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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER  
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS), AT A SEMINAR ON "ADAPTIVE REUSE:  
INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL AREAS INTO THE MODERN URBAN  
FABRIC" HELD AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON SATURDAY,  
28 APRIL 1984 AT 10.30 A.M.

I do not propose this morning to touch directly on the topic prescribed for this seminar: "Adaptive Reuse: Integrating traditional areas into the modern urban fabric". This self-denial is in part prompted by the fact that people more qualified and better prepared than me will discourse with erudition and greater reliability on various aspects of the topic during the next few days. Therefore any attempt on my part to compete with the experts can only be a source of confusion, embarrassment and possibly irritation for all concerned.

What I propose to do instead is to discourse on a different though not unrelated topic: "The uses and abuses of the past" with particular reference to the Singapore situation.

Let me begin with the positive aspects of why it is necessary for a people to have an awareness not only of their present and future but also of their past. Each has its uses. The proper use of the past was forcefully brought home to me when a few years ago I visited Warsaw as a guest of the Polish government. What I learnt then explains to a considerable degree why the Poles are today stubbornly and so far successfully defying the demands of a superpower which claims to share a common communist theology with them. In the case of Poland we have a pertinent illustration of the proper uses of the past.

Before I visited Warsaw I had read everything I could about that country. One of the things I learnt was that a great deal of that ancient capital had been destroyed by the Nazis during World War II. So what I expected to see rising out of the rubble and ruins was a new Warsaw consisting of modern buildings.

I was therefore more than somewhat baffled when I found myself in what was unmistakably an ancient city with buildings reminiscent of centuries past. So I told my hosts that clearly very little of old Warsaw had been destroyed in the war and what I had read about the devastation was greatly exaggerated. My hosts assured me that, on the contrary, I had not been misled and that the destruction had indeed been extensive. What had misled me was that the Polish authorities, despite other pressing needs, had put in a lot of effort and money to rebuild Warsaw exactly as it was before the war. Since a number of their great buildings had been built by non-Polish architects and builders centuries ago, the authorities of Communist Poland send their architects to capitals all over Europe to dig up plans and other relevant documents from archives and museums to help them rebuild Warsaw as it was before the war. Where possible even the interior of the buildings was reproduced to the smallest detail. The idea was not merely to replicate the physical shape and size of a building but also to recapture, as far as it was possible, the intangibles of a building - its character, its atmosphere and texture.

My hosts conceded that reconstructing old Warsaw was far more expensive in terms of money and effort than building a modern 20th century Warsaw. I know now (and so do the Soviets) why the Polish Communists thought the vast outlay of time and money was worth it. To have built a 20th century Warsaw would have meant, if not obliterating then at least weakening to a significant degree the Polish people's awareness of their long and memorable past. A nation must

have a memory to give it a sense of cohesion, continuity and identity. The longer the past, the greater the awareness of a nation's identity. The history of Poland, because of its strategic or, more accurately, unlucky location, has been one of repeated invasions by marauding armies which sought the subjugation and elimination of the Poles as an independent people. Had the Poles not had a strong sense of their past they would have disappeared as a people as so many have done in the course of mankind's chequered and violent history.

What was even more intriguing was that the old Warsaw the Polish Communists so meticulously and lovingly rebuilt celebrated not Communist glories and achievements but what the Communists knew full well were, from the viewpoint of the Polish communists, a worthy heritage left behind by vanquished Polish feudalism, capitalism and Catholicism.

Of course I was discreet enough not to discuss this disturbing thought with my Communist hosts but it has since then occurred to me that all Communist countries are without exception proud of their pre-Communist heritage regardless of the fact that it was created by men and classes their ideology condemned as shameful, repulsive and oppressive. Yet in every Communist country I visited the highlight of their official programmes were not the factories, farms, creches and the many monuments erected to the dead and living heroes of the proletarian revolution but the churches, palaces, palatial homes and cultural treasures from an earlier and theoretically shameful era left behind by the classes they had joyfully liquidated. More often than not, as guest, I have been put up in castles and palaces from whose walls paintings of officially disreputable kings and queens, dukes and duchesses and lords and ladies continue to gaze in bewilderment at the new class of rulers with whom they are irreversibly locked in a love-hate relationship.

