

**TRANSLATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION &
ANSWER SESSION AT THE SINGAPORE MALAY TEACHERS'
UNION SEMINAR HELD AT DBS AUDITORIUM ON 31 MAY 1978**

CHAIRMAN: Thank you Mr. Prime Minister for your speech. The Prime Minister has kindly agreed to answer questions from those present. And without much ado, this discussion is now open to all

OSMAN BIN JANTAN: My name is Osman bin Jantan, I am from Swiss Cottage Secondary School. Mr. Prime Minister, at the moment the teaching of the Islamic religion is being carried out in the Malay stream; but should the time come when the Malay stream ends, what is the possibility of the teaching of the Islamic religion being given to Malay pupils in the English stream?

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PRIME MINISTER: Religion and language are two areas which are most sensitive. The Government's policy is that these sensitive matters are decided by the parents. In Government schools or semi-government schools run by Chinese or Christian groups before those questions arose, we had decided in '59 -- when we came to power -- that the pupils' time in school could not be used for religious matters. If pupils wished to learn religion, let it be taken as an ECA

subject; that it would not be a fixed period for pupils in schools. If we allow Malay pupils in the English stream to use their school time to learn religion, we are reversing this decision. So I think it is a difficult matter for me to now give a decision which satisfies the teacher who raised the matter.

MOHAMED NOR

BIN YUSOF: My name is Mohamed Noh bin Yusof from Toa Payoh Secondary School (I). Mr. Prime Minister, it is felt that the teaching, implementation and use of the national language are deteriorating. This is not in keeping with the status of the national language, with its being a sovereign language. What is the Prime Minister's view?

PRIME MINISTER: It is not only the Malay teachers. The Chinese language and Tamil language teachers are also unhappy because the standard of their languages is deteriorating. That was why just now I brought up the matter of bilingual comparisons. Let me give an example. During an election, I have to use Hokkien. After two weeks of Hokkien, I am more proficient in Hokkien than in Mandarin. So this is a matter that cannot be solved. In my opinion, pupils who can use two languages with equal proficiency number perhaps two, three or five percent only. The standard of the first language of our pupils, that is of pupils mostly now in English schools, the standard of their English is not that

high but it is sufficient for work. Because they want to raise the standard of their English, they have to spend more time on the language. As a result, the standard of their mother-tongue has declined. So we must define our stand. Apart from the three to five percent of pupils who have the ability, the standard of the second language of most Singapore pupils cannot be as high as that of their first language, be it the national language, Chinese or Tamil. So when the Chinese teachers complained to me, I said it is up to the parents. By deciding to send their children to English schools, the parents have also decided that English will be the language their children will be more proficient in than their second language.

MOHD NOOR: My question just now was Singapore's national language, which is sovereign, which has been entrenched in the Constitution -- this has been deteriorating. If we look, for instance, at signboards or notices of ministries or elsewhere, sometimes the national language used is topsy-turvy. It has not been given due attention. There is no respect for the status of the national language in Singapore. That was what I meant.

PRIME MINISTER: I will reply frankly. If we had taken the people's decision after we separated from Malaysia, I believe the Singapore Constitution would probably have been completely changed. But because the PAP

government or Petir feels that this has become part of our history, so working within this Constitution, pragmatically, we will slowly look for a model which will satisfy our requirements, that is the people of Singapore, which will provide a way that will give a good life to all our citizens. So we have to use English as our common working language. And just now I explained how difficult it is for a pupil to use two languages. If we want every pupil to use three languages, I believe perhaps pupils who can pass the 'O' level or the 'A' level will be reduced to 50 percent or 60 percent. Because of that, we have let the national language to be a language that is symbolic -- the language of our national anthem and the language of command of the military. So, to explain, if Chinese students are to be urged to learn three languages, that is their mother-tongue, English and the national language, I believe there is no single political party or political group which can persuade Singaporeans to accept that policy. So we have to put into practice our educational policy of bilingualism -- the mother-tongue and English. If you are not satisfied, ask further.

CHAIRMAN: Give a chance to the other friends. Please.

RAHMAT BUANG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Rahmat Buang from McNair Centralised Workshop.

PRIME MINISTER: Centralised Workshop?

