

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH, MR. YONG NYUK LIN,
AT THE INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY
BOARD HELD AT CONFERENCE ROOM, PALMETT ROAD, ON MONDAY,
1ST JUNE, 1964 AT 11 A.M.

I am very pleased to welcome you as the first members of the Public Health Advisory Board whose functions, according to the first term of reference would be "to formulate and advise the Minister for Health on simple yet practical and effective measures for the preservation and maintenance of the highest possible public health standards in all its aspects for Singapore."

You can see that the Board has to cover a very wide field indeed, which it must because Public Health affects everyone of our 1.8 million people and its execution generally impinges on the work of departments outside the Ministry of Health itself. The composition of your 11 man Board takes this into consideration. There are three political appointees on it to ensure that the political repercussions of proposed recommendations for execution will not be lost sight of. Of the remaining eight who are officials, only two are from the Ministry of Health, and the rest come from the Ministries of National Development, Social Affairs, Housing & Development Board, Public Utilities Board and last but not least a very high ranking representative from our Police Force, which underscores the work of your Board as standing for law, order and maintenance of peace.

Then the Secretariat is composed of the three Heads who are responsible for our Public Health Inspectorate, City Cleansing and Hawkers and Markets Departments.

The 2nd term of reference is to request your Board "to give immediate attention to three pressing public health problems, namely,

- (i) Collection and disposal of refuse.
- (ii) Hawkers and Markets.
- (iii) Straying cattle on public streets and trespassing of property."

I shall deal briefly with each of these problems.

(i) Collection and disposal of refuse.

As you are probably aware our four-month Spring Cleaning Campaign came to an end yesterday. The results of this campaign can be said to be reasonable but not an unqualified success. Public health consciousness has, however, been increased throughout the community and I wish to place on record my deepest appreciation of the hard work put in by all concerned, especially the 11 members of the Spring Cleaning Campaign Committee (four of whom are now associated with this new Board), the supervisory staff and the workers as a whole. I wish to single out the Union leaders, in particular, for their readiness in co-operating towards the trying out of new methods of collecting and transferring over of refuse from hand cart to transporting vehicle. It can be imagined how everyone reacts to a proposed change to his routine, but our supervisory staff, Union leaders and workers responded well.

Why did I use the term "qualified" success for the four-month campaign? Whilst I was able to get the willing co-operation of the Union leaders for experimentation on new methods for collection and disposal of refuse, I tried hard but regrettably failed to overcome their suspicion to bring in 200 additional workers from the Work Brigade to help make the campaign a greater success. Failing to win their confidence in this respect I had hoped, however, that the rate of absenteeism of our workers during the campaign at least, would be improved, but sad to say it did not. The pattern of absenteeism remained the same as before, namely, 3% to 6% on Sundays and Public Holidays (when double pay or triple pay apply) and 12% to 15% on week-days. Indeed, on Wednesday, 29th April (during the campaign itself) the highest absenteeism yet recorded was 24%! It should be stated that the majority of absenteeism, however, was by way of Sick Certificates but 35% absented themselves without giving any reasons. How do we attempt to correct this situation? As we were paying no less than \$400,000 for overtime in 1963 and we have tens of thousands of unemployed, perhaps we should ponder over the statement made by our Prime Minister when he addressed the Annual Convention of our National Trades Union Congress on 4th April that "in a number of African countries like the U.A.R. there is legislation to prevent any worker from doing more than 42 hours a week, in other words, no overtime is allowed. In this way they are able to spread employment amongst more workers." I hope your Board will be able to find the magic formula for me in time.

Any way, here are some other highlights during our four-month Spring Cleaning Campaign:-

- (1) Although a contract was placed for a minimum of 20 and maximum of 35 open lorries daily for transporting refuse to Kalam Ayer Dumping Ground, only 22 lorries were in fact used because of "shortage of workers."
 - (2) Total tonnage of refuse dumped during four months (Feb./May 1964) was 49,923 as compared with 43,532 for the same period the previous year or an increase of 6,401 tons or 13%.
 - (3) Highest tonnage ever dumped any one day was 582 tons on 12th February, Chinese New Year's Eve.
 - (4) More than 1,600 bill notices had to be served on householders without dustbins.
 - (5) The large monsoon drain at junction of Kitchener and French Roads with drain water lying stagnant for five years has since been repaired but regrettably requiring ministerial intervention before action was taken!
 - (6) More than 300,000 school children were involved in Essay and Poster competitions.
 - (7) More than 400,000 leaflets, posters and poster strips printed and distributed or used.
- (ii) Hawkers and Markets.

The second problem pertaining to Hawkers is indeed one of great magnitude. At present, there are an estimated 40,000/50,000 hawkers of whom only 10,000 are licensed. Our Hawkers Department needs a complete overhaul and re-organisation and I have already taken certain initial steps in this direction. It is my intention

to de-centralise the Department into four divisions, so that each division could then be supervising and dealing with 10,000 hawkers instead of the present futile attempt to tackle everything in the office situated at Canning Rise.

Whilst on the one hand we are launching free Mass X-rays Campaigns, under the F.B. Control Unit, yet we tolerate the scandalous situation whereby hawkers dealing with food are being permitted to hawk without passing the X-ray test. This must be put right as soon as the re-organisation of the Hawkers Department is accomplished.

It is my view that all hawkers should be licensed and that licence fees should be nominal. Hawkers should only be allowed to hawk, in order to earn an honest living, subject to three conditions

- (i) If they comply with certain minimal public health standards;
- (ii) They should also not obstruct traffic, which is the live-blood of our commercial and industrial life which sustains the livelihood of our people;
- (iii) They should also not increase fire hazards so as to endanger life and property of our people.

Once certain basic principles have been established (and I await your recommendations in this respect) perhaps it would be best to implement such recommendations in stages, e.g. (say) in five electoral constituencies (three City and two Rural) as models, to test their effectiveness before contemplating island-wide application. I therefore suggest that the testing grounds be at:-

- (1) Bukit Timah (Rural)
- (2) Farrer Park (City)
- (3) Geylang West (City)
- (4) Kallang (City)
- (5) Upper Serangoon (Rural)

(iii) Straying Cattle, etc.

This nuisance has remained unchecked because of lack of liaison between various Ministries and the fact that pounds are situated at Police Stations. We appreciate that our Police Force have more important duties to perform to ensure that peace and security will prevail in Singapore and with Indonesian saboteurs lurking around it is better for our Police to pounce on dangerous men rather than dangerous cattle! With the existence of this Board I am sure this problem of straying cattle will be tackled and become a thing of the past.

Conclusion

You will note that I have thrust a number of thorny problems for your immediate attention which I am sure will keep you extremely busy for quite some time. But your terms of reference are very wide in scope and may I say that I will welcome any one of you raising any problem of public health which may have escaped our attention. We have had El Tor Cholera outbreaks for the 4th time within one year. El Tor Cholera, like typhoid is endemic in Singapore now. We have, unfortunately, to learn to live with El Tor Cholera like Indonesian Confrontation.

A good start was made with the four-month Spring Cleaning Campaign and now with your valuable advice and able guidance, I am confident that the S.H.A.B. will make 1964 the turning point for a cleaner and healthier Singapore for all.

JUNE 1ST, 1964.