Even in former colonial countries, despite some spirited assaults against the many statues and monuments erected by the now vanquished imperialists many of the more impressive viceregal palaces, residences and public buildings are, quite properly, preserved and often tenanted by the victorious anti-imperialists.

There is a sound and, in my view, proper reason why ideological beliefs, whether it be communism or anti-imperialism, should not stand in the way of our preserving what we can of the past however much we may despise and denigrate the creators of that past.

Russian, Chinese and East European Communists have not only preserved but are unexpectedly proud of the great and enduring creations of their ideologically disreputable ancestors. The Soviet rulers for example may with justification condemn the barbarities of the fearsome Tsars who built and lived in the Kremlin. But it is to the eternal credit of the Communist rulers that instead of reducing to rubble the home of the hated Tsars, they made it the home of Communist power and glory. Today the term Kremlin signifies the centre of Soviet Communist power.

Similarly in Communist China the climax of a visit to that country is a visit to Peking Palace, the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall. In comparison with these a visit to the glories of Communism which consist of monumental factories, shipyards, hydro-electric plants or communes is a pretty tame affair.

I may be mistaken but in every communist country I visited I got the feeling that my guides tended to get more spirited as their discourse shifted from an unenthusiastic recital of production statistics and the superhuman performance of heroic workers and peasants to the churches, palaces, tombs, mausoleums and the splendid gardens and castles built by an admittedly irresponsible and exploitive class of kings, priests and aristocrats.

To refer to an example nearer home - Singapore. Creating an awareness of the past poses peculiar and unique problems for Singapore. The island of Singapore as such has no long past. When Raffles founded Singapore in 1819 it was the home of a few hundred fishing folk. All we know of its past prior to this are vague hints that it was used as a halting place by mariners, traders and pirates before they moved on to more congenial places. What happened before 1819 - if anything worthwhile happened at all - has been irretrievably lost in the mists of time.

Singapore's knowable past began in 1819 - exactly 165 years ago. As pasts go, I confess, this is not much of a past in a world when countries can boast of histories dating back thousands of years. Some nations claim direct descent from sun goddesses, moon goddesses, from sexy gods in Mt. Olympus, the Garden of Eden, Aryans, and Adam and Eve. Some light-hearted tribes have claimed honourable descent from owls, eagles, lions, and wolves and I believe in one instance from a pig.

Singapore's genealogical table, alas, ends as abruptly as it begins. However we could have contrived a more lengthy and eye-boggling lineage by tracing our ancestry back to the lands from which our forefathers emigrated - China, India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and Indonesia.

The price we would have to pay for this more impressive genealogical table would be to turn Singapore into a bloody battleground for endless racial and communal conflicts and interventionist politics by the more powerful and bigger nations from which Singaporeans had emigrated.

So from our point of view to push a Singaporean's historic awareness beyond 1819 would have been a misuse of history; to plunge Singapore into the kind of genocidal

madness that racial, communal and religious imperialism is today devastating so many underdeveloped and even developed countries. The present government, much to the dismay of local racial and cultural chauvinists, has been careful about the kind of awareness of the past it should inculcate in a multicultural society.

Towards this end Singapore took a step unprecedented in the history of anti-imperialist nationalism. After attaining independence in 1965 there was debate as to who should be declared the founding fathers of Singapore. The debate was brought to an abrupt end when the government fixed responsibility for this on Sir Stamford Raffles and officially declared him the founder of Singapore. Many of our Third World friends are completely mystified that contrary to usual practice a dyed-in-the-wool British imperialist should have been named the founder of modern Singapore. In fact there were some well-meaning patriots in Singapore who were all for casting the Raffles statue situated in front of Victoria Memorial Hall into what was then the revoltingly filthy and smelly Singapore River.

It was a touch and go then whether Raffles ended in our improbable River.

To cut a long story short there was a reprieve and Raffles was saved. Today there is not only a Raffles statue brooding in front of Victoria Memorial Hall but there is also a less grimy replica of Raffles brooding alongside the Singapore River which, but for the intervention of the stars, was to have been its grave.