RAHMAT BUANG: Yes. Mr. Prime Minister, in '71, the KGMS proposed a national educational system which stressed English as the language of instruction and with every pupil required to learn his mother-tongue and its literature, a subject to be made compulsory under the system. About the following year, in '72, in a seminar for pre-university students, you made a speech, Mr. Prime Minister, this followed by a question-and-answer session. And, in reply to a question from a student as to your views on the system, you replied, and I quote: "The Malay teachers are playing into chauvinist hand" and you also mentioned: "Any government would be mad to accept the proposal". Perhaps at that time, the timing was not appropriate. I believe the KGMS also understands the question of timing in any matter. So in today's context, in today's situation, what is your view of the KGMS's proposed system? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: My view is the same as that which I expressed to the Chinese Teachers' Union. Because the enrolment of pupils in Chinese schools in '77 went down to nearly 10 percent, the Chinese Teachers' Union has now proposed a similar system, about the same as that put forward by the KGMS in 1971, that is, a system or plan which would once more attract pupils to the Chinese stream. So I told the Chinese Teachers' Union, this has become a problem. This plan can be regarded either as a plan to solve an educational

question or a political question. In my opinion, this is not solving the educational question because the capacity of every pupil to learn two languages does not only rest on the school but also on the home background. What is the language used at home? How high is the level of the parents' education? Those aspects are important. If we do not take into consideration the parents' background and wishes, and we fix 50 percent for English, can this make our pupils sufficiently proficient in English? For me, I will choose a Chinese school because given my family background, English is not at all a problem. So I would want my children to use 80 percent or 90 percent of their time in school to learn Chinese which is a difficult language to learn. So this is not a matter that can be solved by teachers' unions. Teachers' unions do not have the capability or expertise to decide how we should enable the pupils to learn two languages. In my opinion, and I have the experience as legal advisor to the KGMS, KGMS has the ability to unite its members and to urge the government to raise the level of acceptance of Malay teachers. This is my view. An educational matter cannot be solved by a union which does not especially look into educational matters but which is concerned with raising the standard of living of its members.

JURI BIN WARI:

Mr. Prime Minister. My name is Juri bin Wari and I am from Swiss Cottage Secondary School. I would like to quote the Prime Minister's statement made at the Regional English Language Centre on 30 May 1974 in which he said that given the various languages, ethnic groups and

cultures in Singapore, the learning of only English is not wise because this will divorce us from our cultural links. What is the Prime's Minister's view as to literature in the second language? Because I am positive that the study of literature can inculcate the values of our traditional heritage, education and philosophy to a society. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: This question is a vitally important one. First of all, let me clarify the meaning of literature and heritage. Literature and heritage or tradition are different altogether. What do I propose? I do not propose to raise the standard of education for literature. Literature is a pastime for people who have education. A person who has passed through school, if he has a full education, he can himself look for books to ease his own mind by reading literature. But what is important for pupils is not literature but a philosophy of life, an outlook towards life: how pupils in future can imbibe courtesy and think not only of their own self-interest; how, in future, they can become citizens who will not only look after their families but also build up our society, raise the standard of living of our people. And this becomes an educational matter -- a value system of life. I know that be it Malay or Tamil or Chinese or English, because of the experience of hundreds or thousands of years, the people who use the language provide a guide in life for their own society. If there is a proverb or a saying, this reflects their way of thinking or values. I will give an example.

Chinese pupils who pass out from Chinese schools and Chinese pupils who pass out from English schools, have different attitudes towards the older generation. Those who pass out from English schools are not that courteous, are a little rough in their ways. This is not only because of the philosophy of life that derives from the language, but also because of the example of teachers who pay special attention to conduct towards parents and elders. Because now 90 percent have chosen to go to English schools, there is some anxiety amongst many Chinese parents that in future, their children after passing school, after 'O' level, after 'A' level or getting their degrees, will not care about the older generation. So I propose that we must look for, decide on, a plan in English stream schools that can reinforce values of life or a philosophy or our outlook towards life that are not an imitation of what they see on TV from America which is entirely different from our society. This is an important matter which is concerned not with poetry or literature but with relationships -- the relationship between the younger generation and the older generation, the relationship between brothers and sisters, and between friends. This has to do with how humans differ from animals. This is the meaning of culture.

