

PRIME MINISTER'S MAY DAY MESSAGE, 1980

Two characteristics mark out successful industrial societies: one, a cohesive society where class divisions, though they exist, carry no stigma and do not hinder free mobility up or down the socio-economic ladder so that talented children of all classes make their full contribution to national progress; two, workers in trade unions are not locked into antagonism against management or the establishment. The two features are faces of the same coin.

Germany and Japan are very different examples of such societies.

On the other hand, Britain is a society where, unfortunately, both these characteristics are absent. A talented people has suffered grievously because class conflicts, with different speech accents and social manners make the lower classes resentful of the upper classes for giving them a sense of inferiority. Able children from poor homes who for many decades used to go up the socio-economic ladder via grammar schools and scholarships to Oxbridge are, because of recent egalitarian theories, lost in comprehensive schools with mixed ability classes taught by teachers who are anti-Oxbridge because they did not make it under the old elite system. Most British trade union leaders are intensely hostile to management and the establishment; indeed their fulfilment in life, or rather,

their release from their resentments and frustrations, comes from fighting over new grievances and old grudges.

Singapore's society is young and supple. It is not homogenous; but like other immigrant societies, such as America, it has no sharp class divisions; nor do workers or unions feel any animosity for management or its nascent establishment. We have the rare opportunity to mould and shape our society into a harmonious whole. PAP leaders have drawn their lessons from the experiences of these advanced countries.

Twenty years ago, when PAP leaders took office, three of its Ministers had more than ten years of personal experience working in the trade unions, both amongst the Chinese-educated industrial workers in the private sector, and the English and Malay-educated workers in the public sector. We had open minds, with no pre-conceived prejudices. Our experience has proved our assumptions: that we shall make most progress if we provided equal opportunities of education and employment, regardless of race, language, culture, or religion. We have been guided by the principle that a man's worth depends on what he can do, not who his parents were or what they had achieved. A society based on performance, not pedigrees, has resulted in the maximum benefit to all. At the top of every functional and professional group, from Ministers to

permanent secretaries, from chief executives of statutory boards to general managers of private corporations, from professors to professionals, we have some men whose fathers were taxi drivers, hawkers and humble workers. Indeed the policy has been so thoroughly successful that it has left union rank and file with a grave problem: no intellectual gems have been left behind for the unions to discover and polish. All the able but poor ones have won scholarships in school to receive their polishing at the university.

Hence it is important that the unions consciously and assiduously co-opt trained talent to ensure a viable successor leadership. It is not likely that there is another Devan Nair to be thrown up from the union rank and file. What the unions can and will continue to throw up are grassroots leaders, men with that extra drive, that extra commitment to their fellow workers, that strong sense of fair play. The schools have not found ways to identify these vital qualities of character. Many stalwart personalities were not spotted for special training because strong points of character are not as easy to identify as high IQ is by examinations. So we shall continue to have grassroots leaders with strong characters. The unions will have enough leaders from their ranks who have the capacity to judge those whom they are co-opting to make sure they are not time-servers or careerists, to make sure they will put the interests of the workers and of society first and foremost.

The NTUC will need a core of at least four able and dedicated men.

We have many able and trained men who have come from poor and humble homes. They have been educated in some of the best universities in the world on scholarships provided by the government. Many have not forgotten their humble origins. Some will find fulfilment in working in the unions. They have to be tested for reliability and dedication, before they are confirmed in authority. If these men are sincere, our workers will learn to trust them, as they had learned to trust my senior colleagues and me. We did not rise from the union ranks.

The trust and confidence between the present group of leaders in NTUC and the government came about through the history of the last thirty years. In 1952, a group of men got together to rid the country of colonialism. They rallied the workers through the unions. The same group formed the PAP.

The united front broke up in 1961, split between the PAP and the pro-communist Barisan Sosialis. The unions split between NTUC and SATU. The PAP won.

So the NTUC won. If Barisan had won it would have been the end of the NTUC. The NTUC won with the PAP. The result is a union movement which does not have class antagonism and social conflict as dogmas. This valuable attribute must be nurtured by the next generation of NTUC and PAP leaders. As the group of older leaders who straddled the PAP and NTUC leaderships step

aside in the second half of the 1980's, younger men, now briskly going through their paces, must keep this objective of intertwining interests and purposes uppermost in their minds.

I am aware that some senior second-line leaders in the NTUC had hoped to succeed to top positions. They have put in long years of loyal service; they have considerable experience. It is natural that they are less than enthusiastic over this process of self-renewal. Able younger men from outside the union hierarchy have been brought in and placed above them. The same is true of the PAP. What I find remarkable is that these old guards have such short memories. They seem to have forgotten the anxiety that seized all of us in those fearful years when the Communists and communalists were so threatening, when the future looked so bleak, so black, when everyone and everything looked like going down under the weight of overwhelming assaults of ruthless and evil opponents. Then no one volunteered to be first in the firing-lines: the leader man. Whilst the Lim Chin Sions, Fong Swee Suans, and the Woodhulls were mounting their fiery attacks, I remember many trusted lieutenants ready to leave the decisions to Devan and me. Now, after the crucial battles have been fought and won, and all appear quiet, some believe they can run the show. They talk each other into believing that they can cope with the top jobs; and that these bright, but junior recruits should work under them, for they are more experienced

and deserving of promotions. Let me be blunt: a leader must lead; to lead, he cannot be slow, he cannot be dependent on advisers, especially in a crisis. A leader is one who, in tight situations, faced with the unexpected, takes swift decisions alone. Devan and I have worked long enough to know who can do what. The old guards, who have the experience, lack that extra, the keen cutting edge of decisive minds. The present tranquillity is deceptive. That they do not see the perils ahead is the reason why they have been slow to develop good working relationships with the young leaders. I do not fear for the younger men. My concern is for the older comrades who will risk redundancy as the young leaders gather around them a group which excludes them. This would be a pity, for the old comrades have the experience to make a valuable contribution to the next team.

In a number of NTUC affiliate trade unions, the process of self-renewal is being thwarted. I have reports that such affiliate union leaders, now in their late 40s and their 50s, snuff out younger men who show the ability or the promise to take over them; they feel more comfortable surrounded by old cronies who pose no threat. No leader, determined to leave behind a vigorous organisation, will tolerate a slide to mediocrity with only old faithfuls to grapple with jobs too big for their grasp. If Devan or I believed that these senior second-

line leaders could hold the organisations together whilst the younger men gain experience, neither of us would feel this sense of urgency.

There is urgency. It has made us thrust responsibilities upon these young men. We are stretching them, perhaps unfairly pushing them to their limits. The new Secretary-General, Lim Chee Onn, with Devan Nair's support, is going into the field with a group of young men with the potential to give the NTUC a fresh burst of vitality at all levels of leadership. Age and seniority alone are not enough. The lesson of the old second-line leaders of the old Indian Congress who lingered on and took over and squabbled long after Pandit Nehru, and with such calamitous results, is terrifying. Singaporeans deserve a better fate.

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