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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE PRESENTATION CEREMONY
OF THE 1982 PRESIDENT'S SCHOLARSHIPS AT ISTANA
ON THURSDAY, 1 JULY 1982 AT 8.00 PM

This year, four boys and two girls have been awarded the scholarships associated with my office. It is my privilege tonight to congratulate the nation's premier scholars. It is reassuring to find our best students spread over a wide range of interests. It is important for Singapore to have good minds sharpened on different whetstones.

Three of the President's Scholars are also provisionally nominated for the SAF/SPF Scholarships. Jek Kian Yee will read Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge, Chua Chwee Koh will read Engineering and Economics at Birmingham University and Teng Chieh Schen will read Law at Cambridge.

The two girls, Miss Anne Tan Poh Ann will read Medicine at the National University of Singapore, while Miss Chai Hwee Min will read Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford.

The other President's Scholar, Tham Chiew Kit, will read Economics at Cambridge.

All six scholars, their parents, schools, teachers and friends have good reason to feel gratified by their achievements. The inborn capacities and talents of the scholars, and their hard work, together with the monetary and inspirational inputs of parents and teachers, have resulted in their well-deserved success. There is a much larger group of people, however, who have made very substantial investments in all our students. I refer to the people of Singapore, who are all too often forgotten on such occasions.

Every student/2.

Every student in Singapore is heavily subsidized from public funds. And public funds do not belong to the Government, They belong to the people of the Republic. The Government is merely the trustee of public funds.

Let me give you some idea of the extent to which the people of Singapore subsidize our students. At primary level, the subsidy per student is \$834 per year. At secondary level, it is \$1,289 per student per year. At the JC level, it is \$2,052 per student per year. Take the total of our school-going population of nearly half a million, and you will really appreciate how substantial is the outlay of public money on our students. The above figures exclude the construction costs of our schools and junior colleges.

Now for tertiary education. A student's education at the University is subsidized from public funds from \$1,400 to \$19,400 per student per year, depending upon the course of study he pursues. A student who pursues a course in Arts/Social Sciences, is subsidized to the tune of \$4,000 per year. His own direct payment is only \$900 per year. A student who takes Engineering costs the public \$6,000 per year, his own direct annual contribution being only \$900. The heaviest public subsidy is for the student who pursues Medicine. He or she costs the public \$19,400 per year, while the individual's own direct payment is only \$1,000 per year. Again, these figures do not include capital costs.

The people of Singapore contribute even more to those who have the distinction of being awarded President's Scholarships. I learn from official sources that the figures are as follows: the public expenditure on Scholarships for Engineering and Science, works out to an average of \$35,000 per scholar per year. For Arts scholars, the quantum works out to an average of some \$30,000 per scholar per year.

For the President's Scholar doing Medicine in the National University of Singapore, the quantum, inclusive of the annual public subsidy, works out to an average of \$25,000 per scholar per year. I need not add that inflationary pressures are likely to drive these figures up in the coming years.

The point/3.

The point which needs to be driven home is that there is a substantial public investment in your education, and an equally substantial interest in your achievements. Every individual has therefore certain inescapable moral commitments, to the family which cherished and encouraged the individual, and to the society which nurtured him or her.

The high achievers of our society need to remember that they are not above society, anymore than a tree can hope to flourish, cut off from its nutrient supply in the soil. The tree and the soil need each other, as indivisible parts of one organic complex. No declaration of independence is possible for either.

It is also pointless to debate as to which comes first - tree, root or soil. In this connection, one is reminded of the best answer ever given by a philosopher to the age-old conundrum: "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" The great Indian poet and philosopher, Sri Aurobindo promptly replied: "Both, and the cockerel!"

Nobody is or can be alone by himself or herself. There is a secret solidarity which binds together all members of a nation in a common bond. In incalculable ways, we help to make or unmake each other, and our society. And individuals or nations which forget this basic truth invariably come to grief.

We in Singapore are fortunate that we do not subscribe to the aristocracy of pedigree, class or caste, but to the aristocracy of talent. Hence the high social mobility which is one of the outstanding characteristics of our Republic. The talented are valued for the good reason that they are expected to contribute more to the society which nurtured them. And talent, wherever it shows itself, needs to be accepted and respected. In all fields, in the public or private sectors, appointments and promotions must necessarily be based on experience, exposure, proven talent and assessable capacities.

The danger, however, lies in the absence of social motivation and moral commitment among the men and women of talent. The greatest difficulty for any Selection Board is to assess the strength of character and emotional stability of young men and women at the age of 18 - 19.

