

REPLY BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, IN
PARLIAMENT ON 16 MARCH 1976, ON CRITICISMS RAISED BY
BACK-BENCHERS ON DISCOURTESY, INDIFFERENT ATTITUDE AND
BUREAUCRATIC APPROACH OF THE CIVIL SERVANTS

The Prime Minister: Sir, I do not want to stand as a defender of rude, arrogant, unfeeling and discourteous civil servants. Where they exist, where they can be pin-pointed, action will be taken. There is for senior civil servants a Civil Service Staff Development Institute which, amongst its other duties, tries to involve the civil servants in the wider aims of Government and the duties of the Administration. The Civil Service, with the help of the Public Service Commission, have tried to define those areas where the public comes into contact with the officials, whether it is the Immigration Department, the Registry of Vehicles, the hospitals, clinics, post offices, wherever there is a counter, and attempts will constantly be made to improve the way in which the public at large is being served.

Having said that, let me pick up the point made by the Minister for Katong. He invited senior civil servants or super civil servants, as he has superciliously referred to them, to sit with him at his meet-the-people sessions.

Mr. P. Govindaswamy: On a point of clarification. He is a Member and not a Minister.

The Prime Minister: The Member for Katong. Thank you. Sir, let me explain to him that if we pick out the really outstanding civil servants to sit with him or to sit with the other MPs in the meet-the-people sessions, he ought to look out and make sure that he is not displaced in some future election. We are professional in our relations with the public. That is part of the business of the MP if he is not good at it, then he would probably not be here. A civil servant who can both do his job as an administrator and be good at the public relations side of it, who is able to say "No" to an obstreperous, vehement and insistent constituent who wants the answer to be "yes" and wants his MP to bend the rules in order that the answer is "yes", would have learnt the secret of politics and will comprise the Government. So I think it is not an invitation to be made lightly and in jest. Perhaps if the Member for Katong knows how to keep his constituents happy whilst having to say "No" to them in the politest of terms, he should patent the secret, hide it away in a file, and never show it to a good civil servant.

But let me place this against the broader context. First, I am glad that this is the maximum of criticism. There is no charge of dishonourable, corrupt or

other practices, if MPs come here and complain of discourtesy, inadequate toilet or canteen facilities, tatty signboards, all this is in part a reflection of our relatively healthy state of affairs. In fact, we should have a conducted tour for MPs and some of their constituents, who complain of the bureaucratic practices, of parts of the Third World, and when they come back they would be extremely grateful that they have Singapore and the Singapore Civil Service.

That having been said and done, I think we have to take this in the context of our total society. Consideration for each other, courtesy or the lack thereof, comes out of a long cultivation of good habits. It is extremely difficult to be polite and courteous to a crude, obstreperous and ill-mannered person. It is a two-way process, whether it is the SBS bus drivers and conductors against passengers, whether it is motorists versus lorry drivers, or motorists versus motorists, or motorcyclists versus motorists, whether it is jostling at the National Stadium or in the schools, it is the general tenor of behaviour, the accepted standards of conduct of a society as a whole, in the last 17 years, or perhaps I should go back to 1955 when we had the first elected Government and the pressures of elected representatives wanting less high-handed treatment for their illiterate, ill educated constituents, things have improved. But they can improve only so far as the general level of conduct and courtesy between our citizens can improve, I have known of communities where people are elaborately courteous to

each other because of the nature of long years of cultivated breeding, cultivated nurturing of good public behaviour. Words like "I am sorry" or "please" are not something one hears over the telephone. They are "What?" "Who are you?" And if you say, "Sorry, it is the wrong number", they say, "Oh!", not "I am sorry". But what an absolute waste of time that you should be the person answering, if you are wrong, you should not be there.

I have picked up the telephone and have had to deal with telephone operators who did not know who I was and treated me just like a member of the public. So I have a fair idea of the general level of public conduct. But they pick it up first at home, then the neighbourhood, their friends, then in the school reinforced by fellow students and teachers, then out where they work, their friends, their bosses and the people they meet and frequent and are together with. This is a slow and painful process.

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Of course, you can have the very converse where you have all the manifestations of good behaviour but actually a crude vicious inner self. I have known of capitals in this world where, having nudged you out of the bus queue -- this was 20 or 30 years ago when I was a student -- they say, "Pardon me." They give you a sharp nudge and they are on, and you are off, the bus. They say, "I am sorry." They have all the external manifestations of a cultured well-bred person. Which would you have? An honest straightforward Singaporean who says, "No". "What". "Who is there?" or a hypocritical one who says, "I am terribly sorry," when he is not. The Member for Katong should think these things over.

As to the Unit in my office, it is a difficult business identifying talent. Why Division I? Because that is more than I want to handle. The PSC, together with the Establishment Branch of the Ministry of Finance, will look after everything. But an urgent situation has arisen to spot talent at the top. I do not agree with the Member for Telok Blangah that the Ministries are understaffed.

