could so easily have happened in Singapore and in Malaya. The Malayan Communist Party was as determined and ruthless as the Vietminh. But a combination of firm response to armed insurrection, plus intelligent policies allowing political advance, made it unnecessary for nationalists to make common cause with the Communists. Non-Communist leaderships grew in strength and ascendancy both in Singapore and in Malaya, and eventually they were capable of taking over power from the British without being undermined or routed by the Communists. The Communist insurrection failed as their ground support melted away. Today, unlike, Vietnam, there is peace in Singapore and Malaysia. Some forty to fifty thousand British troops are there not to engage the local people in conflict but to help the growing strength of indigenous armed force to protect the integrity of the new countries from external aggression, which the former Indonesian President, Dr. Soekarno, called "confrontation". I am reminded by Denis Healey that the British do not do these

things in order to gain gratitude. However, we in Singapore are not unmindful of the fact that but for intelligent policies to advance the enlightened self-interest of the British, we would not have inherited an administration which worked, and an economy which we built upon to provide a standard of living in Asia second only to Japan.

I have not come to seek reprieve from the execution of the decisions that were announced only recently in Parliament on Britain's role East of Suez. No one has the right to ask the British Government or the British people to expend their resources to protect the interests and sustain the economies of some other country which is no longer part of British responsibility. But our long association with the British over a period of 150 years emboldens me to hope that the disengagement can take place in a way as to give us the best chance of continuing security and stability. I am not unoptimistic that given a little time and no little effort, we will make the adjustments and live as well in the middle 70's without British base expenditure as we are doing now. After all, there was a thriving and prosperous Singapore for over 100 years from 1819 to the 1930's before the Bases were built -- a Naval Base, then an Air Base. They were intended to keep a check on the growing Japanese strength. And it was only after the war, when British servicemen were accompanied by their families, that Base expenditure rose to 20% of the G.N.P. of Singapore. Quietly and

intelligently we can sort these problems out as we face the changed circumstances of the world in the 70's. And British troops in Singapore, unlike the French in Vietnam, can depart with ceremonial style and with good wishes and goodwill. This area of relative stability and security is testimony to the wisdom of the policies which were initiated by the Labour Government of 1945.

We are through a difficult and dangerous period, particularly those of us whose homes are in Southeast Asia. For this tragic conflict in Vietnam could have the most grievous consequences for all of us, should there be any miscalculation on the possible consequences of either escalation or, equally dangerous, sudden evacuation.

I do not want to sound either like a hawk or a dove. If I have to choose a metaphor from the aviary, I would like to think of the owl. Anyone looking at what is happening in Vietnam must have baleful eyes. It need never have been thus. And perhaps it was not the wisest place, nor the safest ground in Asia to have made a stand. But enormous sacrifices have already been expended, and in blood, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. One can only hope that all countries and all parties will persevere and strive for some rational solution, so that the non-Communist countries in Asia can avoid the same dreadful ordeal, and that eventually the Communist states of Asia will accept the existence of

non-Communist countries of Asia as a fact of life. These are crucial and critical issues that cannot be willed away by wishful thinking. And non-Communist Asia must show that they have the same tenacity of purpose and unflinching will to be themselves. And eventually we shall achieve the kind of detente that has been established in Europe, where the Western and Eastern parts accept the right of the other to order its own life in its own way, and with no illusions that easy victories can be won either through armed intervention or subversion.

Finally, perhaps you may be interested in an account of my experience in Singapore. In a microcosm of community of two million people, we faced some of the problems which trouble most democratic socialist parties in office. In June 1956 the People's Action Party, Singapore's equivalent of the Labour party, won a great election victory. We had promised wondrous change of a better and a brave new world. The workers and the trade unions with whom the party had worked closely together had solidly supported us. But when we came into office, we discovered that the previous government had emptied the kitty. The free schooling, better housing, free health services and better wages were not immediately possible. Some stern measures had to be taken, and were taken. By 1961, some two years after office, the jibe was that the democratic socialist government in Singapore was running the capitalist colonial system better than the best capitalist director or colonial governor had ever run it, much to be

advantage of the big commercial house and at the expense of our own supporters, the workers.

