

Speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister of Defence at the 5th Annual General
Meeting of INCOME at Trade Union House on 11th
June 1975 at 5.30 p.m.

Most of us know that the face of Singapore is changing very fast. This may not be apparent to those who live here all the time, but occasionally we get visitors or former residents, who return after an absence of two or three years. They find it difficult to get their bearings. New roads and buildings have gone up, whole new housing estates have appeared where none existed before; traffic directions have changed.

While we can see that the appearance of Singapore is changing, not many of us have realised that the nature of Singaporeans is also changing.

Not so long ago, women factory workers wore pigtails and white blouses and skirts. During week-ends, they attended picnics and sang communist songs. Very few of them do this nowadays.

In those days, workers thought they best protected their self interests by joining militant trade unions, almost invariably members of the Communist United Front. By taking on the government and the employer, these unions presented themselves as the champions of the workers. In practice, such unions damaged the interests of members in two ways. First, loss of income during strikes. Next, loss of jobs when factories closed down and when no industrial expansion took place because of loss of business confidence.

Today, workers and trade unions know better. They know they must seek a balance in which the legitimate interest of employers and the policies of government are taken into account. All three parties share a common objective of fostering rapid economic expansion.

It was this enlightened attitude of unions, employers and Government, which made possible the sustained rapid growth of our economy over the last ten years.

During this period, not only was there a continuous rise of wages and a very rapid expansion in employment, but there also took place profound changes which have left a permanent impact on the nature of Singaporeans.

Perhaps the most remarkable change in Singapore over the last 15 years occurred in the status of women. In 1960, out of 50,007 pupils in secondary schools, 30,158 were boys and 19,849 girls. Girls were only 40% of enrolment.

Last year there were 85,936 boys, 86,465 girls with a total of 172,401 in secondary schools. Girls actually outnumbered boys.

The change in the universities is even more remarkable. Since 1960-61, there were only 805 girls out of 3502 in the two Singapore universities. In the current session, there are 3604 girls out of 7959, or 45.3%. The percentage of women students in our universities is higher than that in Britain, where it was 31.3% according to 1974 official statistics. Even in the United States, the percentage of women students came to 42.7% of total enrolment last year.

Another change is the widespread and rapid growth of home ownership. It is no longer an idle dream for a member of the working class to own his own home. Tens of thousand have already done this and many more are on the waiting list of the Housing and Development Board.

For workers in the middle and higher income groups, there are better types of homes available, such as the scheme which INCOME itself is embarking upon.

At one time, the typical home of a Singaporean was a cubicle in a shop house. On each floor of a shop house, there may be six

to eight families, each in a cubicle often no bigger in area than a drawing room carpet. This is no longer the typical accommodation of Singaporeans. They now live in Housing Board Estates. Each family has a separate self-contained apartment, with all modern facilities. And on an increasing scale, the family is the owner and not the tenant of the home.

The way a man lives and works largely determines the way he thinks. In colonial times, Singaporeans regarded this land as a temporary lodging place, where they tried to make a big fortune if possible, or some kind of livelihood if not. The idea that one owed any responsibility or loyalty to the land of adoption then appeared nonsensical. The thought that one's sons would join the army to learn how to defend the country would be dismissed as fantasy.

This was the time when Singapore was a country of nomads. People came from China, India, Britain and the West, Malaysia and Southeast Asia to work here. The British provided a stable framework of law and order and maintained a laissez-faire economic system. Under this system, it was "Each man for himself and the devil takes the hindmost." While Singapore's economic performance was excellent, the system left its imprint on people, particularly those who benefited most. These are the real nomads; they came here to seek a fortune and they succeeded. If the environment became inhospitable or if prospects were better elsewhere, they packed up for pastures new.

While it is too early to say that our nomadic tribes are now extinct, they are becoming less visible. They are least evident among the younger generation. These are not nomads because they were not born abroad and they did not experience the colonial system. Further, for most, there is no place where they can go to which provides them with more congenial living and better opportunities for talent and hard work.

You may ask what has all this to do with the life insurance business? The answer is "A good deal". When people with money generally belong to the class of nomads, which was the case during colonial days and some years after, life insurance is not likely to flourish. A life policy imposes a constraint on one's mobility. The two developments I mentioned earlier - higher status of women and home ownership - have helped to erase the nomad mentality because stable families and educated mothers result in a durable commitment.

This means that people have to plan not only their own lives, but provide also for their children's future. They have to take into account the hazards from which no one is immune and to make provision for ill fortune.

Nomads will not act like this, but a settled people have to do so. For the life insurance business, this means that the dominant social attitudes of the past had been unfavourable. That was why, compared with societies of equivalent per capita income, so few Singaporeans were interested in taking insurance policies.

But the social changes that have since taken place will be conducive to growth of the life insurance business, provided we know how to grasp the enlarged marketing opportunities offered by the new situation.

INCOME's performance in the last few years was the result of a combination of effective management, good organisational support of trade unions as well as a more receptive psychological climate.

What lessons can we draw? The first is that we must not be complacent over what has so far been achieved, for much more remains to be done and much more can be achieved. The second lesson is that the future favours us provided we work hard and in the right way.