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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS), ON THE OCCASION OF THE 160TH FOUNDER'S
DAY OF RAFFLES INSTITUTION AND RAFFLES JUNIOR COLLEGE
AT THE RAFFLES INSTITUTION GROUNDS, GRANGE ROAD
ON TUESDAY, 24 MAY 1983 AT 4.00 PM.

In most newly independent countries a ceremony such as the one I am presiding over this afternoon would be considered outrageous and most definitely reactionary. Sir Stamford Raffles, as we all know, was a faithful servant of British imperialism and so for an independent Singapore to celebrate the founding of his school some 160 years ago is something which most new nations would find inexplicable. This is because in almost all newly independent states one of the first things the new indigenous ruling class does is to wipe out all traces of the imperial past. Monuments and statues testifying to real or imaginary deeds of glory by the imperial rulers are blown up and replaced by monuments and statues testifying to the equally real or imaginary achievements of the new ruling class. Streets, avenues and even cemeteries are renamed and most of them to the utter confusion of the populace carry but one name - that of the glorious new leader. The purpose of the new leader is to reduce the nation to a state of amnesia in regard to the imperial period.

In the same spirit the good and the bad in the former conqueror's culture and civilisation is eradicated with ruthless impartiality. The baby is thrown out with the bathwater, though some discriminating new nations kept the bathwater and threw out the baby.

In short the intervening decades and centuries of imperialism are erased and every attempt is made by the new leaders to get the people to make a great leap backward, spiritually and intellectually to that blessed paradise which it is claimed existed before the imperialist intrusion.

So many of our anti-imperialist friends and enemies find our attitude towards Sir Stamford Raffles extremely confusing. They cannot understand why we tolerate the existence of a Raffles Institution, a Raffles Place, a Raffles Hotel and even shady bars and disreputable establishments whose lurid signboards invoke the name of Raffles.

What most progressive revolutionaries find inexplicable is that instead of flinging the statue of Raffles now in front of Victoria Memorial Hall (another provocative imperialist relic) into the nearby Singapore River, not only have we cleaned up this statue but yet another replica of him has been erected along the Singapore River.

One statue of Raffles is bad enough, but many of our progressive friends certainly consider two statues a bit too much.

The greatest shock of all comes when militant anti-imperialists are told that Sir Stamford Raffles has been officially nominated as the founding father of modern Singapore. That a fervent believer in the sanctity and indestructibility of the British Empire should have been designated the founding father of an independent Singapore is something which passeth all understanding.

I think even Sir Stamford Raffles would, were he to be reincarnated, indignantly reject the honour thrust on him. For one thing as a dedicated empire builder he

never for one moment believed in an independent Singapore. When he founded Raffles Institution, the last thing he had in mind was that it should be a school to turn out anti-imperialist agitators to seduce Singapore out of the British Empire.

Today wherever he may be he must be wondering whether he did the right thing setting up this institution. For of all the schools in Singapore, according to my reckoning, Raffles Institution seems to have nurtured the single largest group of anti-colonial politicians. For example, in the present Parliament 20 out of the 75 MPs are Old Boys of Raffles.

Exactly half of the 20 Rafflesians are Ministers, Ministers of State or Parliamentary Secretaries, including the Prime Minister.

This is quite an achievement for a school which the founder had established to turn out loyalists of empire.

So the question is why has Singapore freely elected to nominate an imperialist as the founder of our independent state?

There are many reasons for our choice but the principal one is that our decision is a recognition of facts. It reflects reality.

A nation which starts off by facing facts is more likely to have a secure and hopeful future than one founded on fantasy, dubious myth and downright falsehood.

Every people have a past, a present and a future. The past determines the present. The present can be changed but the past is unchangeable.

If you have a realistic appreciation of the past then you are in a better position to manage the present and shape the future as you wish.

What generally happens is that as a ruling class makes a mess of the present they invent a glorious past to which the people are enjoined to return. Only by returning to ancestral ways can the nation become great again.

In this connection I am reminded of the apocryphal story where a Persian and a Hindu were arguing about the superiority of their respective ancestral civilisations.