IBRAHIM BIN

HAJI MOHAMAD:

I am Ibrahim bin Haji Mohamad from Kim Seng

Technical School. Mr. Prime Minister, because the learning of the second

language has deteriorated from day to day, this has affected the position of

teachers teaching the language. What is your view of the matter? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: I don't understand. The standard of the second language has gone down because ?

IBRAHIM BIN

HAJI MOHAMAD: So the position of the teachers who teach the language -- the second language -- including Malay, Indian or Chinese, their position is affected. Their future is affected.

PRIME MINISTER: I don't agree at all. This has become an emotional matter. Actually teachers who can use their time to achieve proficiency in the second language, the position of those teachers is more assured. Our attitude must be positive, not negative.

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IBRAHIM BIN

HAJI MOHAMAD: What I meant Mr. Prime Minister is, for instance, Malay teachers. They lack subjects to teach. For instance, the national language. Most schools no longer teach the national language. So what is the situation?

PRIME MINISTER: That is what I was explaining You do not understand English?

IBRAHIM BIN

HAJI MOHAMAD: I understand, but I certainly am not that qualified to teach.

PRIME MINISTER: How old are you now?

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IBRAHIM BIN

HAJI MOHAMAD: About 37.

PRIME MINISTER: 37. I was 35 when I started learning Chinese, Mandarin. I didn't spend all the time learning Mandarin. In a day, I worked 8 or 9 hours, chatted with friends for perhaps two or three hours, and then had to

learn Mandarin. And now, although my Mandarin is not fluent, I understand what the papers publish everyday. We must learn.

HUSSEIN BIN

ABU SAMAD: My name is Hussein bin Abu Samad, and I am from Ponggol Malay School. With the unlimited and widespread exposure of English through television, books, magazines, I am afraid that Singaporeans in future will not have a culture that they have inherited from their ancestors. I believe the teaching of religion as being done with Malay children by their parents, this can ensure respect for parents or elders, and I still believe that the learning of religion is very important in schools. So my real question is: Will the future Singapore society, with the widespread exposure to English, keep any of its original culture or the culture of its parents?

PRIME MINISTER: Culture is a very complex matter. Culture means the way of life of society, and there is no society whose culture does not change.

The way of life of every society, if we study its history, changes. And in the past 200 or 300 years, because European society industrialised, it changed the whole world. Firstly, it colonised the whole of the African continent, the Asian continent and America. Now countries which were colonised have become independent and are looking for a programme or capability to compete with

European countries or America or Japan which has already industrialised. So all societies throughout the world are facing difficulty. Culture reflects the way of life of a group or a group of people: how it makes its living. And when we change our way of life, our culture somewhat changes. But I hope it will not change to the extent that we no longer recognise our parents. There must be a link. It's inevitable that we change. We must change. But let there be a relationship or continuity that keeps the factors that are already guaranteed. I will use English because this matter is more abstract.

(The Prime Minister then delivered the following answer in English)

You cannot have a society that does not change. The culture of a society reflects the way in which that society makes its livelihood -- whether it is a hunting society, and agricultural society, a pastoral society rearing sheep, goats, cows; or a commercial society or an industrial society. The way of life changes because the way you make a living changes. And the problem of change for us is very acute because the European powers and the Americans were the first to enter the industrial age -- science, technology, steamships, cannons, aeroplanes, rockets, atomic bombs. So they were able, first, to impose their will on us; then, as the subject people reasserted themselves, they have withdrawn. So this problem is being faced by all the countries that are not industrialised: how to keep what is good in the old culture but which will not

obstruct the search for new ways of life which use modern science and technology. The danger is real. What the questioner has posed -- that in seeking this new knowledge, new technology we are so exposed to foreign influences, whether it's TV, newspapers, magazines, tourists meeting in the hotels, cameras -- that we lose our sense of being ourselves, that's a real danger. Therefore, the importance of bilingualism; that we keep a lifeline to our past, to the sayings we remember as a child, what our mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters said to each other -- to comfort you, to encourage you, to give you solace, to give you the strength and the stamina to persevere over hardships. But if you just cling to the past, you will never progress.

