



Speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew for Mr Lim Kim San's 80th Birthday Dinner on 28 November 1996 at the Mandarin Hotel

On the 80th birthday of my old friend and colleague, Lim Kim San, allow me to pay him a tribute.

The Bible speaks of three score and ten. He has had ten bonus years and more to come. Let me give a brief audit of his life. He was born in Singapore, the eldest in a family of six, two boys and four girls, educated at Anglo-Chinese School. After Senior Cambridge in 1933, during the great depression, at 16, he worked as a petrol pump attendant, then as a clerk with Straits Steamship Ltd. In 1936 he enrolled at Raffles College, majored in Economics, and graduated in 1939. He married in February 1939, an arranged match. It was a very successful marriage. Mrs Lim died just over two years ago in August 1994 after 54 happy years together; he still misses her. They have two sons, four daughters.

Eldest son a stockbroker, second a doctor McGill University, eldest daughter a pharmacist from Leeds University, another a vocational teacher trained in London Polytechnic, third a Mathematics graduate from the University of Singapore, the youngest a housewife. All married, eight grandsons, a houseman at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, another on National Service, two schooling, four in tertiary institutions. Four grand daughters, one law graduate, another in hotel management, two studying in tertiary institutions.

He suffered during the Japanese Occupation. He traded in jewellery and gold in the black market. For no rhyme or reason he was pulled in by the Kempeitai twice.

In January 1944, the Kempeitai caught a youth canvassing donations for the communists from shop houses along North Bridge Road. He had come to Kim San's shop, but Kim San sent him away empty handed. He thought the way he did his soliciting, he was sure to be

noticed by the Kempeitai. They did and brought the man to identify the contributors. He pointed out Lim Kim San. The Kempeitai charged Kim San as pro-communist and pro-British. They flogged, beat, kicked and physically abused him. He was kept in a filthy over-crowded room of 30 persons, sitting on his haunches, like all others. He slept on a hard surface without a blanket, which brought pains and aches to all parts of his body. He was released after a week. Then they arrested him a second time. He never knew why. Again blows, kicks, lashes. In the room, there was one squatting toilet, which all used for defecating, washing and drinking. So they made repeated flushings to clean the water. He was fed rice mixed with discarded vegetables in an old kerosene tin. It reminded him of the way Chinese feed their ducks. He saw men beaten to death. Any one who has gone through such an experience is never the same again. He was not broken. There was a stubborn rebellious streak in him. When he was pressured to confess that he was a pro-communist

and British spy, he not only denied it but argued that he could not be a communist. That brought more kicks and more beatings.

After the liberation he went into the sago flour and sago pearl business. He invented a set of machines which produced sago pearl cheaply and efficiently and cut out much labour. With this invention he made his first million in 1950, at age 34. But there were no patents to protect his invention and it was soon copied by others. He became a director of United Chinese Bank (now the UOB), Chairman of Batu Pahat Bank Ltd and Pacific Bank Ltd.

In 1959, I appointed him a member and later Deputy Chairman of the PSC. In 1960, Goh Keng Swee recommended him to me as Chairman of the Housing and Development Board. He helped change the fortunes of the PAP and of Singapore.

The HDB came under the Ministry of National Development. Kim San had a difficult Minister in a man called Ong Eng Guan. He had been Mayor of Singapore and was widely popular for his dramatic gestures, actions like ordering the mace out of the City Council Chamber, sacking expatriates in the service, and other crazy, populist acts like letting crowds of spectators in singlets and slippers into the City Council Chamber itself to join the City Councillors during the inaugural meeting.

Ong Eng Guan told Kim San to hire workers direct and not use contractors to build the HDB flats. He saw me in my conference room at the City Hall and earnestly asked whether I wanted him to build houses or be a labour contractor. If I wanted houses built he had to do it his way, which was to get a contractor who would have his relatives in charge of different sub-contractors, and they in turn would have people they trusted in charge of groups of workers. If we wanted him to be his own labour contractor to build houses he did not know how to

do it. I overruled the Minister and asked him to do it the way he knew best. His keen business sense built Singapore the homes as speedily as the technology and labour of that period could at low costs.

I remember two blocks of flats he was building along Cantonment Road in my constituency, Tanjong Pagar. The structures were up in 1963 but were not completed by election time in September 1963. Huge groups of pro-communist students from Nanyang University and the Chinese middle schools ran around Tanjong Pagar to unseat me. The voters could see that the PAP as a government not only made promises but could deliver on their promises. The two uncompleted blocks of flats made a difference. In 1963 we were fighting for our lives. I won.

