

**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW**  
**AT THE DINNER FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT**  
**ON TUESDAY, 25 SEP 84, AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL**

**Reason for Dinner**

It is 10 years since we had the last dinner for our Establishment - those who give expression to the will of our society, who make our economy work, who make possible our development and ensure our security. They are persons on our table of precedence, the protocol list, which ranks the President before Ministers, before Judges, on to Members of Parliament, the top officers of the Public Service, the SAF, the Police, and the heads of the institutions of higher learning. We have also included those not on the protocol list, leaders of the banking community, the Chambers of Commerce, Manufacturers' Association, and the trade unions. Because of the open and diverse nature of our society, they include many non-Singaporeans - British, Americans, Japanese, Dutch and others who help run our banking, industry, and commerce, and some of our training institutions.

People in the mass can only govern themselves, and obtain their needs, either through traditional or through representative leaders. A well ordered society with a long unbroken history, like Britain or Japan, has its national solidarity and its establishment based on the king and the royal family, a religion

and the elders of the church, the elite in the ruling parties who alternate in power, the elite in the public service and the armed forces, the elite in commerce, industry, and in the professions.

Singapore's national cohesion did not have a promising start. We had many different immigrant racial groups speaking different languages and dialects. We did not and do not have a common religion. The majority are Buddhists, with significant minorities of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. We cannot use religion as a force for national unity. For our multi-religious community, perhaps it is as well. Singapore does not have a royal family for a Sultan. Nor do we have any history or tradition of two political parties which alternate in power. All Singapore has had is the PAP. We went through a short period of great peril and stress in the 1950s and 1960s. The alternative political party, for over two decades, was the CPM. Now there is no credible alternative political party.

From the political crises of the 1950s and 1960s, we became acutely aware of the vulnerability and fragility of our society. Fortunately we are a pragmatic people and we set out to build on our common interests and play down our differences.

The PAP has broadened its base as widely as is practical. It has also tried to institutionalise the methods by which its party leadership is rejuvenated and strengthened. In Government the PAP leaders have ensured that the elite in the civil service, the SAF, the police and the professions, comes from the best in our

1ky/1984/1ky0925.doc

schools and universities. All children are given equal opportunities to education so that the best do find their way to the top. We have improved the methods of selection, career development and promotions in the civil service, the armed forces, the police and the professions. We should have a continuing flow of trained and able men to help govern the country and run the economy.

Nineteen years ago, when we unexpectedly became independent, if someone wanted to destroy Singapore, I estimated that he could do so by destroying about 30 people, if they were disposed off suddenly and simultaneously. Their sudden disappearance, in a period of great uncertainty, would leave our society headless, and render it open to destruction: 10 in the political leadership, 10 in the civil service and judiciary, and another 10 in the army and police.

Today our survival capacity has increased by a multiple of 5 and more times. The core of leaders has increased. And for each key digit, whether in the political leadership, or the civil service, judiciary, the armed forces, the police, or the professions, there are 2 to 3 others who are deputies, or assistants to the deputies, who can step in their places. However less experienced they may be, they can, in an emergency, make the government function.

### **The Establishment**

This dinner to celebrate our 25th year also conveniently marks the closing of an era. The original team of men who embarked on an unexpectedly exciting if perilous venture over 30 years ago is disbanding.

By 1985, power will have effectively passed to a younger generation. They will be in the majority. As Prime Minister I shall provide a link with the original team. To those old guard Ministers and MPs, I want to record my appreciation for the contributions they have made and for the good grace with which most of them are taking their imminent departure from office. I understand the painful adjustments they have to make following the dislocation to their way of life and their status in society. It cannot be helped. People have to make room for younger men. My turn will come.

National Archives of Singapore

The most significant imprint we can leave is not by hanging on to office, but through the way we hand over the power to govern. We have exercised power as trustees for the people, with an abiding sense of our fiduciary responsibility. Our honour, our sense of duty made us exercise power scrupulously. We have curbed, restrained, and prevented any distortion of policies which would have been inevitable, if the personal interests of the few in charge were allowed full rein. This is the case in many new countries. When those in office regard the power vested in them as a personal prerogative, they inevitably enrich themselves, promote their families, favour their friends. The fundamental structures of the modern state are eroded, like the supporting beams of a house after termites have attacked them. Then the people have to pay dearly and long for the sins and crimes of their leaders.

Our future stability and progress depend on those succeeding us being imbued with this same sense of trusteeship, this awareness that to abuse the authority and power that they are entrusted with, is to betray a trust. By handing over power whilst we are still alert and fully in charge, we are able to ensure that our successors have the basic attributes to be entrusted with power. It is feckless to hang on and to have power wrested from us when we have become feeble. Then we shall have no say on who our successors are.

## Sense of Group Survival

Camaraderie, esprit de corps, a sense of shared honour in the top echelons of any society, are crucial for the survival of the group and the system. I have seen British colonial officers preserve this mystique of a ruling elite. They punished individual officers for letting down their side. They saved those who were unfortunate and got themselves into difficulties. It was a kind of Freemasonry. They never denigrated the system. They believed in themselves and their right to govern to the end. I once, in the early 1950s, prosecuted under a fiat the Chief Fire Officer at the Naval Base for criminal breach of trust of the Naval Base firemen's subscriptions to their welfare fund. An English district judge acquitted him. I sued him in a civil action in the High Court and tried to prevent him from leaving the country. An English Supreme Court judge tossed out an application for an injunction to stop him from leaving Singapore, until the case was heard. But his fellow officers made good the missing funds to the firemen. They dealt with him in their own way. I was given a person lesson in group solidarity by a ruling elite. They kept morale up even whilst they were on the way out.

Except for one, or two, aberrations, the PAP old guards have maintained high standards in their esprit de corps. It is not becoming of an old guard to hack down the edifice he has spent the best years of his life building.

### **Sense of Continuity**

As leaders we must recognise that our power is transient. We must see ourselves as part of the drama of players who have their hour upon the stage and know that when they have played their part, they must pass on and let others play their part. We have in the last few years invested authority and power in younger men. They will succeed us. They may or may not be better than the original team, but they are the best we can find.

### **Special Features of Singapore**

Because we are small and compact, we should be easier to govern. But because we are small we know each other well, and this is what makes Singapore more difficult to govern. There is little of the mystique of the upper classes or the ruling classes. Our right to govern is based on merit, that we are manifestly better qualified by our abilities, by our training and by our character, to exercise power for the common good. There is sufficient similarity of background amongst those at the top for us to share a common set of values. With the younger generation this will be even more so for they will also have been through the same or similar schools and universities, and will have done National Service.

Our system for selecting men based on their ability and performance is open. Hence our system of open appraisal for promotions in the public service, introduced more than three years ago, is gaining respect and acceptance. There is no place for favouritism or personal bias. When panels of three or more assessors identify and rank talent and ability, we ensure that, invariably, the better men get to the top. Nobody in Singapore believes that those present here tonight have been invited because of the accident of birth or privilege. You have worked and deserved your place at the top. Your contribution is proven. This legitimacy of the top echelons of our society is a power force in getting the people to cooperate when we implement policies for the common good. This legitimacy must be jealously preserved as the hallmark of the Singapore style of government. Because the principles by which people get to the top are universally understood, we have a dynamic society and a stable government

National Archives of Singapore



Now let me ask you to join me in a toast to the President, the Head of the Establishment.

-----

National Archives of Singapore