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SPEECH BY PROF S JAYAKUMAR, MINISTER OF STATE (LAW AND HOME AFFAIRS)
AT THE 1982 PRIME MINISTER'S BOOK PRIZE PRESENTATION CEREMONY,
ON WEDNESDAY, 18 AUGUST 1982 AT 3.00 PM

I am pleased to officiate at this year's Presentation Ceremony for the award of the Prime Minister's Book Prize. The purpose of the award is to promote bilingualism in our schools. As the note in the official programme indicates, in 1973 the Prime Minister donated to the Ministry of Education the total of the lecture fees he received on an overseas tour with the request that the interest earned from the donation be used to promote effective bilingualism in our schools.

This year, 32 students will receive the Prize. I understand this is the largest group of recipients thus far. Of the 32 students, five studied Malay as one of their two languages, two studied Tamil and the remaining 25 studied Mandarin. All the 32 students took English as their other language.

I congratulate all the prize winners. You have proved yourselves to be effectively bilingual. You have shown that the bilingual policy is workable. Your teachers in the schools should be congratulated. May I add that your parents must also be congratulated for, in my view, parents play a pivotal role complementing that of the teachers in schools.

The bilingual policy is an integral part of our educational system. It is workable; it is desirable; it is necessary.

The bilingual policy does not mean that all students have to master two languages at the first language level. Very few students would be able to do this. The majority of students must concentrate on mastering English and acquiring a competence in the second. In time, English will

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become the common language in Singapore with students taking Malay, Mandarin or Tamil as a second language.

From time to time I have been asked: Which is really more important to the nation? Mastering English, or, acquiring knowledge in a second language?

The answer is not one or the other. Both are important. The twin aspects of the bilingual policy - English plus Malay, Mandarin or Tamil - are to achieve two goals which are crucial to our national interests.

Let us take the second language aspect. What goal does it seek to achieve? Is this goal in our national interests?

First, it is intended to give our children a key to understand their cultural roots, traditions and heritage. In this regard we must not forget that language is a transmitter of cultural values.

Secondly, we must ensure that we in Singapore do not lose our Asian character, traditions and values. If we do not make a conscious, determined effort, we can indeed easily lose our Asian character in view of the meteoric pace of modernisation and increased interactions with, and influences of, other nations.

Thirdly, it will give our society a soul and character. Visitors who come in 20, 30 or 50 years must not applaud us for being a modern, progressive, advanced nation and at the same time find us culturally, emotionally, intellectually, completely divorced from our ancestral heritage.

Seen in this light, the bilingual policy is not merely incidental to national interests; it is essential to national interests. We must prove that we can become an economically successful nation without abdicating our cultural traditions, our customs, our values, our songs, dances - all of which are held together by language. Once we abdicate, there is no coming back.

Let me turn to the other aspect of the bilingual policy: the mastering of English. This aspect is also to promote a goal indispensable to national interests. It is the key to our economic development: in short, it is the key to our survival.

First, English is the major international language for trade, commerce, science and technology. It is not Malay, Mandarin or Tamil. As a nation we must climb up the technological ladder if we want to survive and progress in a highly competitive world. We must become a leading international financial, banking centre. This means proficiency in English.

Secondly, Education in English (and the other subjects which are studied in English) is the key to the concept of productivity which is the essential ingredient to our future success. Hitherto, Singaporeans with little or no education could get jobs. However, with extensive use of automation, computerisation and robotisation which will arrive over the next 10-15 years, there will be greater need for technically skilled workers who have basic literacy and numeracy skills; this means English and Maths.

Thirdly, English will be the common language among Singaporeans and it will enable all Singaporeans - regardless of race - to communicate with each other, to join hands in teamwork in common cause.

English thus is the key for both the individual and the nation. For the individual, it is the key to acquisition of skills and training and career advancement; for the nation, it is the key to a better educated and skilled workforce thereby ensuring higher productivity and economic growth.

It is no surprise that the Ministry of Education is concerned with the standard of proficiency in English. In fact, the weaker subject in schools is not the second language but English. I am glad that the Ministry of Education is taking steps, such as obtaining the services of experts, to look into this matter.

I have thus far spoken of our formal educational policy. Succeeding in our educational policies, succeeding in our quest to upgrade our knowledge, skills and training is only one aspect.

But there is another important aspect: how do we ensure that our schoolchildren grow up to be good Singaporeans? ... to feel deeply committed to our country? ... to understand the complex dangers and issues that confront Singapore ... to appreciate that solutions to our problems are not to be found in soft, easy options ... in short, how do we arouse national consciousness amongst our youth, the spring source of our nation?

You, our youth, are told ad nauseum that you will be tomorrow's leaders. True. But as leaders of tomorrow you must have a sensitivity today to our situation.

You must therefore be aware of the events and issues within Singapore and outside Singapore; events and issues of the past which have shaped our present; events and issues of the present which will shape our destiny.

On the political and economic front, the world has seen crisis after crisis ... Falklands War; Israel-Lebanon-PLO Crisis; Iran-Iraq War; Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan; Vietnamese Occupation of Cambodia; Vietnamese Foreign Minister's belligerent threats - and you must know about these and begin thinking about them. On the economic front, the world is in the grips of recession and trade declines. You must think about the implications for Singapore.

Only then, as adults, you will have a firm grasp of Singapore's options; only then you will understand why there are no easy options if we want to survive, progress and excel.

Can this aspect of learning be acquired in our formal education? I doubt it. It must be a combined effort of teachers, parents and students. My message to all students is: read and be aware; read the newspapers; be aware of what's happening in the world; be conscious of the problems faced by other nations richer, bigger and more powerful than Singapore; in this way you will find yourselves beginning to feel deeply for our own situation. A sense of commitment, a sense of patriotism must emerge early. This is what we need when you are at the helm of Singapore, when you and succeeding generations are in charge and have to protect our independence and security and our economic development.