Both sides claimed that all the comforts of modern civilisation had been discovered by their now vanished civilisations.

As the shameless boasting got more heated the Hindu said: "Well last month our archeologists were digging away when they suddenly came across buried copper wires."

"Well," said the Persian, "What does that prove?"

"Isn't it obvious," said the Hindu, "It proves that in ancient times my people used telephones."

This floored the Persian and for a few seconds he relapsed into brooding silence. Then his eyes gleamed triumphantly.

"Well," he said airily, "That's nothing. Our archeologists too have been digging all over our country for many years."

"What did they discover?" asked the Hindu warily.

"Nothing of course," said the Persian.

"What do you mean nothing," said the Hindu, "What does that prove?"

"That proves," said the Persian triumphantly, "that my ancestors communicated by wireless."

A great deal of argument over civilisations and cultures is of this order. Those who make a mess of the present, tend to create for themselves an imaginary past whose shortcomings are concealed and whose triumphs are exaggerated. Only a generation which has no achievements of its own wastes our time and patience by prattling away about the real and imaginary achievements of its forefathers.

To achieve we must always face facts, pleasant or unplesant, and recognise reality.

In designating Raffles as the founder of modern Singapore we are facing facts and recognising reality.

Let me put it this way. If Raffles had not founded the free port of Singapore neither you nor I would be here today. He bought a fishing village and invited anyone from any part of the world to come and settle here and turn it into one of the great emporiums of Asia. Had he not been an imperialist with a vision of the future your ancestors and my ancestors would have stayed on in China, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and we, their descendants, would today be hard at it trying to make ends meet.

So we are here because of Raffles. I am sure that many of our kith and kin in the land from which our forefathers emigrated would be wishing that their ancestors too had responded to Raffles' invitation to emigrate and settle down in Singapore.

I am not saying that without Raffles Singapore would not have amounted to much. It would be a different Singapore but I doubt very much whether it would be as congenial, clean, secure and prosperous as the one we now inhabit.

True Raffles was an imperialist but an imperialist of a different kind. He did not loot the country he was in charge of. His rule was not marked by terror and savagery. He did not farm out the colony he founded for unbridled exploitation by friends and relatives.

It is true he had shortcomings. It is true that his attitude towards the non-white races was that without British overlordship the natives would not amount to much. But when I look around me there are many independent countries ruled by indigenous people where exploitation, injustice, racial and religious bigotry, corruption and nepotism, lawlessness and savagery make Raffles imperialist prejudices appear venial, forgivable sins.

If it were possible to resurrect Raffles and take him on a tour of Singapore he would, I am sure, say: "Forgive me, I was wrong about Singaporeans not being able to manage their own affairs."

I think he was a big enough man to be forgiven small sins.

This is not a defence or praise of Raffles' imperial prejudice. His imperial sins died with him. What lives on is his vision of Singapore as a great trading centre open to all who are enterprising and willing to take their chances on the basis of merit and hard work.

That is the heritage he has left behind and which my colleagues and after us you must build upon. Education is a meaningless venture if its purpose is merely to help you make money. If that is your fundamental philosophy, then the Singapore that Raffles created and which the present generation of leaders have improved upon would in no time revert into the fishing village that Raffles found.

All pupils present here this afternoon were no more than hopeful twinkles in the eyes of their parents when Singapore became self-governing 24 years ago and independent 18 years ago. So none of you have direct experience of what Singapore was like before independence. The Singapore you see today was for the older generation an unattainable science fiction fantasy - and for many countries in most parts of the world it is still the "impossible dream".

But you will be here for the next 50 or more years. What you enjoy today is the cumulative result of two centuries of toil, sweat and tears by immigrants in search of a new life. The impossible dream has now been made flesh for you. You and your children can enjoy it indefinitely if you are ready always to face the hard facts of life.

There are many hard facts of life but the ones I would single out to see you through the stresses and storms of life are these:

"You live in an increasingly insecure world of hunters and hunted. You live in an island which gives you little else except space for work and shelter. Your prosperity and security rest, as we have shown the past two decades, of the superiority of your intellect a strong sense of community and courage when confronted with challenge and threat."

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