A year earlier, in 1962 he was awarded the Order of Temasek, Singapore's highest award for solving the housing problem.

Although politics was not Kim San's forte, I persuaded him to run for elections in September 1963. We needed people of integrity, courage and ability, people who could get things done. He fought in Cairnhill and won. I appointed him Minister for National Development.

Two years later, in 1965, he received the Magasaysay Award in recognition of his work in housing.

As a businessman who had done business in Kelantan, he got on well with the Malay Ministers including the Tunku and Tun Razak, who liked him. He was a valuable link between Kuala Lumpur and us. Indeed at one time the Tunku considered appointing him a Minister in the Federal Government. The British government had urged the central government to show solidarity in the face of Indonesian confrontation. But the internal politics of the Alliance prevented this. The MCA strenuously opposed any PAP representation. All the same the Tunku liked him better than me. In July 1965, one month before

separation, the Tunku took him to London when he was attending a Commonwealth PM's Conference. When the Tunku had shingles, he told Lim Kim San at a London hospital "For the next PM's Conference, Kuan Yew can be there on his own."

Kim San came back and told me this. I asked him what it meant. He could not make it out. After the separation of Singapore he concluded that by July 1965, the Tunku had decided that Singapore should be out of Malaysia, be independent on its own, and that I could attend the next PM's conference on my own.

After separation, I appointed Goh Keng Swee Minister for Defence, and made Lim Kim San Minister for Finance. After three years I switched them, Goh Keng Swee back to Finance and Lim Kim San Defence. They were the two most important ministries. Later I sent Kim San to Education, then Environment and back to National Development.

He is a practical man and produced results. He had told me he could not make speeches, and that he was unsuited for politics. I told him to speak his mind and not worry whether his speeches sounded like Rajaratnam's. He was not a spellbinding orator, but he carried his ground.

During the General Elections in 1976 while running around electioneering in Cairnhill he had a heart attack and blacked out. Fortunately he recovered. In 1980 he decided he had had enough and did not contest the general elections. He was in charge of PUB in the 1970's, then of the PSA as Chairman from 1979 to 1994. He worked as Deputy Managing Director of MAS for two years.

In September 1988, he became Chairman of SPH. His business acumen led to a trimming down of costs, and cutting out waste in staff and material. This resulted in increased profits. In his late 70's he did not

flinch from change. Convinced that advertising revenue would flow increasing to the electronic media he has taken SPH into the new fields. He does not tolerate idlers for long as SPH staff discovered.

He has an intuitive sense for judging people, their character, their motivation and their capabilities. He once described to me how after he shook hands with a thug who had become an important figure he felt dirty and repulsed and wanted to wash his hands. I knew the man as a dangerous thug. I used this uncanny ability to good purpose when I wanted candidates to be interviewed for jobs, especially for prospective MPs, to gauge their potential.

On retirement the President decorated him with the Order of Temasek. Whenever we needed somebody for an important position, one that required integrity and judgement, we have called upon him. So he became Chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisors.

He is not a man for writing memos or speeches. He prefers dealing with figures and is especially good at balance sheets. He prefers face to face dealings to long memos. His shrewdness is in-born, but honed by his upbringing. At the age of 10 he used to follow his father to his store where he learned the smell of smoked rubber sheets, the sour smell of sago flour and the heavy laden air of piles of salt. He soaked in the meaning of the percentage, the difference between buying price and selling price and cost of holding commodities. He is not a man only for accumulating money. He enjoys life. He is a gourmet, a fastidious eater. If I had to choose a food taster, Kim San would be my choice. When I see him eating with relish, I know that it is a good dish. When he picks and pecks, I do not bother to try the same dish. He is a dandy, dresses smartly and with good taste.

Most of all, he has a tremendous spirit. He never gives up. He has had several operations for his neck and spine over the last 40 years. First a surgeon

fused his neck vertebra. There was no great improvement. Then he suffered excruciating back pain and had another operation. The pain kept recurring over the years. But despite the pain, he forced himself to walk daily until he overcame the pain and got his muscles to loosen up so that he could golf again. He has made his life worth living by his indomitable spirit.

Now let me ask you to join me in a toast to Lim Kim San. Zhu ni - Fu ru dong hai, Shou bi nan shan.
