

SUMMARY OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
SINGAPORE TEACHERS UNION'S 26TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER
HELD AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON 5TH NOVEMBER, 1972

Thirty years ago, there was not in Singapore the same equality of opportunities which we have today. As a result, men with considerable ability and dedication to their society went into the teaching service. In the years prior to independence, they played a significant role in the fight for self-determination. Many today are social and political leaders.

Now with universal education, free primary schools, nominal fees for secondary schools, and ample number of scholarships and bursaries, the sieving process has become more thorough. It is much more difficult to get some of the best into the teaching service.

I would like to pose to you not the role which as unionists alone you should concern yourselves with, but your role as teachers.

The English stream has now nearly 9,700 teachers; the Chinese stream about 6,000. Unless this trend is reversed, the ratio will widen in favour of the English stream which you represent.

This fact confers on you greater responsibilities, especially when confusion of values and selfishness of purpose are now perversely affecting men in many developed English-speaking countries. We now read of teachers and doctors of developed countries on strike -- a sign of a disordered society. We have not come to such a sad situation. I hope we never will.

As a union, your function is to see that teachers acquire their fair share of material rewards. But in the context of the Singapore of the 1970's I believe it is more important that their status in society is enhanced. No amount of monetary rewards can match what an enterprising man can get in the private sector. It is status in society, the respect which fellow citizens hold you in, which is crucial in attracting to, and retaining within, the teaching service, a hard core of men and women in the schools who can maintain the high standards.

The accent in the next five years is on quality. How do we achieve this in the schools? The professionals in the Education Ministry say we have done marvellously. In 1971, 53% (47,000) passed their Primary School Leaving Examination. This year, nearly 62% (53,000) or 6,000 more pupils have passed the Primary 6, and are entitled to enter Secondary I. Does this reflect an increase in teaching quality? Or was it the dropping of history-geography as an examination subject, and the testing of basic intelligence and learning capacity in the first and second languages, mathematics and science to go on to Secondary I?

In the English stream, nearly 63% passed. In the second language, in Chinese 62% passed; Malay 82% passed; Tamil 62%. We are now suddenly faced with 6,000 more students for Secondary I next year, a shortage of classrooms, a shortage of teachers. We have to improvise -- gymnasiums, extra classrooms and other facilities. Schools which have single sessions, will be used by other schools for Secondary I classes. All this we can do and more, provided we keep the birth-rate down.

The other simple alternative was to do what the Finance Ministry said we ought to do -- decide on a "cut off" point. Last year, 47,000 went into Secondary I. So 47,000 ought to be the "cut off" point. I believe it will be wrong to do this. We have to respond to the consequences of adjustments we have made, more

primary 6 passes partly because of the better teaching in English schools where most of the pupils are, and partly because of the adjustment in the examination syllabi.

The first basic target is to lower the birth-rate.

The second is to get teachers, who are well balanced and well trained to discharge their duties to our children. Then we will have a society with much more ballast. How to teach enough to a child so that he or she wants to go on reading and learning after the years in school are over. With one language, and that the mother tongue in a British, a French, or German society, it is difficult enough. In our society it is doubly difficult. The average Chinese boy who goes to an English school is really learning two non-mother languages. He learns English, which is not his mother tongue. He learns Mandarin as a second language. It is also not his mother tongue because often the dialect is the language of the home. This presents us with a very grave challenge.

It is possible of solution, provided we understand that we cannot expect all those who passed -- the 62% -- to be simultaneous translators. A language is first heard and spoken before it is read and written. Teach our children enough

for them to understand and to speak freely in two languages. But let them choose which one to use as the master language to articulate their thoughts effectively in.

It is important that this is done very early in schools. It is easier for a European to command two languages, perhaps English and French, or English and German. They are cognate languages. But English and Chinese are completely different, one Greco-Roman and Anglo-Saxon in its base, the other not spelt or pronounceable from the idiographic script, monosyllabic and tonal. To be able to speak both fluently requires a great deal of effort.

I am convinced that this effort has to be made, if we are to survive as a distinctive society, worth the preserving. Or we will become completely deculturalised and lost. If we become like some societies speaking pidgin English, mindlessly aping the Americans or British with no basic values or culture of their own then, frankly, I do not believe this is a society or nation worth the building, let alone defending.

