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Subject: (EMBARGOED) SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE FAREWELL RECEPTION FOR PRESIDENT ONG TENG CHEONG ON MONDAY, 30 AUGUST 1999, AT THE ISTANA AT 6.30 PM

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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Mr President

Colleagues and Friends

President Ong Teng Cheong and I have known each other for over 20 years. We are old colleagues and friends. He entered politics in 1972. I became an MP four years later. We worked closely together in the PAP, the NTUC and the Government.

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We socialized and played golf together. After he became President, our relations were governed by the protocol of his office. As President, he maintained a certain reserve and detachment from his former Cabinet colleagues. We still kept up regular contacts, but no longer with the same informality and camaraderie.

2 In 1982, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew first proposed the concept of an elected President with custodial powers to the Cabinet. President Ong was then in the Cabinet. The Ministers examined the proposal exhaustively. We satisfied ourselves that it was both wise and workable to have an elected President holding a second key. Prime Minister Lee then raised the subject publicly in his National Day Rally in 1984.

3 Over the next five years, the Ministers, including Mr Ong as the Second Deputy Prime Minister, worked together to elaborate and implement the proposal of Elected President. Little did we expect then that Mr Ong would become the first Elected President of Singapore.

4 My Cabinet and I supported President Ong when he decided to stand for election as President in 1993. We felt that he was the best man to make the new institution succeed. He had been directly involved in designing the new institution. He understood its rationale and purpose.

5 President Ong won his election in August 1993. He brought to the office of President twenty years of experience in the grassroots, the trade unions and the government, a deep understanding of our people and a strong commitment to Singapore.

6 Throughout his six-year term, President Ong has carried out his responsibilities conscientiously. He took his duties seriously, and rightly tested to the limits all of his powers. He worked with the Government to give effect to the new safeguard mechanisms, in the areas where he is vested with veto powers. Together with the Council of Presidential Advisers (CPA), he played a key role in settling the convention between the Government and the President on determining and safeguarding the accumulated reserves of the Government. This culminated in the publication of the White Paper on principles of safeguarding reserves which was tabled in Parliament on 2 July 1999.

7 These six years have been a learning exercise for both the President and the Government. From time to time, as we worked the new provisions of the Constitution, difficulties and differences of views have arisen. This was to be expected. A President, together with the CPA, who independently examines the expenditure of government and approves the persons for key appointments, cannot always agree with the Government.

8 The Government has sought to resolve such differences rationally and objectively, in accordance with the Constitution. In dealing with the issues, both sides have been conscious that we are elaborating and evolving the rules as we go along, and are setting precedents for future Governments and Presidents.

9 Looking back, Mr President, your press conference of 16 July 1999 and the statements that had to be made in reply in Parliament on 17 August 1999 by the Minister for Finance, Mr Richard Hu, and myself, followed by questions and answers, have served a useful purpose. They crystallised the issues in contention, and clarified the powers and role of the elected President in simple non-legal language that ordinary people understood.

10 It has been an educational experience for all of us: the President, Government, MPs and the people. Singaporeans now know better how our system of a President with custodial powers works, and how decisions and actions have to be publicly justified whenever questioned.

11 You, President Ong, have played an important role in building the Presidency into an effective institution for safeguarding our national assets and the integrity of the public service. You have shown that as custodian of the second key, the President has and will exercise his power to protect Singapore against an opportunistic or profligate government, as long as the Constitution stands unamended.

12 President Ong as the Head of State in his ceremonial duties, is respected and admired by Singaporeans from all walks of life. He has won their affection by his dignity and dedication to duty.

13 President Ong made full use of his keen artistic interest and considerable talents, to promote culture and the arts. He gave several performances himself, as a conductor and pianist. His patronage raised public interest in the arts, and helped artists and musicians to open doors and launch careers. He took a special interest in encouraging gifted young talents, who might otherwise have lacked the opportunity to realise their artistic potential.

14 President Ong initiated a series of annual events to provide young, promising musicians, artists and artistes a platform to showcase their talents, and at the same time raise money for charity. These events, the President's Star Charity, Charity Ball, Charity Concert and Charity Art Exhibition, have benefited many charities, arts groups and youth organisations.

15 Besides his official duties, President Ong devoted much time and effort to charitable and civic causes. He is patron of several voluntary welfare organisations. As Patron of the Mount Everest Expedition, he not only helped raise funds but also met the team regularly to encourage them. His strong moral support was an important factor which motivated the team to achieve its mission against the odds.

16 He also played a key role in restoring the Istana to its original elegance. He suggested many improvements in the construction, design and décor of the Istana. He made umpteen site visits and held detailed discussions with the architects and engineers. Whenever visiting foreign leaders complimented me on the restored Istana, I always told them that it had benefited from the President's free services as an architect.

17 Mr President, you have discharged your responsibilities well and fully. You have upheld the standing and prestige of the Presidency. You have given more than a quarter of a century of your life to public service, the last six years as Head of State. We and our fellow Singaporeans will long remember your many contributions to

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our nation and society.

18 Mr President, on behalf of the Government and the people of Singapore, I thank you for your dedicated service to Singapore. As you step down from the Presidency, we bid you farewell, and wish you a long and happy retirement.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Please join me now in extending to President Ong Teng Cheong our best wishes for his future.

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