

PLEASE EMBARGO TILL AFTER DELIVERY  
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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PART OF A SPEECH BY DR LEE CHIAW MENG,  
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1           Modernisation and industrialisation are undoubtedly two major concerns of all developing countries. They are further compounded by a primary need to raise basic level of training and expertise, and to speed up the technological and the economic progress. What is most difficult and also most important is to bring about proper infrastructural change in the cultural patterns and the social habits of a people to enable them to respond positively to the needs of transformation into a society with higher production skills, management expertise and scientific and technological know-how.

2           In this regard, Singapore might be said to have been more fortunate. This dilemma of developing countries had been accorded full cognisance as early as 1959 when bilingualism was clearly specified as a cornerstone of our national goals. Firstly, knowledge of the mother tongue goes with its built-in value systems of thrift, industry, the family unit, etc. for cultural stability and ballast. Secondly, knowledge of English goes with access to the benefits of industrialisation and modernisation. This basic philosophy remains unchanged.

3           National goals give purpose and direction to education policies and education objectives. These things, like the rice we eat, are basic to us and do not change. They do not undergo "frequent" and worse still "contradictory" changes as has been alleged recently. What can change are the various methodologies and approaches adopted to achieve policy objectives in a flexible manner, always bearing in mind that methodologies and approaches must suit the children. Those who are in fact capable should be encouraged in every way to learn as much as possible, while those who are genuinely unable to respond should be likewise accommodated according to their aptitudes and abilities.

4           In view of the foregoing, the so-called brain drain of local graduates to developed countries may have been laid somewhat hastily and unfairly at the door of the bilingualism policy and education policy. As I understand it, the brain drain of many developing countries had resulted because their language policies had placed no premium whatsoever on bilingualism.

5           In the final analysis, the development of nationhood must be above all other considerations.