High academic scores without the foundation of a stable character and keen temperament, often end in disappointing performance in life. One of the most important factors in a useful life is high motivation - the essential propellant for high performance.

As psychologists make deeper probes into the human make-up and learn how to discern these potential qualities in a person, so the PSC shall become accurate in their selection of the ablest and the best. Singapore's hard-earned resources should be invested only in those likely to yield the highest returns not only to the individual, but also to the community.

I might usefully repeat here what I had occasion to say a few years ago. The sole social and political justification for the high achievers, educated at public expense, is the degree to which they can lead and inspire the society that nurtured them to higher levels of collective attainment. If they fail to do so, and are content merely to serve themselves and feather their own nests, there can be only one end result - social and political instability in the Singapore of the future.

It is not merely the personal market value you will be able to command on completion of your studies which should motivate you. Not that there is anything illegitimate in taking an interest in your market value. Much more socially significant, however, is your vision of the Singapore of the future the younger generation have to build. What will you make of that future? It is a crucial question, even though people of my generation will not live in that future. We may be elsewhere or nowhere. I do not know. We are nonetheless concerned, simply because we have, like your parents, and in our different ways, contributed to the Singapore which you will inherit. What do you propose to do with your inheritance? How and what will you contribute towards that vision?

There are certain essentials you must bear in mind when you try to develop your vision of the future. For one thing, you need to be keenly conscious that the only wealth that Singapore can boast of is that which lies beneath the skulls of Singaporeans. But brains alone are not enough, for crooks also have good brains. Which is why qualities of character and motivation are equally important.

In your/5.

In your own interest, and in the interests of your fellow Singaporeans, it is vital to ensure that the ablest and best Singaporeans do not steer clear of the responsibilities of social and national leadership. If lesser persons, of mediocre abilities and dubious motivations, take charge of decision-making, Singapore will find itself helpless in an economically complex and politically dangerous world.

Participation in the coming age of high technology will call for high skills and rich expertise, for intelligence married to high social commitment, and for incorruptible integrity in public life.

Social stability and a broad national consensus on vital social, economic, cultural, educational and political issues and priorities, constitute the essential basis of Singapore's future progress, and must be presided over by our ablest and best. To allow mediocrities and quacks to take over in any field of social endeavour would be to invite very serious trouble indeed.

Singapore's ascent up the ladder of social, educational, economic and technological achievement has been uncommonly rapid. The descent into the abyss of failure would be even more rapid, if the ablest and best disown their obligation to preside over our future progress. In which case, in place of national cohesiveness, we will be afflicted by national incoherence, the inevitable prelude to national dissolution.

A nation, in particular, a small and compact nation like Singapore, may be likened to a noble work of art, or alternatively, to a product of high technology, like a computer, for instance. It takes inspired skill to produce a great work of art, and a great deal of technological knowhow and expertise to put together a computer. But both are incredibly easy to destroy. As a poet put it: "An idiot hour can destroy what centuries made". The same applies to nations.

By virtue of our limitations of size and resources, the margin we can allow for error and wrong-headedness in Singapore, is minimal. Consequently, the narrow margin of safety we enjoy as a nation is fraught with danger. This bears constant repetition.

In our/6.

In our circumstances, it is of vital importance for our nation's future, that our best scholars develop high aims, not only for themselves, but for the Republic. A deep and clear-headed commitment to the future is therefore expected of you. As I showed earlier, the people of Singapore pay heavily for educating our young. They pay most heavily to enable our ablest and best scholars to achieve their highest academic potentialities. You will therefore agree that the people of Singapore deserve our ablest and best as the captains of our future. It would be an injustice to them if they are obliged to settle for anything less.

I would be remiss if I did not state, in conclusion, that although public funds now finance most of our overseas undergraduate scholarships, we are nevertheless very grateful to foreign governments and organisations who have continued to extend technical assistance to augment our training resources. Singapore has derived considerable benefits from these assistance programmes. In appreciation of the benefits of technical cooperation, we have in turn made our contribution to other developing countries by providing training awards under the Colombo Plan and Asean Scholarships and Fellowships.

I am also grateful to local organisations, donor foundations and philanthropists for their generous contributions to our training resources.

Once again, I extend my congratulations to the six President's Scholars and their families, and wish them success in their endeavours. The people of Singapore have not let you down. May I express the hope and confidence that you will not let the people of Singapore down.

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