

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE OPENING OF THE
CONFERENCE OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC SOCIALIST BUREAU OF
THE SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL AT THE SINGAPORE
CONFERENCE HALL ON SUNDAY, 28 MAY 1972

This Conference of the Asia-Pacific Socialist Bureau of the Socialist International marks the second time socialist parties in Asia have gathered together for co-operation and co-ordination in an organised way.

The first effort was at the Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon in 1953. That was a different era. Then socialism seemed so obviously the way towards a better and more just society for the newly independent countries of Asia, in search of progress and equality. But after another meeting held in Bombay in 1956, the effort lapsed.

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If we are to make the Asia-Pacific Socialist Bureau a more enduring organisation, giving impetus to democratic socialist movements in the region, we must be realistic and practical. Only in this way can this Bureau become an organisation in which our different experiences can be shared, and our struggles for more just societies derive encouragement and strength.

The fraternal parties represented in the Bureau can be divided broadly into three categories. First, the Australian Labour Party and the New Zealand Labour Party. They are well established parties in wealthy and developed countries. * These parties have held office for long periods on many occasions in the past. Their systems of government are stable and well established, modelled after the British parliamentary tradition.

Second, the Socialist Party of Japan and the Japan Democratic Socialist Party. Like Australia and New Zealand, Japan is a wealthy country. * She has a longer history than either Australia or New Zealand. But, unlike Australia and New Zealand, the present Japanese parliamentary system is new, set up after the Second World War. The parliamentary tradition of two or more main contending political parties taking and relinquishing office in turn, as a result of the vote of the electorate in general elections, may become established in Japan. But the Liberal Democratic Party has ruled almost continuously for over 20 years. There were two shortlived coalitions of the Socialists Party and Democratic Party -- from May 1947 to March 1948; and March to October 1948. But no Japanese socialist party has ever been in office alone or as the senior partner.

In the third category are the Democratic Action Party of Malaysia, the Socialist Party of India, the United Socialist Party of Korea and the People's

Action Party of Singapore. These parties are from new countries, less developed, with comparatively low GNP and per capita income. * Except for the PAP in Singapore, none of the parties have ever assumed office.

I must not, of course, forget the Israel Labour Party. They are a class by themselves -- sui generis. Their country, though new, is well developed. * The Israel Labour Party has been in office as a major partner in successive governments for many years since 1948.

After the Second World War, communism and socialism seemed the wave of the future. Many believed, then, that state central planning for the Communist countries would bring about a golden age. For Western Europe, democratic parties, operating in mixed economies, as in Britain, France and Scandinavia, sought economic advancement and social progress through nationalisation of basic industries, coal, electricity, transportation, iron and steel, but leaving consumer products primarily to private enterprise. It was the more humane way towards a more equal and more just society.

Today, nearly three decades later, the golden age has yet to come, for both the Communist and non-Communist systems. The Communist countries have made material progress. Their advances in the pure sciences and military

technology are at least equal to those of the West. What has eluded them so far has been the application of science and technology to industry, for mass production of high quality consumer goods, to match the high consumption societies of the free enterprise West.

Moreover, people now know that the Communist system does not necessarily transform agricultural societies of the less developed world into industrial technological giants, especially where technological and economic aid have not been forthcoming from the more advanced Communist or non-Communist countries. So whether it is Cuba, North Korea, China, or North Vietnam, the post-industrial society of abundance is still a long way off.

However, the lustre of the social democracies of Western Europe has somewhat diminished, in spite of prosperous societies. Idealism and revolutionary fervour do not burn as fiercely in the new permissive generation born to the warriors of the Second World War. Democratic socialism in West European countries have set out to achieve full employment as a basic target. In nearly all instances, these efforts were accompanied by higher inflation rates, and higher personal taxes for more social benefits and welfare schemes. Sometimes, they have led to lower economic growth rates. With affluence, and without the fear of hunger or deprivation through poverty and unemployment, young people

seem more devoted to pleasure and leisure than to increasing the well-being of their community, let alone to help put right the many wrong things in the world around them, except to demonstrate violently about Americans in Vietnam. Their concern is more about the relatively few Americans being killed than about the appalling devastation wrought on the Vietnamese. A poverty of motivation to work and to achieve appears a widespread problem. And when right-inclined governments have taken over from socialist governments in Western Europe, they have not been able to discontinue the welfare programmes, probably because it had become too difficult electorally to do so. At most, they have trimmed some of the welfare benefits and made their availability more selective.

In newly independent countries, the story of the last 25 years has been very different. "Socialism" has been an elastic word. Nearly every political party, in or out of power, claimed to be socialist. Even military councils, which have displaced inept civilian regimes, declared that they have socialistic objectives. But almost everywhere, the pervading poverty contrasts sharply against the obscene wealth of the corrupt or fortunate few. Economic development has been painfully slow, with high unemployment, and precious little wealth generated.

