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SPEECH BY PROF. WONG LIN KEN, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS, AT A. C. S. OBA DINNER AT BARKER ROAD ON WEDNESDAY, 1ST MARCH, 1972 AT 8.00 P.M.

My wife and I are pleased to be here to celebrate the 86th Founder's Day Re-Union Dinner of the old boys of the Anglo-Chinese School.

The environment in which we celebrate this day is radically different from the time that the Rev. William P. Oldham laid the foundation of the Anglo-Chinese School. Indeed, the rate of change in the last 10 odd years finds no parallel in any equivalent period since 1886. Self-government, merger and Malaysia, independence - all these are major milestones in our constitutional history. Along with those political developments come other changes, larger to date and define, but no less profound in their consequences.

These changes are inevitable, as we progress further apace on the road of industrialization. By choice, we import modern technology and the management of modern business and industries, because there is no other practical road to industrialization. By circumstances, we cannot isolate our traditional societies from the impact of our chosen road of progress.

Indeed, it is questionable whether a society can industrialize, and still remain traditional. The winds of change must blow through our windows. And because we are at the cross-roads of communications, the winds blow stronger and faster. So, our life styles are changing, responding in some instances, almost instantly to the vagaries of fashions and fads abroad.

The changes in life styles are likely to increase significantly in the future, because the bulk of our population is of an impressionable age, exposed to that most effective invention of pervasive persuasion, the T.V. In the same category of visual-aid agency of change, can be included the cinemas. In 1970, the number of T.V. and radio licences amounted to 115 per 1,000 population, an almost 90% increase over 1963, the year T.V. was first introduced. The newspaper reading public, measured by the number of newspapers in circulation, amounted to 256 per 1,000 population in 1970, an increase of more than 300% over the same period.

The mass media, therefore, has a wide influence. In particular, T.V. reaches the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated, the young and old in a manner all can understand. It is not difficult to see the vast influence T.V. has over the life styles of individuals and society as a whole. It will be in the later part of this decade that the impact on the T.V. babies will begin to show significantly in social behaviour, and even more so in the next decade.

The direct cause-effect relationship between T.V. and social behaviour is a subject of controversy. It is agreed that, at the very least, there is a suggestive influence on the minds of youth. So, when we tune on the T.V., we let the winds of change blow into our living rooms.

We cannot tune off the world of industrial progress by dispensing with T.V. After all T.V. is a product of that world of technology on which we have pinned our faith for the future of Singapore. Obviously, we have a lot to learn about the problems of living in the new T.V.-dominated industrial society.

We cannot tune off the world, but we are not helpless creatures of change. Up to a point we have control over the programs we televise. Our control is only selective. The majority of our best programs are produced abroad, for obvious technical and economic reasons. We can be selective, as indeed we are in the purchase of T.V. programs, but we cannot completely cut off the less desirable influences. After all, T.V. films do reflect the life style of the societies in which they are produced. Indeed, even films mirror contemporary life. Violence, hedonism and suggestive permissiveness, the stock in trade of many Western celluloid products have crept also into Chinese films.

What is a matter of concern is that a celluloid life style of hedonism and violence may permeate in an extensive way into actual social behaviour. Violence threatens the framework of law and order, while hedonism undermines the work ethos of our community. The maintenance of law and order, and the work ethos, are basic to the problem of continued progress of Singapore.

Parents play an essential role in containing these threats to our social framework. They have that ancient source of power called parental authority. They can be a responsible restraining influence on their children. They can do more than imposing restrictions. They can be more positive in the teachings of right and wrong; they can inculcate social values, like respect for law and order, thrift and hard work, and, generally, good social behaviour.

The question is not that this is not being done, but whether it can be done with greater firmness and authority. Spare the rod and spoil the child. It is proverbial wisdom, doubted by many child psychologists, but looked upon with refreshed interests, by those who have brought up their children on the prescriptions of Dr. Spock. Dr. Spock's work on bringing up children, I believe, is gaining popularity here, among the English-educated. In an age when university researches in other countries provide no adequate answer to the disorder amidst industrial prosperity, perhaps, we should rely more on traditional experience.

The responsible exercise of parental authority provides part of the answer to the problems posed by change - perhaps, the most important part of the answer. The schools are supplementing parental efforts, adding education on good citizenship. But they can never replace the authority of parents. A matter of some concern is that some parents tend to throw too much responsibility on to government.

It is to be suspected that some of the problems of youth are in some way connected with their sense of emptiness of life that television, cinemas, even the rock and its life style, do not satisfactorily fill. More can be done in devising more constructive ways for youths to spend their leisure. What has always stood out is the fact that while we have a literate youthful population, few read outside the necessary books essential for passing examinations. What they read is not necessarily edifying, like American comics. Reading to pass time is a habit worth encouraging, for parents and their children.

It is when parents and schools have failed that youths become a major social problem. Fortunately, not all are bad citizens in the police sense. In the last few years, we have been spared the problem of youth unrest. But, it was not so, in the mid-50's and early sixties. Full of ideological idealism of the extreme left, our youths had stormed against the established social order. We have shown what is ideologically new, and being tried elsewhere, is not always better, and for many the experience they have acquired as they grow older has proved their best teacher.

The occasional cries of the alienation of our youths are more an imported disaffection than genuine discontent. Indeed, it is probably more accurately described as an effectation than disaffection. Our potential problem lies in a literate youth, exposed to the trauma of rapid changes and increasingly intense competition. Unable to make the necessary psychological adjustments, an increasing number may seek refuge in hedonistic escapism or anti-social behaviour. The problem will be compounded, when economic progress makes possible a higher standard of living, and the failures of the under-achievers appear greater by comparison. The poverty line will rise above the essentials of life. And the discontent we face will be one arising from prosperity and not poverty. Because the young are the assets we must nurture for the future, and because of their potential source of strength or weakness in our social framework, it is imperative to pay greater attention to their development. The youths of to-day will make or break the Singapore of our old age.

On this note, I will end this address. My wife and I congratulate the prize-winners, and also express our wish that the Anglo-Chinese School will continue to be one of the premier schools in the Republic.

Date: 1st March, 1972.

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