This is the dilemma of all non-industrialised countries and it is the dilemma even of countries that have been industrialised like Japan. They are also worried. The older generation Japanese tell me that the younger generation is getting soft and they are losing their traditional Japanese drive -- willingness to sacrifice for society -- that they are getting unruly so they can't open their new airport, Narita. The same Samurai spirit turns around to fight the government, to block the opening of an airport, so that the very fact that we are discussing this problem not just as a debating point but discussing it because we are seeing it happen to our children and seeing the society change very quickly. Ten years ago, there was no DBS in Shenton Way, there was no air-conditioned

auditorium. When I was the legal adviser to KGMS, we met in small little halls, very hot, with the fans going. Now, we can't have this without the technology, the industry, the mass communications, including the airports. Every year something like 12 million people land and take off from Singapore Airport. Last year 1.6 million tourists came here to Singapore Airport -- two-third the population of Singapore. This leaves an imprint on us, on the people they meet, the shops, the taxi drivers, the hotels, the people they meet on the streets. And we are, by this discussion, influencing each other. Sixteen years ago, there was no television. Today, what we are discussing, in a few days time after they have processed the film, people will be watching.

We are in a completely different society. What we will be depends on our interaction, first, between ourselves as we decide, as the result of these influences, what is our choice; second, our interaction between ourselves and the rest of the world. No society lives in isolation. You want to live in isolation? ... Well, there are very few parts of the world today. We can go to even the South Pacific. I went to Sydney, I met so many heads of government from the South Pacific and their complaint is they don't meet us enough. So, we are moving really into a new state of world civilisation. Just think, Mohammad Ali fights in Kinshasa, in Zaire and you and I watch it here. Or the World Cup is being played in Argentina, Buenos Aires, and you and I are

watching it here at the same time via satellite. The whole world is sharing in this event. We cannot go back to the past. I think we are in the future whether we like it or not.

What we have to do is to decide. Right, we are already grown up, we have already firm views about life, religion, how we behave, how children should be brought up. The trouble is we are not the only influences on our children: it's what they are being taught in the school; it's what they are watching on television; it's what they are reading; what they are discussing among themselves. So we must try, insofar as we can, to define certain areas which we consider critical, where change will be for the worst.

I give one example on which all the races in Singapore will agree. We are Asians, we are conservative particularly about our womenfolk.

Now in the West, especially in America, they don't marry anymore. No need to get married. We just try it out first. So, it's a new civilisation. Please meet my friend, but it's more than a friend. Please, this is my child from my friend. So this is a new civilisation. They are experimenting. Whether it's going to be a better society or a worse society, you won't know for one generation. So I said, "Well, please, you experiment. After two generations and it's a better society, I will follow you." But I doubt whether it's a better society. I think

there is a reason why all civilisations, in order to create and build, have protected their womenfolk and have protected their children and reared them up. Here the West, with science and technology and the pills, says "No need. The government will look after the children. Men and women can be happy, have children, abandon, carry on, have more children, abandon, carry on." Well, I don't think it's a good idea. I would be most worried if that came to Singapore. I say we will collapse. So you don't want it to happen, I don't want it to happen. But that doesn't mean it won't happen because I know that it is already being brought back by our students who are coming back. They have gone as young men --19, 20 -- and young women, to Britain, America; they come back bringing this lifestyle. Today, there are more divorces than there were ten years ago and remarriages and broken marriages. It's all the sign of change for the worst. But we must try, in certain areas, to exclude experimentation until we are sure that it is an experiment which is successful and we won't know for at least one

generation, probably not for certain for two generations. In one generation, perhaps we can see whether it's a failure and we need two generations to see

whether it's a success. And I am not sure at all that what I am seeing, experimenting with lifestyles ... Mr., Mrs., Miss -- now they have Ms. What does that mean? That means belongs to nobody? I don't know. I think this is a curious world, this is a twilight world. Let's go slow, let's not change in this. I am by nature quite an adventurous man. I like to try. You say, "Here is a tonic

which makes you stronger, more muscles.” So I say, “Alright. Have you tried it on the monkey?” He says, “Yes”. Nothing happened? “No.” Who else has tried it? “Thousands -- nothing happened.” “Alright”, I said, “I’ll try.” But in this case, I am quite sure something is going to happen. I say, “Don’t try.” And this is the problem: Which areas don’t try? I think they are areas connected with the family and the next generation because that is how we have sustained ourselves.