They say that they are understaffed because this is Parkinson's law. Every Permanent Secretary says that there should be so many Deputy Secretaries, so many heads of departments, and so on. A manpower survey conducted by the Development Unit shows that the public sector is taking too many engineers and other professionals as against the private sector, and that we should do with less.

And if there are efficient men, the right people to do the right jobs, then we will not only do with less but we will do better with less.

If I may read an extract from the circular which was signed by the Head of the Civil Service. It says:

'This Unit will be responsible for:

- (i) career development and training;
- (ii) postings, transfers and secondments;
- (iii) merit increment scheme.

Officers likely to make the top superscale graders will have postings to broaden their experience and test their mettle. There will be accelerated promotions whenever performance matches the promise. This need to discover outstanding ability and administrative talent has become pressing because of the void in numbers of able officers in the 30 to 45 age group caused by many promising officers leaving to join the private sector in the years of rapid economic growth.'

It is a very painstaking business, trying to spot the difference between ordinary pebbles and a gem on the beach. A gem before it is polished is often indistinguishable. But if one looks closely and long enough, picks up the right

one even if it is one in five and the wastage in testing is four out of five -- putting a person to trials to see whether he comes up with the right answer, whether he is imaginative, he is creative, he has got the right approach, he has got the decisiveness; once he has made up his mind, he has got the stamina to pursue his recommendations to fruition -- then even if it is the right one out of 10, I think we are lucky. Whether it is in the civil service or whether it is in the political side of Government, the problem has always been that the more able the person is, the more the workload is put on him in order that the job gets done. Perhaps the Member for Katong was giving unwitting praise to the few. They carry an enormously disproportionate burden of the load because they have been found to be reliable and able to get things done.

I agree with the Member for Anson, I am not interested in whether an officer has got a B.A. M.A. Ph.D. or D.Sc. Can he get a job done? Can he get a team to work with him? Is he a talker or a thinker, or a talker and a doer? The best, of course, is the man who thinks before he expounds and having expounded he then acts. But at the end of it all are the results. It has got nothing to do with whether he has got a Ph.D. or a School Certificate or even a Std. VI qualification. In the old days, Std. VI would have taken you very far. It is whether you have got this up here and whether you have got that drive. But the chances are, with our methods of universal education and selection all along the

way, race after race, year after year, if you cannot make a simple B.A. then it is hardly likely that you will be able to last the marathon. And that is what we are looking for -- people who can last the pace, not just one test but having passed it he will have three or four more quickly passed on to him. Every Minister can testify that when you discover such a person, then a large section of your Ministry and its problems are taken off your shoulders and you get happy reports every month; and after a while every three months, and after a longer while you begin to take reports only once in six months.

I hope I have made my position clear. We are the political side of the Service. I do not defend rudeness. I do not defend arrogance. I do not defend mediocrity. I do not defend the desire to do the minimum and get by. But this is what we have got. This is after 17 years of PAP government. I think it could have been better, but it may have been a lot worse. In fact, let us start off in the knowledge that it is better and let us make it better. But to make it better, let us not come here with any scales over our eyes. True MPs must make some noise for querulous constituents. But it is extremely difficult when the answer is "No" to make a member of the public go away happy.

And as MPs know and even as Ministers know, some fellow Ministers have the habit of passing on the buck. So the MP comes here and passes on the

buck to the Minister. I have got a lot of experience with that. I get Ministers passing on the buck to each other and they land up on my plate. Finally, the answer is still "No" because if you say "Yes" then you have changed the rules for everybody and an unworkable situation is created. So the man who knows how to say "No" and keep his constituents happy and have them voting for him at the next elections should quietly congratulate himself either at his innate good nature that God has endowed him with or for his cultivated sense of self-discipline that keeps the face in relaxed and happy countenance, while he is really fed up to the teeth with troublesome constituents. Whichever way it is, I hope all MPs will look after their constituents, keep them happy even when the answer is "No" because, as you know, if the answer is "Yes" he would not be looking for the MP.

Mr. N. Govindasamy: Sir, may I just point out to the Hon. Prime Minister that the figure I have quoted in respect of the shortage of staff is not mine. It is the Government's figure found in Cmd. Paper 4 of 1976.

The Prime Minister: I was fully aware of that. I am questioning whether that figure represents the actual required vacancy that should be filled. I do not doubt that it represents vacancies in Establishment posts which have been approved by the Establishment Branch of the Finance Ministry. I do not doubt

that. But if you go right back to 1955 when I was sitting opposite, you find that there were always vacancies. If you want to be a General and everybody wants to be a General, you cannot be a General unless you have got lots of troops -- and I think all MPs are familiar with this. If you want to be a Brigadier, you must have a brigade. If you want to have a brigade you must have three battalions and that means you must have three Colonels. But there is only one colonel and, in fact, one Colonel alone can do the job well. So he says, "All right, we will have one and two vacancies", i.e. the Brigadier. If he has only got one person, then he ought to be a Colonel. This has been going on a long time. I am not at all convinced that that represents the actual needs in the Government Service.

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