

(To be embargoed until after delivery)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT
MR TAN SOO KHOON AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
1999 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING ON 4 MAY 1999
AT 10.15 AM AT HOTEL INTER-CONTINENTAL

Mr Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister,

Hon Hector McClean, President of The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and
Speaker of the House of Representatives of Trinidad and Tobago,

Hon Billie Miller, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CPA and Deputy Prime
Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Barbados,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Committee of the CPA,

My Fellow Parliamentarians,

Excellentes,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Singapore Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary
Association (CPA), may I first of all extend a very warm welcome to our guests and
friends from the CPA member countries. I would also like to extend our gratitude to
Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for gracing this occasion. The Singapore Branch is
indeed privileged to be hosting the mid-year meeting of the Executive Committee of

the CPA and the presence today of so many distinguished personalities from Commonwealth parliaments and legislatures brings us great honour.

2 Singapore has hosted the executive committee meetings of the CPA in 1972 and in 1983. That it has taken us 16 years since the last one to host another such meeting in no way implies any diminution in our involvement with the CPA. Indeed Singapore attaches great importance to its membership in the CPA. We share in the objectives of the Association in promoting knowledge and understanding amongst parliamentarians of the Commonwealth, and in pursuing the many positive ideals of parliamentary democracy. Like all of you here we are committed to the parliamentary process and to the enhancement of Commonwealth membership and ideals. Our membership in the CPA, like those of all the other Branches, is a strong indicator of a functioning parliamentary democracy in our country.

3 The members of the Singapore Branch of the CPA have benefited from participation in the Association's conferences, study visits and many other related activities. Such meetings provide opportunities for participants to exchange ideas and views on parliament procedures and practices. All of us here share the ideals of a fundamental institution. We also speak in one common language. Yet we are so diverse in that we are of widely different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and even if the principles on which the institution that we all have and is founded upon are deep-rooted and well-established, and are common to us, there exists variances in practices and procedures. But it is this diversity that gives flavour, and a richness that is so precious in allowing us to communicate, exchange views and add value to each other's perception of not just parliamentary democracy but also of current global issues.

4 That there is this diversity is no doubt reflected in the CPA's grouping into eight regions: The African Region, The Asian Region, The Australian Region, The British Isles and the Mediterranean Region, The Canadian Region, The Caribbean, Americas and the Atlantic Region, The Pacific Region and The South East Asian Region. I think this is an excellent arrangement. The Singapore Branch belongs to the South East Asian Region, a region which like the others, is unique in its own way because of the interaction of culture, language and religion. The impact and influence of Westminster democracy on each region is also quite different. Thus, the existence of the regions adds to the richness of the ideals of parliamentary democracy subscribed to by all members of the CPA.

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5 Above all, our involvement in the CPA over the years has allowed us to forge close ties with all of you here and with many others throughout the Commonwealth. It is a friendship that we value greatly and your presence here today is a re-affirmation of this close bond. We here in Singapore support and applaud the work of the CPA and hope that in the days ahead you will find success in charting the policy directions of the Association.

6 I am sure, too, that you will also discuss the challenges that will confront the CPA as it stands on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium, and while I am also sure that there are many amongst you who are more well-placed and experienced to discuss this subject, I venture to suggest that the CPA must regularly explore ways for parliamentarians to remain relevant to their constituents. It is the constituent who puts us in Parliament, and being relevant and meaningful to his or her life must be paramount in our thinking and in what we do. And I make this point today because it has become something that is increasingly challenging

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for us to do. We know that in many countries there is still a large amount of what I call voter apathy, and this despite the fact that there is a higher literacy rate and educational standards in the general population. But we can break this trend. We must make ourselves accessible to the citizenry by communicating with them. We must understand the people in our communities by constantly getting feedback. At the same time the community must know that we are there for them. In Singapore, our Members of Parliament hold weekly Meet-the-People sessions with their constituents and visit the homes of their constituents. With our approach towards a consensual style of government, we engage our people - not confront them - by receiving inputs from them and by building a rapport with them, so that those who lead and those who are led, are always working together in building the country. It is this togetherness, working as a cohesive whole, that gives strength to a country and its people, in good times as well as in difficult times.

7 Special attention must be paid to young people. In this respect I am pleased to note that the CPA recognizes young people as a target group vital for the advancement and the continued health of Parliamentary democracies, as outlined last year in the report of the Working Party of the CPA on "Rediscovering the CPA: Towards the 21st Century". You have very correctly emphasized the need to focus on young people in a CPA outreach programme for non-members, and I fully agree with the need to involve our young in understanding parliamentary affairs. I also note with interest the CPA's intention to host a Youth Parliament for young people from the Commonwealth in Edinburgh to coincide with the annual CPA Conference in the year 2000. What better way to achieve your objective of reaching out to the young than by having our parliamentarians share their experiences with this target group.

8 In Singapore our leaders and MPs have regular get-togethers with the younger segment of the population. These are therefore opportunities for our youths to exchange ideas and views with the policy makers of the country. At the Parliament level we have a regular programme of visits to Parliament by students on sitting and non-sitting days. Last year Parliament received 2,000 students and this year we expect over 5,000 students to visit us. But we are taking this one step further. We are not just taking them round to see the sights in the Parliament building. In our new Parliament building we will have a special educational gallery in the Parliament Chamber where they will observe, and be guided on the proceedings. We will also have space for them to have a moot parliament where they can role-play parliamentarians, and learn how to ask and answer parliamentary questions, how to probe, criticize and scrutinize, and hopefully to engage in the cut and thrust of a parliamentary debate. It will therefore be an opportunity for us to inculcate in them an interest in the political affairs of our country. This is our small, but I hope important contribution towards not only just sharing our experience in parliament democracy with a younger generation, but making them understand and affirm their beliefs in it, and passing to them the traditions of parliamentary practices and procedures.

9 May I now end by wishing you once again every success in your discussions in the days ahead. I hope that your stay in Singapore will be an enjoyable and memorable one.

Thank you.