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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG ON SINGAPORE 21 DEBATE IN PARLIAMENT  
ON WEDNESDAY, 5 MAY 1999, AT 2.30 PM

THE SINGAPORE TRIBE

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I want to put this debate on Singapore 21 (S21) in perspective. When I asked Teo Chee Hean to chair the S21 Committee, I saw its work as part of a continuing exercise to build the Singapore nation. The Report of the S21 Committee is not an end in itself. It must be implemented, and strengthen the process of nation-building. For Singapore is not yet a nation. It is only a state, a

sovereign entity.

2 A state is not necessarily a nation. Harvard Professor Rupert Emerson, in his book, "From Empire to Nation", defined a nation as:

"A single people, traditionally fixed on a well-defined territory, speaking the same language and preferably a language all its own, possessing a distinctive culture, and shaped to a common mould by many generations of shared historical experience".

Singapore - Not A Nation

3 By this definition, Singapore is not a nation. We do not all speak the same language. Nor do we share the same religion and customs. We have different ancestors.

4 We have to accept the hand we were dealt with: 600 square kilometres, no natural resources, densely populated, and a disparate collection of people, most of whom had migrated from other parts of the world.

5 But Senior Minister and his generation overcame great odds and laid the foundation for the Singapore nation. They emphasized multi-racialism and gave every race an equal place in our country. This multi-racial country has lasted 33 years, beyond the skeptics' expectation. But whether it will last the next 100 years will depend on whether the different races can gel as one people, feel as one people and pulsate with the same Singapore heartbeat.

6 I raise this question because it is important for us to debate the Singapore 21 vision against the background of nation-building.

Nations - Jews and Serbs

7 Nations which have lasted 1000 years have an almost homogeneous population sharing the same culture and religion, speaking the same language and practising the same customs. They descended from the same DNA pool. Such a people will instinctively group together when threatened. They will fight together, and die if necessary, in order that the tribe they belong to may survive.

8 The Jews are one such tribe. When Israel was threatened, Jews all over the world rushed to support it. Israeli reservists overseas dashed back to defend the country.

9 The Serbs too form a nation. However reprehensible their ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, they are standing up to NATO as one Serb nation.

10 To Serbs, Kosovo is hallowed ground. It is their Holy Land. Kosovo had

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been Serbian territory as early as in the Middle Ages. It was lost in a humiliating defeat to the invading Ottoman army in 1389. Following the Ottoman conquest, ethnic Albanians moved into Kosovo, thereby displacing the Serbs who were of Slavic stock. The racial composition of Kosovo changed, from majority Serbs to majority Albanians. Today, 600 years later, Serb nationalism has reared to reclaim Kosovo.

11 It is said that the Serbs would no more think of yielding Kosovo to Albanians than Jews of handing over Jerusalem to the Palestinians.

Tito's Yugoslavia - Not A Nation

12 There was never a Yugoslavia nation. The break-up of the former Yugoslavia illustrates that a nation is not just a collection of peoples under a common constitutional framework.

13 Yugoslavia was cobbled together after the Second World War in 1945 by Marshal Josip Tito. It comprised 6 republics (Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina) and 2 autonomous regions (Kosovo and Vojvodina). The Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Slovenes, Macedonians and Montenegrins came from the same Slavic stock, but they belong to different tribes and backgrounds. Kosovars are mostly ethnic Albanians. The Albanians and Bosnians are Muslims while Serbs are mainly orthodox Christians.

14 Soon after Tito died in 1980, Yugoslavia began to disintegrate. Belgrade could not hold the different tribes together.

15 Open violence broke out. Finally, independence was declared by Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, one after another, between June 1991 and April 1992.

16 The Bosnians are Slavs, like the Serbs. But despite this, Bosnia fought a war with Serbia from 1991 to 1995, and became independent under the US-brokered Dayton peace accord. Islam divides Bosnians from the Christian Serbs. They were converted to Islam in the late Middle Ages by Turkish occupiers.

17 Yugoslavia was not a homogeneous nation. So it broke up after strongman Tito died. Yugoslavia lasted only 45 years.

Singapore - Racial Riots

18 Singapore is also not a homogeneous nation either. However, Singapore is too small to break up into two or three separate countries. But racial riots can tear the country apart.

