

PRIME MINISTER'S MAY DAY MESSAGE - 1979

On this May Day, allow me to congratulate the NTUC on a successful decade of modernisation in the 1970's. It was a decade which saw Singapore transformed from a caterpillar into a chrysalis, something full of promise. The core leadership has been in charge from the 1950's, for over two decades.

In the 1980's, the next generation will take charge. To discuss it openly is to help it to take place smoothly and successfully. The torch, with the flame alight, must pass into firm and strong hands. Union branch leaders must face up to this question and consciously help to decide on the successors to the present leaders.

After 20 years of universal education, and plenty of scholarships from the government, the unions, the People's Association, and other constituency associations, all bright pupils in primary school have reached the university. The unions must recruit top talent from amongst the best that have got to university. The days when unions from their own ranks found a Devan Nair are no longer with us. And Devan came from the ranks of teachers not the office or factory workers. Thirty years ago the unions threw up a few men like the late P

Govindasamy, M.P. for Anson. He started life as a postman and rose to the Inspector of Postmen. He was a strong and dedicated union leader. P

Govindasamy spoke poor English, but what he said made good sense, because he had a good mind. He had missed going to university only because he was born 40 years too early.

Times have changed. The question today is not whether or not to induct able men into the ranks of union leadership. It is how grass roots union leaders are to identify which of the able men brought into their midst are sincere and reliable, are men of principles. For without convictions how can they serve the cause of the working man? Ability is easy to identify. What is difficult is to see beyond ability, into the "heart" of the man, for otherwise ability may mask selfishness and opportunism.

The unions will always throw up committed and unselfish ground leaders, especially in the branches. It is the responsibility of these leaders to spot from amongst those more talented and better educated than themselves, the few who have the integrity and dedication to match their ability. This is the crux of the problem. To do this, they do not need powerful brains or higher education. To find out if a high flyer is sincere and honest is a question of "feel". The ground leaders have to have that social touch to get the "feel" of the men they have to

place confidence in. Those who are unselfish and sincere can instantly “feel” who is selfish and insincere.

In this task you can, in part, rely on the experience and judgment of the older union leaders. Devan Nair and I have been testing a number of men who have been educated at great public expense. We are testing them for those qualities of heart which will make them more than just high-powered technocrats. It depends on whether they feel that sense of duty, to re-pay society for the privileges they have enjoyed, and to serve their less well-endowed fellow workers.

Our reservoir of talent is limited. From this limited few we have to identify two or three men. They must be put to the test. If they have the stuff that leaders are made of the future of the NTUC and of Singapore will be secure.

National Archives of Singapore

Another point I want to draw young union members’ attention to is the close link between the PAP and the NTUC.

In the history of modern Singapore it is not possible to divide leadership neatly into political and union leader sections. They were one and indivisible. They still are. Immediately after the Japanese surrendered in September 1945, the communists moved out of the jungles and set about mobilising the workers in trade unions to consolidate their power. In June 1948 they took to the jungles for armed revolution. But they left their united front cadres working in the unions and in the social, educational and cultural associations. They worked feverishly to build up a mass following amongst the miscellaneous factory workers, bus workers, coffee shops and eating house workers. They needed mass support to add punch to their political and military thrust for power.

In 1952, before the PAP was founded in 1954, a group of my senior colleagues and I came to know Devan Nair and a group of communist cadres who had links with the communist cadres in control of factory workers' unions and the Chinese middle-school students' unions. When the PAP was formed in 1954 it was a united front of non-communist socialists and communists. The PAP had the support of non-communist unions in the government, in the British armed services, and also some white-collar unions in the business houses. The communists brought in the support of the unions they controlled in factories. This united front lasted for seven years. In August 1961 came the parting of the ways over the future of Singapore. Open conflict took place between the

socialists and the communists in the PAP. It led to a similar division in the unions.

The communists did not win the political battle. They lost in the referendum of September 1962 to join Malaysia. They lost again in the General Elections in September 1963. The side that lost the political leadership had to lose the leadership of the unions. No government could have allowed the communists to use the unions to threaten the stability and security of Singapore. This is the first lesson of life in Singapore unions: that the political leadership is supreme. It is the political leadership that settles the political and economic policies for Singapore, including the policies on the unions. There are some countries, like Britain, where the situation is different. Singapore will not be like that because we cannot afford that.

The NTUC was formed in 1961 by a group of non-communist leaders led by Devan Nair. They had to combat the communist stranglehold on the industrial workers' unions. PAP and the NTUC cadres worked strenuously to strengthen the non-communist leaders in the unions and to enlarge the membership of the non-communist unions.

The NTUC research unit was formed at the end of 1962. It was originally financed by a grant from the government. A group of civil service officers of ability and commitment was seconded to help strengthen the small team. They helped build up union organisation and expertise. They brought in and built up the intellectual muscle in the tussle for better terms and conditions of service. Between the government and the NTUC we identified active and competent trade union leaders and got them no pay leave from their employers. We put them to work full time in the Research Unit. Many of these active leaders came from the teachers' unions like the late N Govindasamy, former M.P. for Radin Mas. Some were from the business houses like the late Joseph Tan Meng Kwang who died in 1974. Gradually a core of leaders coalesced in the NTUC to give coherence, direction and leadership to the non-communist unions. Then the NTUC moved into the factories and organised the industrial sector. And before long the NTUC moved to organise even the bus workers.

National Archives of Singapore

There was never any distinction or division between the political (PAP) and the trade union (NTUC) objectives. Both were out to abolish the old unjust colonial order and to create a society which offered everybody equal opportunities for education, health, housing, jobs and a better life.

The close co-operation between the political and the union leadership made modern Singapore. It is both history and today's reality. We have advanced because the government and the unions moved in tandem. Promising unionists were fielded by PAP to be Members of Parliament. And PAP Members of Parliament with no union experience have been inducted into union activities. The future of Singapore depends on our strengthening this symbiosis between government and unions. We must strengthen these relationships to make our future secure.

LEE KUAN YEW

National Archives of Singapore

Date : 30 APRIL 1979

Time Released : 1845 HOURS