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- 1 NOV 1980
03-1/80/10/25

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**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, MINISTER FOR
COMMUNICATIONS, AT THE AUSTRALIAN ALUMNI SILVER
ANNIVERSARY DINNER AND DANCE AT THE TROPICANA
THEATRE RESTAURANT ON SATURDAY 25 OCTOBER 1980
AT 7.45 PM**

I believe most of you here are graduates of Australian universities and colleges and since I am of the same background, I shall speak freely tonight about a subject very close to me and about my recent visit to Europe, Canada and the United States without running the risk of either describing what you already know well or of being challenged on matters of fact by more knowledgeable people.

The purpose of my visit to these places was to gain first-hand knowledge of how other cities cope with their transportation problems. I had embarked on it amidst some rather interesting discussion between Mr Hansen and his team of Harvard professors and the previous group of consultants, Wilbur Smith and Associates about whether an all-bus or a bus-rail system would be better for Singapore in the 1990's. Before relating my impressions, a word of caution: There are as many differing schools of thought on urban transportation as there are transport planners. So there are different and diverse reasons why cities choose their respective systems. There are many lessons we can learn from them; the trick, if there is one, is to choose only those, whether of successes or failures, that are relevant, and discard those that merely cloud the issue.

If we choose our transport system by emulating that of the West, there is little doubt we will build an MRT. All the cities I visited - Paris, Lille, Marseille, Brussels, Toronto, Montreal, Atlanta, San Francisco, Chicago and New York, had or are building one form of rail MRT or another. But all with different reasons. If

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transportation requirements are the only consideration, I think only Paris, Chicago and New York have good reasons to justify the existence of their MRT systems. All three are very large cities and started operating MRT's in the days when the bullock carts still roamed our streets - New York in 1868, Chicago in 1892 and Paris at the turn of this century. Their population has since grown rapidly - from three to 17 million in New York, two to nine million in Paris and one to seven million in Chicago. I have often wondered whether these cities could have grown so rapidly and to such a scale if the MRT had not been built some 100 years ago. Since there is no way of knowing for sure, one would be better off re-phrasing the question: Can these cities function properly today without the MRT? I suspect that the more than three million daily commuters on either the New York Subway or the Paris Metro will all say "no". It is not difficult to imagine how these cities will be like if the MRT commuters are suddenly transferred to buses and cars running on already congested roads.

On the other hand, there are other cities with fairly small population for which an MRT may not seem necessary - one million in Lille and 1.4 million in Marseille. Why then do they have the MRT here? I was told, for political reasons - it was a matter of prestige and of enhancing the city's image so as to improve the quality of life. If Paris and Lyon could have MRT's - why not Lille and Marseille. Although this may not be a very good reason and should not be taken as an indictment of their social and political policies, it nevertheless goes to show how other considerations affect the MRT issue. In time to come, say 50 years from now, the social and urban structure of Lille and Marseille will be changed with the MRT and their population may grow at the same rate as Paris or New York. Later historians, with the benefit of hindsight, can then judge whether it was a good or bad thing.

In between these two extremes are a host of other examples. In Brussels, the Metro has been the result of a rather natural and logical series of events. Brussels had inherited a system of trams built some 80 years ago operating in mixed traffic. The natural

stop after that was to segregate the trams from other vehicles. This however poses all sort of problems at intersections; and tunnels were therefore constructed for exclusive use by trams. Having dug the tunnels, it was relatively simple to increase the capacity of the system by substituting MRT trains for trams.

On the other hand, in the American cities of Atlanta and San Francisco, the main reason for building the MRT was to persuade the motorist to leave his car behind and catch a train instead and thus relieve congestion on the roads. This is a very noble, if rather ambitious objective, the outcome of which should be of more than passing interest to us. The MRT in Montreal, it seems, was partly due to the personal zeal of the mayor, the same mayor who was successful in hosting Expo '67 and the 1976 Olympics.

What lessons can we learn from these cities? The first, I would say is that an MRT has a tremendous influence in shaping the growth and development of a city. Nowhere is this more evident than in Toronto. From the air, one can guess the MRT alignment by the cluster of high-rise development in and around the underground stations. Another good example is Montreal where there is virtually an entire city underground with air-conditioned shops lining the subways and linking the stations to hotels, office buildings and shopping complexes.

What is perhaps not clear in all this whether the development that takes place around MRT station is at the expense of other areas or whether it is a net increment which would not have taken place without the MRT. Whichever school of thought you subscribe to, however, does not really matter in land-hungry Singapore. Even if the MRT is only a local magnet for commercial development which would have taken place elsewhere in Singapore, its attractions would mean that land in other areas can be freed for other development, especially for recreational and leisure pursuits.

No discussion today on urban transportation in Singapore would be complete without some mention of express buses and I shall describe briefly my impression of them in New York. Here there is a service with express buses carrying commuters from as far as 112 km away in New Jersey travelling along expressways most of the time.

About 4 km from the terminal, all the express buses converge on to one single bus lane running in a contra-flow direction from the rest of the traffic. Every morning teams of workmen would be busy placing bollards all along the expressway to segregate the bus lane from the other lanes. This exclusive bus lane continues into the Lincoln Tunnel and all the way after that to the multi-storey bus terminal complex in Manhattan.

The express bus I travelled in started from a park-and-ride facility in North Bergen in New Jersey non-stop to the Manhattan terminal 8 km away. Total travelling time excluding boarding and alighting was 19 minutes giving an average speed of about 25 kmph.

If we were living in a country as big as Australia, there would be very little significance in wanting to maximise land use. In Singapore however, it is of great importance. By making maximum use of land, whether for commercial development in the Central area or for residential and recreational purposes in the suburbs, we would in the long run increase the overall real estate value of Singapore. There is strong evidence elsewhere that an MRT will be able to do this with good results. Whether it will also provide the transportation answer in the 1990's and beyond is currently a bone of contention between two groups of consultants. You have watched and listened to their views in the newspapers and on television and must have drawn your own conclusions. It has provided much food for thought. But we need not agonise ourselves on the subject over dinner tonight. This is an issue where the choice is not between the devil and the deep blue sea; rather it is like the man who has to choose between a modern painting or an old jade carving. Which particular artifact will enhance his image, his standing among his peers and improve his quality of life? If he chooses correctly, it may even turn out to be a good business investment in the long run.

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