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**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER OF STATE FOR
TRADE & INDUSTRY AND COMMUNICATIONS & INFORMATION
AND MP FOR TAMPINES GRC
AT THE OPENING OF SECTION SEVEN OF THE MRT SYSTEM
AT SIMEI STATION
ON SATURDAY, 16 DECEMBER 1989 AT 9.15 AM**

When the MRT first started running in Nov 87, the Sunday Times called it "the hottest show in town". Perhaps, it can also be called "the longest-running show in town". It took 11 years from the time the MRT was first proposed in 1971 by the State and City Planning Project, jointly carried out by the Singapore Government and the UN Development Programme, to the time when the decision was made in 1982 to proceed with the MRT system. In between, extensive feasibility studies - technical, economic, financial - were carried out, including a review in 1980 by a team from Harvard University.

The next significant event in the history of the MRT was the ground breaking ceremony in Oct 1983 when construction began, a year after the decision to proceed was taken.

After that, it was full-steam ahead. The first five stations opened for passenger service in Nov 87, just four years after construction began. The next 15 stations opened four months later, in Mar 88. Then, another three stations in Nov 88, another two in Dec 88, finally 10 more just over a month ago, when the trains came to the Eastern suburbs of Singapore. Which brings us to today's ceremony marking the opening of the last three stations on the Eastern line.

In recounting the history of the MRT, I am making the point that, although the MRT was a carefully considered decision, once a decision was made, everything and everybody swung into action to make sure that it would be of the highest standard, in the shortest possible time and in the most cost-effective manner.

The result, I am sure, speaks for itself. London has its tube, Paris its metro, New York its subway, HK its MTR. We have our MRT. And we can all be justifiably proud of it.

Not only has it begun to change the way we work, it is also changing the way we play. Without the MRT, Swing Singapore would not have been possible. Without the MRT, it would not have been possible to turn Orchard Road into a pedestrian mall on the last Sunday of every month. Nor would it have been conceivable that more than 600,000 people from all over Singapore poured into Orchard Road to join in the merriment as the Christmas lights were switched on this year. The MRT tells me that they set a new record for passenger traffic that night.

I am sure that in time to come, it is not going to be one-way traffic either, as organisers realise that with the MRT, it would be just as convenient for mega-events to be held in other parts of Singapore as it would be in Orchard Road.

Just as the jet plane has shrunk distances and turned the world into a global village, so will the MRT alter perceptions of distance in Singapore and open up new options for our town planners and developers. After today, friends and relatives of Pasir Ris, Tampines and Simei residents will no longer find it too far or too inconvenient to visit. And vice-versa.

In the same way that high-speed elevators have made possible the skyscrapers and multi-storey hotels, so the high-speed, high-capacity MRT trains have opened up the possibility of commercial and business centres all along its route. Maybe

one day, living in Orchard Road and working in Tampines will be as natural as living in Tampines and working in Orchard Road.

The MRT is the backbone of our public transport system. It is both complemented and supplemented by other public transport modes like the buses and taxis. It is an investment in the future. A City of Excellence must be a city on the move, not stuck in traffic jams and suffocating from fumes and frustration. We may not be able to persuade all Singaporeans not to own or use a car, but for some people, some of the time, the MRT and its linkage with the buses offers an attractive alternative.

The public transport system is not complete. Neither is it perfect. We must continue to explore ways and means of improving the system. But improve we must, for it remains the most sensible, most effective and most acceptable solution to our transportation problem.

May I congratulate all those involved in making today's celebration possible. It is certainly a wonderful Christmas and New Year present, especially for the residents of Pasir Ris, Tampines and Simei.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

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