The minimum we must achieve is to teach enough, in the mother tongue, of the basic values, and culture. Even if the boy or the girl is unable to recite a Confucian classical passage or a pantun or whatever its equivalent in Tamil poetry, he has imbibed enough to know, when he looks at the cinema or the

television screen, or more and more the young people who come through on charter flights from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, America and Europe, that they are they, and we are ourselves.

This is absolutely crucial.

Americans rioted in their universities, in their capital, because their soldiers were being killed in Vietnam. They could not lick the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese as easily as their 'think-tanks' had prophesied they could. Canadians and Britishers unconnected with this problem imitated and joined in demonstrations. Australians who have a vital interest in a favourable outcome of the war in Vietnam also demonstrated and rioted. The nexus of the common language and a not very dissimilar culture gave them a common net. Or if you like, the lowest common denominator pulls them down, as sometimes it raises them up in nuclear and astro-physics.

If we fail to resolve effectively our problem of languages, and preserve what is best in our respective cultural values, we could become an even more enfeebled version of the deculturalised Caribbean calypso-type society. They were brought over as slaves and have lost any trace of the African in them. The few Indians and the Chinese amongst them have also been deculturalised: the

island-in-the-sun, steel-drum-beating and rum-brewing-and-drinking, happy go lucky life.

I do not believe we can survive in Singapore, with that way of life. Eventually we may evolve a common culture for Singapore. Meanwhile, it is the hard framework of basic cultural values and the tightly-knit Asian family system that have enabled us to achieve what we have. The achievement was not that of economic planners alone. Every time you pass a construction site, cast your eye and see who is the bricklayer, plumber, electrician. Who is the man who gives the finish to your woodwork and tiles? They have that urge to work, to save, and to achieve.

We sent two military officers to sit in two courts martial in Trinidad nearly two years ago. A mutiny had taken place. They had only one battalion. Yet they mutinied. I read the reports of our two officers with great interest. They had never been to that part of the world, nor had they been to Britain where one could meet people from the Caribbean. These two officers came back and recited their experience, not only of the courts martial, but of a way of life. A court martial that could have taken two weeks, dragged on for more than three months. Every now and again they have a fiesta. Everybody enjoys himself for

weeks on end. A holiday is not just for one day. A holiday runs for whole weeks. So the court martial was suspended and everybody had a jolly good time.

Well, if we were in the Caribbean maybe we could survive doing our own thing. You have a wealthy and benign American civilisation that likes to seek holidays in the sun. So you build hotels by the beaches, and large parts of your population consists of nothing but servers and hangers-on. That was one of the reasons for the mutiny. It is Black Power in an island where Blacks are in political control. But the Blacks found themselves in an unsatisfying position as servers to Whites who have the cash.

Please note that when I speak of bilingualism, I do not mean just the facility of speaking two languages. It is more basic that, first, we understand ourselves: what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about, and what we want to do. Then the facility of the English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient common ground on which the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Eurasians, everybody competes in a neutral medium.

We are determined to succeed. I know it can be done and it must be done early in life. I paid for it bitterly because I was foolish enough, when I was

young, not to listen to my grandmother who sent me to Chinese school to learn Chinese, because the method of teaching was wrong. I spent only two years in a Chinese school. They made me recite passages parrot-fashion. I scrubbed it out of my mind when I went to English school. And I have had to study Chinese since the 1950's and I am still doing so. And it is not just learning the language. With the language goes the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact, in spite of exposure to all the current madneses around the world.

My wife and I took the decision to send our three children to Chinese school and also get them educated in English. I know it can succeed. I will not accept anything less from our teachers.

It is your responsibility as a union of teachers not only to find adequate material rewards and status for your members. I think this is necessary if we are to attract, recruit and retain people who can educate our young in a balanced and rounded way, and also instil into them that desire to work and to achieve. Unless we do this, we will slide downhill.

Life in Singapore is not just more hotels and more dinners, bigger and bigger banqueting halls, more motor cars, more flyovers, more one-way streets,

more pay, more 13-month payments -- all these are necessary. But all these will lead to futility if in the process we lose our way, if we are unable to identify ourselves, and confuse ourselves with that which we are not. Whilst we may speak English, whilst we may use the English language, whilst we may watch what the English-speaking world in America and Canada, in Britain, in Australia and New Zealand, are doing, either in person by visiting them or they visiting us, or on the TV screen, in the cinema's, much of it is not us. Only when we first know our traditional values, can we be quite clear the Western world is a different system, a different voltage, structured for purposes different from ours.

If you discharge this second responsibility as a union of teachers, then I shall help you discharge your first responsibility to teachers as Union members.

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