

MC:OCT/3/70(H.A.)

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

EMBARGOED TILL 9.15 P.M. ON FRIDAY,  
2ND OCTOBER, 1970

27

Speech by Prof. Wong Lin Ker, Minister for Home Affairs, at the University of Singapore Historical Society's Annual Dinner and Dance at Ming Court Hotel on Friday, 2nd October 1970 at 7.30 p.m.

It was about five years ago that I first addressed the Historical Society as a citizen. I was then the Chairman of the Adult Education Board. This evening, I have the honour to address the Society, once again, not as your teacher, but as a citizen, deeply involved in the political process.

In the course of those five years, much has happened, generally to the credit of our Republic. The press, both at home and abroad, and the various government mass media have adequately kept you informed of our economic gains and political stability. What I wish to say to you to-night is different from those current themes, but not unrelated to them.

A nation is as good as what its elite can provide in leadership and inspiration to the people. One of the conditions of success is an open elite system, which permits the best in society to be drawn into it. We have always been an open society in this sense. But, during colonial times, crucial leadership positions were closed to us. These were the areas of leadership in politics, the military, and the bureaucracy. In avenues of trade, Singapore was an open society. This was not without advantages for our immigrant forefathers. Peasant and working class by origins, they could concentrate on trade, and left the British to rule and to defend Singapore.

For historical reasons, we have developed our commercial classes, second to none in the region, self-perpetuating, and open to all who make the grade. However, we have not developed a tradition of involvement in politics, in military service and in the bureaucracy. What has surprised me, after several years in politics, is the very small number of persons who regard achievements in these areas as worthy of pursuit. I regard this a major problem facing Singapore in the years ahead.

Whether we succeed as a nation or not will ultimately be determined by the appearance of a breed of men and women, from one generation to another, willing to assume the leadership in these crucial areas, where fulfilment lies not in larger bank accounts. Our migrant background and our history are handicaps. Success in life is still largely measured in financial terms. Ambitions in life are geared towards larger bank accounts, not towards being a great Prime Minister, a famous general, or a successful administrator.

Our universities are regarded as the sources of leadership for the future. If Singapore is to continue to develop, our universities must continue to expose our students to the outside world. The leaders of to-morrow are likely to be those who do not become alienated from their own social and geographical milieu, despite this exposure. Much will depend on the number of local academicians, whose physical presence is matched by an intellectual and emotional commitment to the future of the country. Being alienated by exposure is a possibility for teachers and students alike. To be alienated is to have lost unwittingly the basis for passionate commitment to causes which make for leadership roles. Much has been said about the existence of a generation gap. What is surprising is that every generation has a generation gap. It was there in the past, it is here to-day, and it will persist in the future. What is more relevant is the alienation gap between yourselves and your social milieu. The way you resolve this alienation will determine whether you can carve out for yourselves a leadership role in Singapore and in the context of Asia.

We are students of History. One of the lessons we learn about post-war Afro-Asia is that, in societies in transition, participation in politics carries penalties for failure that are generally absent in societies with stable values and institutions. These are the harsh realities of life in Afro-Asia. Yet, we cannot be spectators of what goes on, like those who cheer or jeer in a football match. For in a football match, we can take sides, and, if our team has lost, there will be another match some day. In Afro-Asian politics, if a team loses, and unless there is an alternative team to replace it, others will step in, and the rules will be altered irrevocably.

DATE: 2nd October, 1970.

Time Issued: 1030 Hours.