As I mounted the platform at a party conference in July 1961, my colleague, the Finance Minister, a product of the London School of Economics, and the person who most personally shared the responsibility for unpopular measures with me, muttered a Chinese proverb: that when the battle is going poorly, the general is more in danger from his own soldiers than from the enemy. We had a great intra-party debate. We had promised free education, but we could only afford free primary education; true, we made up with numerous scholarships and bursaries for bright and deserving students in the secondary schools and the two universities. We had failed to give free medical services as promised. True, hospitalisation was free, but we could not expand the health services without having to charge 50 cents, or a shilling, for each prescription.

And the bright new homes we had promised were very slow in getting off the ground. And new jobs in the new factories were not coming up as promised.

In the end , the issue was quite simple: as a socialist government, we had to decide the priorities between national purposes and social purposes, between courting temporary unpopularity while we got the economy straight, or taking an easy way out by placating mounting criticism at our poor performance. We had

lost two by-elections disastrously. The future looked grim. But in the end, a hard core of Party stalwarts decided that come what may, it was our duty to continue to do what was right for the country as a whole. A much battered party and Government emerged from the great heartsearching. By a majority of one, we governed for another two years and held the broad middle ground. We had no illusions of the traditional right. They would never vote for us. The jest thrown in our faces was that there more millionaires per ten thousand of population in Singapore governed by a socialist party than our neighbour governed by right-winged government. The party machine was somewhat damaged by this great divide. But we proved at the end of another two years, in September 1963, that the ground support had not weakened and a less strong party machine in fact garnered more votes. For, in the meantime, our economic policies were

bearing fruit. The homes, sprung, thrusting up to the skies, until today about

30% of the people are housed in subsidised housing, some of the best by Asian standards. Meanwhile, the social order had been reconstructed over the 4½ years with the change in income tax policies, distinguishing between earned and unearned incomes, and separate assessment for married women's earned incomes. A broad layer of working middle income parents and factory wives began to buy their homes, from our own public Housing Board and from private

developers, on an instalment basis. And about six months before the general elections, the economy allowed us to give the daily-rated workers a 15% boost.

Six years ago, journalists wrote us off as dead ducks. I think we would have been too, had we switched horses midstream. Because we stuck it out and put national purposes first, setting the economy right, we commanded the respect, even if we did not gain the support, of those who had voted against us.

Finally, as we fairly and justly distributed the fruits of hard work and sacrifice, we had gained the trust of the broad middle ground. We had established political integrity. In the end it was the broad middle ground that decided the issue of who was to be given the right to govern. Recently, in April this year we had 5 by-elections because the Communists had decided to abandon parliamentary competition. We were returned unopposed in four of the seats. In the one that was contested, two oppositon candidates lost their deposits.

I have recited fact, not fiction. True, it is only a microcosm of two million people. But in a small way there were some other similar features. For over 150 years we were the capital of an economic unit which comprised the British empire in South-East Asia. From Singapore we serviced Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, Brunei and even the Christmas and Cocos Islands, thousands of miles

away. Now, political divisions have taken place. We will continue to service them only if we are better and cheaper, that is, more efficient, than what they can get elsewhere. It was, and still is, a hard process of change. But a striving community, united in its determination to achieve its collective social purpose, can make this transition if given coherence and direction.

I do not pretend that we are an idyllic socialist community in South-East Asia. We still have the highest number of millionaires per ten thousand of population in South Asia. But we are one of a few places in Asia where there are no beggars, where nobody, old or young, dies of neglect and starvation. True, they are modest achievements but nonetheless precious to us. As we move into a different world of the 1970's, mutual and intelligent accommodation as Britain cuts down on East of Suez and, perhaps more important, American patience and prudence in Vietnam, could leave us in peace to improve on the small advances we have made to civilised living in a turbulent part of the world.

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