

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW  
MOVING THE MOTION ON THE ELECTION OF  
MR CHENGARA VEETIL DEVAN NAIR AS  
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE  
ON 23 OCTOBER 1981 AT PARLIAMENT

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One afternoon, 27 October 1952, I took a police launch from Clifford Pier to St John's Island, then a rehabilitation centre for opium addicts. I had been retained by Yusof Ishak, the Managing Director of Utusan Melayu, to represent his detained editor, Samad Ismail. Between 4 and 8 January 1951, the Special Branch had arrested the first big batch of about 20 English-educated communist cadres, probationary members and members of the Anti-British League. It was a shock to people that these privileged English-educated intelligentsia and professionals had thrown in their lot with the communists to overturn the system.

They were given special treatment, better rations than the average detainee. Theirs was a European diet with butter and eggs and meat. Instead of Changi Prison, one camp of the opium addict rehabilitation centre at St John's had set aside for them. There, under the shade of a tembusu tree, outside the chain link fence, Samad and I sat on to wooden chairs with a small table between us. Beyond the fence was a rectangular-shaped hut isolated from the opium addicts, in case they were infected by more dangerous cravings.

A group of these detainees watched us as I took my instructions. Samad wondered what a lawyer could do for him. I made notes, and talked about conditions on St John's.

Across the chain link fence, I spied a bespectacled Indian in shorts and slippers. He had a particularly pugnacious, angry face. He was short and squat. Samad told me he was his good friend - Devan Nair - an official of Singapore Teachers' Union. He told me that under detention, it was easy to see who were weaklings and who were strong men. He said his friend was a strong man. Later, I learned from R B Corridon, the Special Branch office in charge of this group, that Nair was a member of the Anti-British League and was being cultivated for full CPM membership.

Nine years later, in 1961, when the parting of the ways came, for the Communist United Front, Devan Nair was the only one strong enough to stand by the PAP and resist a takeover bid by the communists.

The irony was, he had been the communist thorn in the PAP's side from 1954 to 1956, when he was on the CEC of the PAP, always pressing views which advanced the communist cause. When, however, the parting of the ways came in July 1961, after the Anson by-election, between the communists and

non-communists in the PAP, he was staunch and courageous. Unlike those who treacherously went back on their solemn pledges of loyalty in a non-communist PAP, he soldiered on with us.

He, more than anybody else, knew what the communists would do to those who turned against them. He, more than anyone else, knew how dedicated, how fanatical, how tireless, how totally ruthless they were. These were qualities which had won him over to their cause. These were qualities which made them formidable opponents. But dedication and resolve were also qualities he had. He knew he took grave risks when he threw himself wholeheartedly with the non-communist leadership of the PAP. He knew how thin and inexperienced the PAP leadership was, how weak its organization, how short of cadres, how lacking in fanaticism, ruthlessness, and zeal the PAP cadres were.

Fortunately, the communists lost : first in the referendum in September 1962 for merger and Malaysia, then in the elections for the Legislative Assembly in September 1963. Devan Nair had contested and lost in Farrer Park constituency in 1955. In March 1964, a Malaysian citizen born in Malacca, the PAP fielded him for the seat of Bungsar near KL in the Malaysian elections. Of nine candidates, he was the only one who won. When the break with Malaysia came in 1965, he stayed behind to lead the DAP.

It was not lack of courage that made him leave KL. The Cabinet decided that Singapore-Malaysia relations would always be bedevilled if Devan Nair remained as a DAP leader. I persuaded him to come back. I told him that the trade union movement in Singapore had to be rebuilt on different assumptions and with different attitudes. We had to have a union movement that would make Singapore a secure place to invest in. We wanted workers to be productive, capital to be safe, and yields to be high. He agreed to return to Singapore and made his preparations. In May 1969, when the Malaysian elections took place, he was in America, amongst other places, at the Southeast Asia Studies Centre at Yale.

When he came back to Singapore, he threw himself into a modernisation programme for the NTUC. The last 12 years have seen the re-education of our union leaders and workers into the realities of making a living for Singapore. Leaders and workers are learning the meaning of management and productivity through the actual running of enterprises like NTUC insurance, INCOME, through the supermarkets in WELCOME, through running a fleet of taxis and vans in COMFORT.

