

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY  
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence at the Opening of People's Association Exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall on Saturday, 5th July at 8.00 p.m.

The People's Association has been with us for 15 years, 5 years before independence, 10 years after. During this period, it has engaged in a wide variety of activities, providing services of one kind or another to the community, in the city, in housing estates, in the rural areas. The PA provides in its community centres and elsewhere services for the young and the old, toddlers in kindergartens to retired old people watching TV programmes in the community centres.

The PA is a well established institution, whose activities are known throughout Singapore and accepted by the population at large. I make this point not to encourage, much less to flatter, those who have been involved in its work - the professional staff, the management committees, voluntary workers, youth leaders, and others.

I make this point to urge that the PA takes a new look at its public relations policy as well as its internal policy and training systems among the professional staff. The reasoning for this call is as follows.

There is one peculiarity about social organisations, and indeed about the social sciences as an intellectual discipline. This is the propensity to talk about words and not about things or events. Some of the social sciences are quite incorrigible in this respect and unless they get out of this rut, there is absolutely no future for them.

But there is no reason for social organisations to fall into the bad habit. After all, their work is not teach befuddled undergraduates but to do things, to work among people with aim of achieving something. Therefore, social organisations, in public declarations as well as in seminars, training classes, or even in informal discussions, should make a point of escaping from the academic trap of talking about words and instead talk about things - events, objects, in short, how the job at hand can best be done.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Recently, there has been considerable talk in PA circles about raising the quality of work, especially in community centres. What do they mean by this? Does it mean that the cooking classes will bake better cakes, the embroidery classes will sew more elegant designs, the kindergarten classes will introduce better methods of instruction? If this is what is meant by raising the quality of work, I am all for it.

But I suspect that there is some muddled thinking here, and raising the quality of work is being equated with getting better off people to take part in community centre activities. Why should the PA make a special point of this? As per capita GNP of the republic goes up, those who call at community centres will be better off on the average.

But I do not agree with the view that the PA should move away from serving the poorer sections of the community in order to attract middle class and professional people. This kind of snobbery has no place in the work the PA should do. If you mean that better quality means better class of people coming in, then this is a self-frustrating job.

Just tell me how any community centre can compete with, for instance, the Singapore Island Country Club, which has 5 squash courts, a \$2 million swimming pool, 4 tennis courts, 4 golf courses, acres of car parks, several air-conditioned dining rooms and bars.

Instead of trying to achieve what is not only impossible but also unnecessary, the PA should pay more attention to some social problems that are visibly growing acute in our midst. For instance the YMCA on 16 June conducted an interesting seminar on problems of youth in high-rise housing estates. Dr Tan Eng Liang made a number of perceptive observations and raised a number of sharp questions. This is the kind of thing which I would like PA professional staff to examine closely, in practical critical and concrete terms. The problems arising here are precisely what the PA was established to tackle.

May I make some observations about youth groups. In terms of numbers, the PA youth group has registered impressive progress, membership being 16,393 as of May this year. 1128 have been elected to Youth Executive Committees. Regional and central youth councils have been established. Now all this is very good and very useful. But I must sound a word of warning.

It is absolutely essential that these youth groups should not be allowed to be used for the greater glorification of elderly people upon whom they depend for money, status or patronage. Youth groups are there to provide interesting activities, hobbies, sports, recreation, instruction classes and such like work for members of the group. If they fail in this prime object, then the group fails.

My second point about the PA Youth Movement is this. It is probably easier to achieve rapid progress of the Movement if the policy is to attract better educated youths. My guess is that this would be the natural inclination of youth leaders and organisers, themselves mostly of better education standards.

Then what about the school dropouts? In group activities of this kind, a commonly observed process is that birds of a feather flock together. In other words, if you start with a group of better educated youths, the less educated will be reluctant to join. Similarly, if you start with school dropouts then those with O and A level education will tend to shy off.

What is the way out of this apparent dilemma? I will be the last person to suggest that the Youth Movement should shut its doors to better educated youths who want to take advantage of the facilities and services which the PA offers.

I think the dilemma is a more apparent than real. The way out is to cater for both groups of youths, merging them together where this is possible - and it could be done with really good leadership - but having separate groups where it is not possible.

One of the things which most people in Singapore forget is that the majority of those who start in primary school do not complete their education. In other words, school dropouts form the majority of young people, some 55%. There is obviously a problem here, but this is nothing new. It has been with us through the decades.

Nobody is more aware of the nature and size of the problem than the army officers who have to instruct and command them when they are enlisted for national service. What type of people are they?

Contrary to what arm-chair theorists may believe, the school dropout when he joins the army is not an abject person who has lost his self-respect or a potential criminal. In-depth studies by army psychologists show that he is quite pleased with himself and views his future prospects with optimism. He carries with him the traditional eastern social values in which he is instructed by his parents - respect for hardwork and honesty, condemnation of wrong-doing. It is an elementary, uncomplicated, set of values. But they do result in a man who can be motivated to good performance if properly handled.

So there is no need to look at school dropouts with pity, suspicion, contempt or fear. But undoubtedly, because they usually come from poorer families, they are probably more exposed to bad influence, such as gangsters and criminals.

May I conclude by putting things in the right perspective. When I suggest that PA takes a second look at its youth programmes to see whether it can offer something useful to what Dr Tan called aimless youths in high-rise buildings, many of whom are probably school dropouts, I am not suggesting that we have a massive problem here. For instance, we have a drug problem among the young, but the percentage of those involved is minute, as compared with the West. As for alienation and the generation gap - these happy cliches of sociologists who have no knowledge of what is

happening around them - the evidence is that the family system remains intact, the work ethic is still strong and social casualties again are very small as compared to what is happening in more affluent societies. This happy result, may I add, is possible only because we in the government have set our face sternly against foolish and decadent practices which some intellectuals believe to be fashionable in advanced countries and therefore permissible here.

The general situation is healthy. Let us ensure that this always remains so and, indeed be further improved. Towards this end, the PA has an important contribution to make.