

RESIGNATION OF MR C.V. DEVAN NAIR PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

(Statement by the Prime Minister)

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, the President was apparently well before he left on a private visit to Sarawak on Saturday, 9th March. Whilst in Sarawak, he developed symptoms of extreme weakness and exhaustion associated with mental confusion and bizarre behaviour. His condition caused such concern to the Sarawak State Physician, Dr Wong Chee Liang, that from Kuching on Thursday, 14th March, he phoned the President's personal physician, Dr J.A. Tambyah in Singapore to inform him of the situation and to seek his advice on the management of the patient.

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The next day, Friday, 15th March, the Sarawak State Physician, Dr Wong, again telephoned Dr Tambyah to report that there had been no improvement in the President's condition. He then spoke to the Director of Medical Services, Dr Kwa Soon Bee, about the President's condition and his behaviour. He requested that the President's personal physician fly over immediately to Kuching to take over management of the patient and accompany him back to Singapore.

Dr Tambyah, accompanied by a consultant psychiatrist, Dr Teo Seng Hock, went to Kuching on 16th March. They found the President in a confused and disorientated state. They made a provisional diagnosis of acute liver failure with mental changes. They accompanied the President back to Singapore the same evening of Saturday, 16th March.

In the Singapore General Hospital, a panel of physicians investigated him and found no evidence to support the earlier diagnosis of liver failure. The panel consisted of Dr Tambyah, Dr Teo Seng Hock, Prof. Chan Heng Leong, consultant physician Dr Ho Kok Tong, consultant neurologist, Dr Loong Si Chin and consultant psychiatrist, Dr R. Nagulendran. Of this panel, four - Dr Tambyah, Dr Ho, Dr Loong and Dr Nagulendran - are from the private sector.

The physicians carried out a series of tests to exclude other causes for the symptoms. After a careful assessment of the President's mental state and from his previous history, they came to the conclusion that the President was suffering from an acute confusional state due to alcohol superimposed on a long-standing condition caused by alcohol dependency.

The President's mental state at present fluctuates between lucidity and mild confusion, and disorientation.

On Tuesday, 26th March, after receiving all the reports from the doctors, my colleague, Mr S. Rajaratnam, and I met Dr Kwa, Dr Tambyah, Prof. Chan, Dr Teo and Dr Nagulendran, to clarify the meaning of the reports, in particular, those of Dr Teo and Dr Nagulendran, the two psychiatrists. Dr Teo had completed his findings earlier, by the 21st of March. Because of the gravity of his findings, he asked that there be an independent examination and investigation. Dr Nagulendran, a consultant psychiatrist, was called in. He had come to the same findings on the 23rd March.

Immediately following the discussion with the doctors, Rajaratnam and I, and the doctors, met Mrs Nair and Mr Janadas Devan, the President's eldest son, on Tuesday, 26th March. We explained the implications of the findings to them. After 1.5 hours of explanations and discussions, Mrs Nair, Mr Janadas Devan and Dr Tambyah left to see the President.

Yesterday morning, Dr Tambyah told me that the President had decided to resign and that he had himself drafted the letter of resignation. I discussed the matter with my cabinet colleagues at 5.00 yesterday afternoon. At about 6.30

pm, Rajaratnam and I went to see the President at SGH. The President signed his letter of resignation addressed to you, Mr Speaker, and handed it to me. I called for Dr Tambyah and Dr Kwa, and asked them, in the presence of the President and Rajaratnam, whether the President was lucid and that he understood what he had signed. Both in turn said that the President did. I have sent the letter to you, Mr Speaker, earlier today.

Sir, when I moved his election to the office of President 3.5 years ago, on 23rd October, 1981, I recounted his many contributions to Singapore. I knew he would drink at social functions. But I have never seen him drunk or out of control of himself. All my cabinet colleagues were also ignorant of his secret problem. Only his family and a few friends from earlier NTUC days knew of it. They did not tell me of this weakness, mistakenly believing that this was in his better interests.

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The first time I knew was on the night of Friday, 15th March. Mrs Nair had asked me to see her after Dr Kwa and Dr Tambyah had seen her to discuss the President's curious behaviour in Kuching and Miri. She said she has wanted to tell me of his problem many times since 1979 but was dissuaded from doing so by her eldest son.

This is an immense personal tragedy. In their final report, Dr Tambyah, Dr Teo, Prof. Chan said that, and I quote:

‘He shows an impairment of judgement and insight and diminished self-control and sense of responsibility. His verbal ability and intellect and ability to rationalise are normal during the lucid state when he would appear normal to one who has not known him previously. To the immediate family and close friends, however, his personality and mental changes would be quite obvious.

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This morning, Miss Loo Wai Ho, Mr Devan Nair's personal secretary from NTUC days, sent me a letter from him. Amongst other things, he wrote:

‘When you said that I had deceived you, it was like a stab in the heart. I did deceive you, but you got your chronology wrong that I had done so when you proposed me as President in October 1981. I did NOT deceive you. I considered myself only as a moderate social drinker. I was certainly not an alcoholic.

‘About a year ago, I knew myself for a confirmed alcoholic. It was only then that the DECEPTION began. I occasionally thought of confiding in you but put things off.... The last time I was on the verge of confiding in you was when we met some two weeks ago in my office, before I left for Kuching. I have missed my last chance to come clean.

‘I don’t know what you will say in Parliament. Feel completely free to quote this letter if you like.’

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The panel of physicians has recommended that Mr Devan Nair be given intensive medical treatment over the next few weeks followed by a period of convalescence and rehabilitation, probably in a specialized centre overseas.

Mr Speaker, honourable members would want to join me in wishing him fortitude in his task of rehabilitation. With the help of his wife and family, he must find the strength and the stamina to break his dependency.

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