Our decision to name Raffles the founder of Singapore is an example of the proper use of history; the proper approach to the preservation of historic monuments.

First in nominating Raffles as the founder of modern Singapore we are accepting a fact of history. To pretend otherwise is to falsify history - about as honest as claiming descent from the sun or the moon or wolves or licentious Greek gods.

Raffles founded Singapore. This is a fact. It is also a fact that the British ruled Singapore for 146 years. We may detest imperial rule but, as with Roman imperial rule in Britain, British imperial rule had both positive and negative aspects. It was both oppressive and liberationist. The intelligent and responsible anti-imperialist should, once the battle is won, retain and improve upon what is positive in imperialism while discarding its reactionary and oppressive features.

We must take care not to throw the baby out with the bath water. But unfortunately in many former imperial territories the new rulers have thrown out the baby while retaining the bath water. The vices of imperialism - poverty, repression, despotism, corruption and looting which were features of imperialism have been retained and even improved upon with lamentable ingenuity. The virtues of imperialism however were abandoned as incompatible with traditional values and national pride.

That is why in Singapore we have not tried to deny our imperial past by blindly eradicating both its constructive and destructive elements. We have not gone around renaming streets simply because they remind us of our imperialist past. This is to deny history. In fact as we renew our aging city I hope our planners will not try to falsify history by eliminating all reminders of our imperial past. Imperialism has been a part of our history. In fact Singapore's history began as an imperial outpost and but for this fact most of us will not be here today and the Singapore we know today would not have come into being.

I had always been uneasy that in our more balanced assessment of imperialism, the Singapore heresy was possibly an idiosyncratic aberration; that our anti-imperialism was of doubtful validity; that we were freaks and eccentrics.

I have no doubt today that our more balanced understanding and use of our imperial past is not a sign of eccentricity. I have these past few months followed with considerable interest Peking's approach to the takeover of Hong Kong from the British. Put very succinctly a Communist regime proclaims that when the British depart in 1997 Peking will not destroy but retain the society British imperialism built - warts and all. Capitalist economy and free enterprise would not be interfered with for at least 50 years. The life style of Hong Kong will continue except possibly for its more pathological manifestations. This, coming from a fiercely anti-imperialist regime, is something remarkable and unthinkable two decades ago.

When I read this my regard for the political and historical understanding of Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues went up considerably. The Chinese, perhaps the most historic minded nation on earth, know that true understanding of history lies in knowing what to discard and what to retain from the past.

The present rulers of China have moved away from the infantile slogan of "Out with the imperial past" to the more sophisticated approach of "Learn to use the imperial past wisely and imaginatively."

So what then of the ancestral heritage our forefathers brought with them into Singapore from China, India, Indonesia and other lands? Must this heritage brought from foreign lands be thrown into the Singapore River? No, we must treat it as part of the Singapore heritage. We must preserve the transplanted cultures which

have taken root in Singapore and which have even in the brief 165 years adapted and changed to fit in with Singapore's different, multicultural environment. The Singapore identity which is now definitely taking shape requires these transplanted cultures to reinforce a Singapore identity which has come into being but which for many years to come will be threatened by periodic challenges from the dormant but not dead virus of racial and cultural chauvinism.

Following the example of the Poles we must preserve as much as possible of our transplanted cultures embodied not only in the language, culture and beliefs of the diverse peoples of Singapore but also in their temples, churches, mosques, houses, street names and localities. These constitute a people's collective memory; an awareness of their history, brief though it may be. A sense of a common history is what provides the links to hold together a people who came from the four corners of the earth. Because our history is short and because what is worth preserving from the past are not all that plentiful, we should try to save what is worthwhile from the past from the vandalism of the speculator and the developer, from a government and a bureaucracy which believes that anything that cannot be translated into cold cash is not worth investing in.

It is because the Poles had a different kind of national accounting when it came to rebuilding Warsaw, that they can today stand up stubbornly and defiantly to assert their identity and desire for freedom in the face of a more powerful, superior and demanding adversary.

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