Whatever the ideology of the political leadership of a new country, to modernise and develop, the leadership must resolve the non-economic hindrances to growth. Nearly all new countries have inherited a plurality of cultures, languages, ethnic and religious groups. Heterogeneous societies are what the colonial powers brought together into one administrative boundary and what new countries have to live with. These non-economic factors can negate development programmes unless these inter ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious rivalries are defused in a sympathetic and intelligent manner and potential conflicts muted.

The first problem of a less developed country is how to develop. Only then can people think or talk of more social services and welfare programmes. Some of us have learned through painful years of experience that adopting the outward trappings and norms of developed Western social democracies can only compound our problems. The 5-day week, of 40 or less hours, fully paid holidays of a month a year, free medical services, heavily subsidised housing, and high personal income tax, they are worse than irrelevant. They will cripple our economy.

Under-developed countries, whatever the system of government or ideology of the party in office, have to find the capital needed to import capital equipment, technological know-how, and management expertise. Some do not have sufficiently educated workers who can be trained for skilled jobs.

The same was true of even the less developed countries of Eastern Europe. Of these countries, in 1945, Bulgaria was the most backward. She had been stultified by over 500 years of Ottoman rule. Today, she is registering more economic growth and technological advance than most other East European countries. The considerable input of capital equipment and the considerable transmission of know-how and skills, from Russia, have made possible this rapid transformation.

What modest advances we have made in Singapore have been due to our willingness, over the last 13 years, to face up to unpleasant realities. We needed, and did import, machinery, technological know-how, management expertise and even some technical skills. We accepted the reality that unless we could prevent emigration of trained talent, there were limits to narrowing the differentials in rewards between the high performers and the average performers, between managers and technocrats and clerical workers, or between technicians and skilled workers and unskilled manual workers. Had we attempted to go beyond these limits, diminishing rewards for those with the ability and the drive, would have led to a brain drain.

Assuming that our people have it in them, over the years, with intensive education and training, and learning on the job, our citizens can take over nearly all the middle, and a part of the higher management and engineering positions. Only then can we claim to be a country that has passed out from the ranks of the “developing countries”. The quantitative test of at least US\$1,000 per capita GNP is misleading in qualitative terms. We may have broken through this arbitrary ceiling. But we are nowhere near “developed” status, just as the oil states of the Gulf are “developed” only in their consumer tastes, which oil royalties, dependent on Western technology and Western technocrats, have allowed them to cultivate.

We inherited a colonial economy, geared to an imperial system -- little industry, some banking and commerce. There was excessive dependence on the entrepot trade, exporting the region’s primary products to Britain, Europe and America, and importing their manufactured product for distribution around the region. But we were fortunate in inheriting good transportation, roads, harbours and airports. We also inherited an honest and effective administration. Most important of all, we were fortunate in having a hardworking and intelligent people. Through universal education, we have been able to increase performance of both brain and manual workers. So we have been reasonably successful in promoting the growth of middle level technology.

With the increased resources as a result of economic growth, we have been able to provide better academic and technical education, better medical services at nominal fees, improved public housing, and more social amenities. Perhaps our most socialistic achievement has been the equality of opportunities, especially in education. Regardless of wealth or status, everyone has an equal opportunity to make the best of his potentials and get a job in accordance with his training, ability and skill. We have mitigated the exploitation of man by his fellow men through the possession of wealth. We have not tried to prevent a man doing better than his fellow men through his own ability, training and hard work. Compassion for the less fortunate moves our policies. But we are conscious that people can improve their lives only if these policies can get them to try for themselves. We can be soft-hearted. But we cannot afford to be soft-headed.

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I hope in the course of the meetings and work of the Asia-Pacific Socialist Bureau, we can compare and contrast our experiences in tackling sometimes similar, but often different, situations. I am sure we in the PAP can learn from the experiences of our fellow socialist parties elsewhere.

Finally, I hope you will find this conference stimulating, and your stay in Singapore interesting and agreeable.

* See Annexure

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* GNP, AND PER CAPITA GNP OF SELECTED COUNTRIES, 1970 AND 1971

	GNP		PER CAPITA GNP	
	1970	1971	1970	1971
	(US \$ million)		(US \$)	
Australia (1)	32,995	38,349	2,629	3,012
New Zealand (2)	5,310	6,084	1,889	2,132
Japan (3)	197,180	218,410	1,906	2,089
Israel (4)	5,273	6,274	1,738	2,004
Malaysia (5)	3,818	3,976	348	352
South Korea (6)	8,057	8,695	253	268
India (7)	41,565	n.a.	76	n.a.
Singapore (8)	2,006	2,287	967	1,084

Source : (1) International Financial Statistics, May 1972, International Monetary Fund.

(2) Monthly Abstract of Statistics, February 1972, Department of Statistics, New Zealand.

(3) Monthly Statistics of Japan, February 1972, Department of Statistics.

(4) Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, January 1972, Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel.

(5) Bank Negara Malaysia, Quarterly Economic Bulletin, Vol.5, March 1972.

(6) Monthly Economic Statistics, March 1972, The Bank of Korea.

(7) Report on Currency and Finance 1970-1971 Reserve Bank of India, India.

(8) Department of Statistics, Singapore.

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