

04-1/83/01/01

SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND MINISTER FOR CULTURE, AT THE OPENING OF THE RC CENTRE AT ST GEORGE'S ROAD
ON 1 JANUARY 1983 AT 7.30 PM

The Residents Committee is an attempt by the people living in HDB flats to help themselves in improving and maintaining their environment. The Residents Committee assists in developing a healthy physical as well as social environment.

In most HDB flats, people conduct most, if not all, their activity inside the flat. When they lived in a kampong or squatter area or even in an urban slum area this was not so. Living space was so cramped that much of the daily activity took place in the street or in some other common area. The living conditions forced closer social interaction. There were of course many problems in such crowded living conditions. But there were also compensations as people knew each other well and there was a close sense of community. With the exception of one-room flats, most HDB dwellers spend their time behind closed doors when they are at home. Thus a special attempt has to be made to build up a community spirit to create a sense of belonging, a sense of responsibility to the neighbours and care and concern for the neighbours and the environment. High rise dwelling also requires a greater discipline on the part of the residents. Without such discipline and consideration for the neighbours, life can become intolerable. It is in this sphere of improving cooperation among the residents and encouraging greater consideration for each other's needs that the Residents Committees play a vital role.

For the Residents Committee to be effective, it must have a variety of talents. There must be members who can conceptualize and anticipate problems, members who can make overall plans, members who

establish easy/2.

establish easy personal relations in their daily dealings with the residents, members who can organise and implement specific projects, members who can lend a sympathetic ear to the problems of the residents and so on. The Residents Committee needs members with a variety of educational and professional background and a variety of aptitudes and interests. Thus in any one zone which is encompassed by a Residents Committee, there must be different types of flats and residents. There must be a good mixture of the small flats and the four or five-room and even HUDC type of flats. It is important that the bigger and better flats are not isolated into enclaves. The residents of such enclaves will then not be able to contribute actively to the betterment of those who are not so well off. In addition living in such enclaves gives the residents a distorted idea of the problems of the society and nation. It is for this reason that the government has decided that HUDC's operations should be taken over by the HDB and that in future HUDC type of flats should be developed as an integral part of HDB's development.

In our meritocratic system, everybody has the opportunity to rise in society. But those who really do well in the professions and in business will always be a minority. For example, in 1981, there were only about 100,000 CPF contributors who earned more than \$1,500 per month out of a total of about 940,000 CPF contributors. Or as another example, only 63,000 resident taxpayers had an assessed income of more than \$20,000 per year out of a total of 518,000 such taxpayers. But this minority is an important minority and must be actively involved in community leadership. People belonging to this group must identify their interest with the rest of the community. When this minority of well-off people are divorced from the problems, preoccupations and interests of the majority of the population, they become selfish and develop distorted values. Let me quote some examples of such distorted values. I remember talking to a HK businessman who told me that he and his family prefer to live in Singapore because there is no need for him or his wife to be involved in the inane activities of what passes for high society in HK. He told me that there are restaurants in HK where the prices are astronomical and have little relation to either the quality of the food or the service. But such restaurants are never short of customers as businessmen patronise them to show the business community that they are

doing well/3.

doing well and that they can afford such expensive restaurants. In fact I was told that if a businessman is not seen in such a restaurant regularly, word passes round among the creditors that something is wrong and he starts to have difficulties with his bankers, creditors and suppliers. In other words there must be a flaunting of wealth to prove that one is doing well financially.

I note that this HK syndrome is spreading to Singapore and some restaurants in Singapore are taking pains to build up a reputation as being very expensive and some businessmen take pride in being seen to entertain in these restaurants. Advertisers are also increasingly appealing to such warped values when they promote a product as desirable because it is so expensive that only few can afford it. Thus we have asinine advertisements to make tight fitting jeans with gold and diamond logos as something desirable. We can do without such measures of success. Those who try to impress by such displays of affluence should be held up to ridicule and contempt by the rest of society.

When people start applying such warped values in judging others, it can lead to bizaare conclusions. It was recounted to me lately that a very successful but humble local accountant decided to travel by bus one day when his car was in the workshop. Being well-known, he was recognised by two passengers in the bus and one was heard saying to another "Say, isn't that Mr A? His business must be in trouble for him to travel by bus." Thus far from being commended for using public transport and thus easing the traffic problem, he was suspected of having fallen on hard times.

The danger of the upper and middle income groups developing such distorted values is all the greater if they segregate themselves into little enclaves. They must become closely involved with the problems of the lower income groups. They must share their knowledge and expertise in every effort to improve the others in the community who are less well endowed. This is not only morally right but is in the wider and long term interest of those who are affluent. A close experience of the problems of the lower income group will have a sobering effect on unrealistic expectations of the affluent.

For the RCs to become vital and dynamic agents for bettering society through self help, the better educated and more successful members of the community must get involved in the leadership and the projects of the Residents Committees. Only in this way can we build a more stable and healthy society.

- - - - -