I believe that the teacher is a very important person because if the teacher -- it’s not knowledge in the teacher alone, knowledge is ... Just now the teacher who asked me about language -- that is only one problem. The deeper problem is the moral problem of the teacher as an example to the students. If this teacher is divorced three or four times, is carrying on with another teacher in the school and all the children know about it and talk about themselves, that’s a disaster. The teacher should be sacked because you are influencing young minds, you are undermining what is being taught at home that this is wrong: don’t do it, although it is in the nature of man to do it. We know it is wrong so we tell the children not to do it and the teacher must set a good example. I believe the moral aspects of this change are the ones which must concern us mostest and it is the moral side of man which the schools and the home can preserve.

(CONTINUED IN MALAY)

PONIADI BIN

ROSDI: Mr. Prime Minister, I am Poniadi bin Rosdi from Whitley Secondary School. You mentioned just now the exposure to Western cultures through English; I hope this doesn't happen to affect Singapore's society. What I wish to know is your opinion as to how to develop a society that has a Singapore identity? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: This is the crucial issue. How do we identify ourselves as Singaporeans? Our people are descended from various races; but because we live in a society in a small island with good communication, so everyday we influence, and are being influenced by, each other -- there is interaction. Finally, this is slowly achieved after one or two generations. We cannot do this as we use a pressure cooker. In '59, 19 years ago, I believed we could encourage our people to unite as a society which would be more closely knit and uniform, with more or less the same characteristics and thinking; but after about five years, I came to the conclusion that if we want to develop a Singapore society of which the people can be proud, we cannot impose a model on our people. Let each language, culture, religion follow its own course. But because of the reasons I

had given in English just now, it's not necessary for me to explain, this has become a world that has entirely changed

We interact with one another and between us and the world, us and the United States, us and Western Europe, us and Japan, us and Australia, New Zealand, us and the other ASEAN countries, and the ASEAN states with other countries outside our region. So this is a process that doesn't stop -- it is continuous. In one generation -- in perhaps 20 years -- there will not be one but many factors which will be common -- as we can recognise this now. I believe there is an obvious difference between our people of Chinese, Indian, Malaysian or Indonesian descent and people who are Chinese, Indians, Malaysians or Indonesians. When I was in school, we could tell an Indian by listening to the way he used English. Now in RTS we know who are Indians by their names but their language is Singaporean. If there was no name announced, we would not know that the person is of Indian descent. He has been influenced by his friends, by the Singapore society. And there are three, four Singapore characteristics. Singaporeans are "triers", who dare to try; no matter how difficult, they try. This is a good factor for us, our society. Secondly, there is a feature that is not so good. There is little sympathy for people who do not succeed. This is not good. He who succeeds gets support, but there is no sympathy for one who doesn't succeed. This is not good. And then there is

debating in two, three languages. In our shops, the attitude is if Russian sailors who come here speak Russian, and I am in the business, whatever language you speak, I can speak. If you like Russian, he puts up Russian: this is “Moscow Store”! I asked the shopkeeper if he could speak Russian and he said he could. Perhaps 200, 300 words: things like “this is a very good article, it’s very cheap, I quote this specially for you.” This is being very shrewd. The fourth characteristic is that now everybody wants to work in air-conditioned surroundings. For work in the sun or in the open where one is exposed to rain, strong winds, we have to look for the work permit holders. So there are the good characteristics and there are the not so good characteristics. But slowly, in one generation, all our people of all races, all religions will share in common the same characteristics. The Malay language uses words from Hokkien. This is an example. I asked Encik Sidek how to say “in common” in Malay and he said “Mengongsi”. I was surprised because I know that “kongsi” is also “kongsi” in Hokkien. He had taken a word from Hokkien, added a prefix and made it a word of the national language. This is an example of how we influence, and are being influenced by, each other.

CHAIRMAN: Thank you Prime Minister. I think the Prime Minister has spent quite a while answering questions and, as usual, the answers have been apt and frank. And I hope that although we might not be satisfied with the questions that still exist, God willing, if there is time later, we shall meet again in an air-conditioned room as well! With this, allow me to express many thanks to the Prime Minister who has kindly delivered his speech at the closing session of our one-day seminar. Hopefully with the questions and answers just now, we would at least leave this hall with a positive attitude. Allow me to congratulate the Prime Minister.

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