19 When the racial riots broke out in 1964, I had just started work as an

Administrative Officer in the Prime Minister's Office, then located in City Hall. Othman Eusofe, who was my classmate, had also just started work in Land Office, also housed then in City Hall. When news of the riots broke out, the offices were quickly cleared and everyone was told to go home immediately. I met Othman in the ground lobby. We wondered how to make our way home. The buses had stopped running and the streets were chaotic with cars and worried people.

20 I did not know how Othman made his way home. I was then living in a HDB flat in Queenstown. So was a colleague. We decided to walk home. Fortunately, a friend of my colleague's came along in a car when we were near the YMCA in Orchard Road. He gave us a lift home.

21 Do not think that racial riots would never break out again in Singapore. They could be caused by chauvinistic leaders. They could be triggered by insensitive handling of racial issues by an inept government. They could be instigated from outside.

22 That is why we need safeguards such as the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Internal Security Act.

23 These legal instruments help prevent subversive and communalistic acts. But they do not guarantee that Singapore would not be divided along communal lines. In a crunch, where the interests of the tribe and the state diverge, can we be sure that the sense of belonging to a state will be stronger than the primordial instinct of belonging to a tribe? Are Singaporeans of different races prepared to lay down their lives for the sake of Singapore if there is a divide amongst the tribes?

24 Edward Osborne Wilson, a Professor at Harvard University, in his book "On Human Nature", observed that, historically, when Maoris fought for land, alliances were based on kinship. They would consciously and explicitly expand against the territories of the groups most distantly related to them. In 1837, when Hokianga warriors arrived at one fight already in progress between two sections of the Nga Puhi tribe, they were undecided about which side to join, because they were equally related to both.

25 I suppose it was the same with Chinese in Singapore before the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Those in one dialect group would instinctively support their own members in a dispute with members of another dialect group.

26 Today, we see the same phenomenon in Indonesia. When a Madurese has a casual fight with an Ambonese in Jakarta, it would soon become a general fight between Madurese and Ambonese. The instinct of belonging to a tribe is most overriding.

Singapore - Serving The Nation

27 In Singapore, we have many pools of DNA. To build a nation out of these

different pools is not easy. We can never remove totally the divide between the different races. The Chinese would not want to adopt Malay customs and culture nor do Malays and Indians want to be assimilated by the Chinese. The Eurasians too are happy to be what they are. But we can work to lower the divide. It is a long process. It may take us at least another one to two generations before we can confidently say that we have built a successful, multi-racial nation where the races will fight together to advance their collective as well as each other's interests. It boils down to trust - whether one race trusts another to protect its interests. We must try and build up this trust.

28 This cannot be done through nice-sounding slogans and motherhood statements. It will be built only when we have gone through fire together, and have helped one another to survive. The older generation of Singaporeans have at least fought the communists and communalists together. They have also fought for Singapore's independence. The bond between that generation of Singaporeans and their leaders is strong and unshakeable. That generation also feels an instinctive moral obligation to serve the country.

29 But the younger generation of Singaporeans have had no experience of hardships, let alone racial riots and external threats. Their lives have mostly been plain sailing. So their bonds to Singapore and their sense of service to the country are not as strong as the older generation's.

30 When Tony Tan came back from his recent trip to the US, he explained to me why he had proposed tuition loans instead of scholarships for our bright students to study abroad. He had met a group of our scholars in Boston. They peppered him with questions on how they could break their scholarship bonds instead of how and where they could serve on their return to Singapore. Tony was totally dismayed. He proposed that scholarships be replaced with tuition loans. He was not thinking of using public funds. His proposal was for the bright students to borrow from the banks at market interest rates. When they return, the organization that wants them can take over their loans.

31 If, indeed, more and more bright Singaporeans think of their self-fulfilment first, there will be no future for Singapore.

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32 Yes, it is important to do one's PhD to maximize one's potential. The organization can wait. Yes, it is important to do research in a world-class institution abroad. Singapore can wait. But if most of our ablest think that way, can we ever build a Singapore nation?

33 When Lee Hsien Loong graduated from Cambridge University, his professor encouraged him to stay back to do a PhD in Mathematics. He came back. He wrote to his professor that he felt his country would need his services.

34 I too wanted to do my PhD after my graduation in 1964. The PSC would not let me. I was under a bursary bond. So I joined the Administrative Service.

