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6th Annual Dinner of the Institute of Building  
Speech by Dr Lee Chiaw Meng, Minister for Science & Technology

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1. Not so long ago, our roadside grass used to be cut by kabuns swinging "sabit". Now this sight has disappeared from the Singapore scene. Instead, the turf is now trimmed by young men and women using small petrol engines on their back powering a high speed cutting disc. They trimmed better and cut more area. These people are better paid. Even with the same pay, few young people could be induced to the sabit-swinging trade. This is a vivid example of how technology was introduced to a trade resulting in higher productivity.

2. When I first enter the engineering trade just over 15 years ago, building workers used to climb many floors up the scaffolding with their heavy tools. Today, we build much higher buildings. We use industrial lifts. Premix has replaced the in-situ mixer. Despite all these improvements, the building trade has not advanced significantly in its technology to be in step with its growth.

3. The turnover of the construction industry was around \$40 million for 1960, \$300 million for 1970. For the 12 months period ending May this year, certified payments reached \$1300 million. The growth will continue. Despite this phenomenal growth, it fails to attract many young people into the trade.

4. A few years ago I made some rather provocative remarks regarding the construction industry. I also made certain suggestions regarding some inter-related issues which I considered important if the building industry is to keep up its momentum of growth. Among other things, I proposed a system of Certification of Skill for workers and a system of Registration of Contractors. The primary purpose of these proposals is that the industries would be able to stabilise the workforce and to offer a rewarding career to young people with better working condition and permanency in return for higher productivity. This is becoming more important as more complex buildings are coming up which demand a better skilled workforce.

5. As we are all painfully aware, there is a dire shortage of skilled workers in the construction industry. The Government, through the ITB, HDB and PWD, has put in considerable efforts to provide facilities and incentives for the training of skilled workers for the construction industry. Unfortunately, the response has not been too encouraging. Though the wages paid to skilled workers for the construction industry are comparable with those in other trades the irregular pattern of employment and possibly the element of danger occasionally highlighted by newspaper reports have deterred many young man from entering the industry. Perhaps one of the reason is that young Singaporean, by his improved standards of living and being better educated, does not find it attractive to wheel barrows, and to labour with shovel and mattocks. He may be more responsive to modern power tools and equipment .

6. Perhaps this unhappy state of affairs can be traced to the present system of sub-contracting where only few large firms maintain a skeleton permanent staff. The rest depends on casual workers. The system has, however, served us well in the past. To do away with it completely will not only push up the cost of construction unnecessarily, but it would also disrupt the entire industry itself. However, it does not mean we cannot take advantage of the flexibility of the present system and improve upon it. I am aware that it is not feasible for contractors to have a large pool of workers on their regular payroll when they themselves are not sure of a succession of contracts to provide sustained employment for these workers. However, it would not be too difficult for them to have a core of skilled workers, foremen and technicians supplemented by workforce supplied by the sub-contractor. In this way, the larger contractor with the necessary capital can equip himself with the latest tools and equipments and be able to maintain a pool of skilled workers so that in time to come he may be able to develop a specialised system of his own. Happily, I note that such developments are taking place.

7. It is axiomatic that to achieve greater prosperity with limited resources, human beings have to be more productive. In the crudest form this can be done by increasing the working hours of the individual. A much better alternative is to have a more efficient workforce and to improve methods of production by utilising relevant high-level technology.

8. The major industrialised nations of today have become what they are through the parallel upgrading of the skills of their

people and improved production methods made possible by technological advances.

9. We have to consider applying more mechanised and automated processes to increase our productivity. In many instances, improvements and advances have been undertaken in the private sector without Government prodding. A good example is the growing use of computers in industries today. The introduction of such electronic devices has led to a need for more highly-trained and therefore, better-paid personnel.

10. The grass-cutting contractors have overcome the problem of worker shortage and raising cost by introducing new technique to its operation. I am certain our builders, with its long tradition, stronger and wider base, will be able to modernise its approach and operation in terms of technology and management and also to upgrade the skill of its workforce so that it would evolve into a sophisticated modern industry. This is what it should be.