Those of us old enough to remember the trade unionists and the workers of the 1950s, those of us who remember simple but fearsome slogans of fighting the wicked colonialists and imperialists, and the blood-sucking employers, must have found it ironic that this same group of union leaders was placed in this predicament. Instead of fierce speeches urging rebellion, they now had earnestly and painstakingly to explain the need for hard work, an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, an end to malingering and obstructionism, and a stop to industrial strife. If these leaders lacked the moral courage to change gears and take a difficult U-turn at great speed, Singapore would not have made it. Without a capacity to rise above themselves and admit that their earlier comprehension of problems was incomplete, without the courage to admit their errors and to persuade their followers to change course, modern Singapore would not have come about.

One golden thread runs through this broad tapestry of events covering the last 30 years - total dedication to a cause bigger than ourselves. Without such a cause, Devan Nair would not have been much different from the many school teachers or headmasters we have in our schools. It was this complete commitment to fight and work for a better society that brought out his strengths. His moral fibre withstood the pressures and the heat of crisis. Because he wanted to do something about the sufferings and deprivations of the people, he

became a tower of strength in our battles against the communists and communalists. It needed fortitude to cease playing the hero strike leader and instead to re-educate the workers, to reshape their attitudes towards management, from a confrontational to a cooperational one. The re-education is not yet complete. Some of the old adversary attitudes and antagonisms still linger on. Nevertheless the tide has been turned. Changes are moving in the right direction. It is left to younger leaders to complete the task.

In March this year, when I first learned that the late President was critically ill, I asked the Cabinet to name possible successors. The Speaker and a few others outside Cabinet were also asked to help in the search. Eventually, a shortlist was settled. It had to be a different selection from 1970, or from 1959. Then, the distinguished men in their 50s and 60s who had the attributes for the office were not directly involved in the political struggles of Singapore. They were a generation or two older than we were. They were apart from the fray. This time, the generation in their late 50s and 60s was our generation, the same age group of my senior colleagues and myself. Anybody with any strength of character had taken sides. There are few outstanding men in the generation of Goh Keng Swee, S Rajaratnam, Toh Chin Chye, K M Byrne, who were bystanders.

In the final shortlist of four, only one was not connected with the PAP. He was colourless compared to Devan Nair.

I do not have to enumerate Devan Nair's merits. Nor need I describe his character or his temperament. Many know him personally. Many more have read of him. Often, in the last 30 years of active public life, he has had to bare his soul. When I approach him in June, some three weeks after the late President's death, he was taken aback. I asked him to take him time to reflect on it. I told him that becoming President did not mean that he had to be quiet and bland. At 58, he could not but continue to be himself. The difference was that in this role, he should be non-partisan. He had to rise above the fray between the PAP and other political parties who aspire to be the government. He would have to represent all Singaporeans.

Many communists who break with their faith immediately embrace another religion, with equal fervour. For these people, communism had been their religion. When they reject communism, they become as intense in their anti-communism as they were fanatical and irrational in their communism. Most suffer psychological cracks, like those hairline cracks on a porcelain vase which has been carefully mended, but will give way again when filled and under pressure again. Devan Nair is an exception. He has retained his sense of

proportion, his balance, and equanimity. His moral fibre withstood the trauma of the rejection of his former faith in communism.

Those of us who have known him well are confident that he will rise above his loyalties to the NTUC and the PAP to embrace a broader spectrum of loyal Singaporeans. We cannot change his character, his way of life, or the habits of a lifetime. Indeed, they are his strengths. What will change is his role. From defender and champion of the workers, he must now become a focal point for all Singaporeans to identify themselves with. He can still be colourful, still be approachable, still be pungent; but he must be above the political fray.

His style must be uniquely his. After two weeks of deliberation, he asked if he could continue to move freely and informally as he had always done, without the trappings of the President. He feared these would cut him off from his old friends and fellow workers. I assure him that there is no reason why he should always be on parade. There will, of course, be time when he must be on parade, with ADCs, Guards of Honour, escorts, and all the pomp and circumstance that go with the office. There is no reason why, however, at ease and in mufti, he should not continue as his old self. Indeed, his best contribution is to be himself. And if he makes it possible for those who had



previously disagreed with him to feel that he is now President of Singapore, their President, that will be his best measure of success.

Men who have long years in office develop a knack of taking the measure of the men they meet. Those who meet Devan Nair will recognize that he is a man out of the ordinary. He will not diminish the high standing of the office of President.

Honorable Members, many of whom have known him for more than 20 years, will want to join me in wishing his success.

I move, Mr Speaker, Sir, that this Parliament in accordance with Article 17 of the Constitution, elect Mr Chengara Veetil Devan Nair as President of the Republic of Singapore.

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