35 Later, in 1976, the late Hon Sui Sen invited me to stand for election. I was not a natural politician. But I felt an obligation to say 'yes'. I had no political ambition. But if my country needed me, I could not say 'no'. Without the bursaries and scholarships, I would not have done so well in life. I felt an instinctive obligation to do national service.

#### Singapore - A Society of Overlapping Circles

36 I support the powerful, emotive statements of Singapore 21. I wish to caution, however, against unrealistic expectations and quick results. A strong dose of realism is necessary. A nation is not built in one generation, much less a country made up of different races and religions, who until recently, were living in different racial enclaves.

37 Historically, the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities lived in distinct neighbourhoods. Even among the Chinese, the different dialect groups had their own cantonments. So we had the Cantonese in Kreta Ayer, the Hokkiens in Telok Ayer, the Hainanese in Middle Road, and the Teochews in Boat Quay. Staying together according to language, race and religion provided an important security and comfort zone.

38 Even today, there is still a tendency for racial enclaves to form in HDB estates. Hence, we had to introduce a quota system in 1989 to ensure that every public housing estate is a microcosm of multi-racial Singapore.

39 If I may use an imagery, our society is made up of four overlapping circles, like the People's Association logo. Each circle represents one community. The four circles overlap each other.

40 What we can do is to maximize the overlapping area. This is the area where all Singaporeans, whatever their race, work and play together. It is an open level playing field with English as the common language, and equal opportunities for all.

41 Outside this common area, where the circles do not overlap, each community has his own playing field. In this separate area, each community can retain and speak its own language and practise its own culture and customs. This practical approach of nation-building whereby every community has two playing fields has given us multi-racial harmony.

42 This approach helps us to build a harmonious nation out of diversity. But as the divide between races is always there, the national heartbeat may become separate heartbeats over time.

#### Britain and Canada - Devolution of Powers

43 Let me use Britain to illustrate my point.

44 In 1707, England, Wales and Scotland came together to form Great Britain. They were joined by North Ireland in 1801. After almost 300 years, you would expect Great Britain to become a British nation.

45 But till this day, England, Wales, Scotland and North Ireland still field their own teams and compete against each other in the World Cup and other international football tournaments. Each will cheer for its own team, not the other teams.

46 And tomorrow, May 6th, the Scots will elect their first Parliament to sit in Edinburgh in 300 years.

47 At the same time, the Welsh will be voting for the first elected assembly in their history.

48 The Economist (May 1st, 1999) said,

"These developments do not signal the re-birth of Scotland and Wales as independent countries. But they do signal a historic and welcome shift in the way Britain is governed."

49 But why should Scotland and Wales want their own Parliaments if they have become more British? Can anyone be so sure that devolution would not go further and that 100 years from now, there would not be an independent Scotland? Or Wales?

50 Look at Canada. The Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867, more than 130 years ago. But many of the French-speaking Canadians in Quebec still refuse to identify themselves with the English-speaking Canadians. Their ancestors had come from France, not Britain. Quebec has held two votes on separation from Canada to form an independent Quebec. In the first vote in 1980, 40% of Quebecers voted for independence. In the second vote in 1995, the percentage has increased to 49.6%.

#### Making Singapore Work

51 So I come back to the basic point: the tribal instinct and shared DNA are stronger than the sense of shared future in a country made up of different tribes.

52 But we must try and make Singapore work, and build a Singapore nation. This is a never-ending challenge. The task is not going to get easier. In fact, it is getting more complicated.

53 To sustain our economy, we need to import foreign talents and offer some of them PR and citizenship. Our population will become more cosmopolitan.

54 Newcomers every year, have to be integrated into our society. We have to create in them the same strong sense of belonging to Singapore as the thorough-bred Singaporeans.

55 Our task of nation building is enormous. But we must persevere. If we do, we will eventually become one family, one people, one nation.

56 In his book, "From Empire to Nation", Professor Emerson also qualifies a nation as:

"a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future".

57 We can, over time, imbue in our diverse population a sense of community, trust in each other, a commitment to Singapore, and a passion to make it work. We can maximize the significant common elements of our different ancestral heritage as well as our common Singapore heritage, and together, build a nation where we will share a common destiny. We can create the Singapore tribe.

58 Sir, I support the motion.

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