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SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,  
AT THE 1989 NEW YEAR GATHERING FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS  
AT THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION AUDITORIUM  
ON FRIDAY, 6 JANUARY 1989 AT 7.30 PM

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I am very pleased to be here this evening to address members of our grassroots organisations: the Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs), the Community Centre Management Committees (CCMCs), and the Residents' Committees (RCs). The beginning of the year is traditionally a good time to take stock and to plan for the new year. It is also an appropriate time to reflect on the fundamentals that make for peace, harmony and stability in Singapore's multi-racial society.

The greatest challenge facing Singapore today is how to ensure that we continue to make progress as a cohesive society. We have come a long way since independence because our policies in education, national service and public housing have fostered social and racial cohesion.

In public housing, we can be justly proud of our achievements in building more than 600,000 flats in the last two decades. But the real achievement is not in the buildings and facilities. Our real achievement is that we have been able to build whole new communities, based on social and racial integration.

The public housing programme has been instrumental in fostering a cohesive nation out of an immigrant population comprising different ethnic, religious, dialect and economic groups. How was this achieved?

To understand the process, we must cast our minds back to the late fifties and early sixties. Various sections of our population were gathered in different pockets distinguishable by their racial or dialect groups. The Malays were concentrated in Geylang Serai, Eunos and a few other areas. The Indians were gathered in the Serangoon Road and Naval Base areas. The Chinese were fragmented into dialect groups each with its own enclave: the Cantonese in Kreta Ayer, the Hokkiens in Telok Ayer, the Teochews in the Upper Serangoon area and in Boat Quay, and the Hainanese in Beach Road/Middle Road. Each group was fiercely proud of its own identity and defended its narrow interests stoutly. Each clung to its own clan or dialect community for security. There was no social cohesion. We were a divided society.

The massive public housing effort gave us the opportunity to mix the population. We made sure that every HDB new town and estate had a balanced mix of racial groups.

We built HDB estates with different types of flats aimed at attracting such a mix. We put rental flats, 3-, 4- and 5-room and executive flats together. Later, we made HUDC middle-income housing a part of HDB estates and incorporated private residential housing at the fringes of HDB new towns. Community facilities were built in every housing estate to meet the diverse needs of the ethnic groups who were resettled from their traditional areas.

Community organisations like the CCCs, the CCMCs and later the RCs brought together local leaders of different racial and social backgrounds. These leaders were able to see the needs of the community as a whole and at the same time appreciate the specific concerns of each racial and social group in the community.

For example in 1987, Malay MPs observed that in some schools, there was a trend towards enrolling more and more Malay pupils. They understood that this trend would lead to problems. They alerted the Government. This resulted in the policy not to enrol more than 25 percent Malays in a school and to encourage Malay parents to enrol their children in a wider choice of schools. In this and many other ways, we succeeded in bringing all the races and groups closer together, while allowing each group to practise its own beliefs and customs.

With few exceptions, we have made each electoral constituency representative of the social and racial mix in Singapore. Each HDB new town contains a cross-section of Singaporeans. Each has its share of talent and community leaders. Each MP is familiar with the individual problems of every ethnic, economic and social group in Singapore. Similarly, grassroots leaders are familiar with these problems, and can play an effective community development role among the residents. Most importantly, each racial group has developed an understanding of the other racial groups that make up our nation. This is the reason why we have been able to forge a consensus on social issues, and carry the population with us.

We have achieved much. But we are beginning to detect two disturbing trends, which, if left unchecked, would undermine our efforts to foster social and racial integration.

First, certain HDB estates are attracting residents of a particular race. There is a tendency for them to move back to their old areas. For example, many Malay applicants for flats want to live in Bedok/Tampines. Many Chinese prefer estates like Ang Mo Kio/Hougang.

Fewer people are now desperate for a roof over their heads. Many are now applying to move to bigger and better apartments. They are, therefore, willing to wait longer to get an apartment in the area of their choice.

Second, with the emergence of a growing resale market for HDB flats, this regrouping along racial lines is gathering momentum. For example, a Chinese family in Bedok that wishes to upgrade to an executive flat elsewhere, finds a ready Malay buyer for its flat in Bedok. The preferences of those wishing to buy resale flats illustrate this trend. Between September 1987 and September 1988, Malays formed more than half of the applicants for resale flats in the Bedok/Tampines zone.

Today, if we treat an HDB neighbourhood as the modern day community enclave, several neighbourhoods are already beginning to show this segregation. There are neighbourhoods in Bedok/Tampines where Malay households have exceeded 30 per cent. There are neighbourhoods in Hougang New Town where Chinese households have exceeded 90 per cent.

If the movement towards separate community enclaves continues for another ten or twenty years, we would be back to where we started before independence. Communal enclaves would be re-created. Living in separate enclaves, the different races would find fewer opportunities to inter-mingle and understand each other. MPs and community leaders will develop narrow views of society's interest. The enclaves will become the seedbeds for communal agitation. We will witness the unravelling of what we have knit so carefully since independence.

We were able to break up the communal enclaves in the 1960s and 1970s because we had a massive resettlement and public housing programme. We cannot afford another massive

resettlement and housing programme to break up the communal enclaves that we believe are beginning to form. It is, therefore, important to recognise the dangers early and to nip the problem in the bud before it becomes serious.

We have used public housing as a major instrument to bring about racial integration. Through our resettlement and public housing policy, we have redistributed the population to new public housing estates with each estate having a balanced distribution of all races. We have been able to create greater understanding and harmony among the different races and social groups.

HDB has been able to achieve a fairly balanced racial mix in its initial allocation of flats. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain this balance and also keep strictly to the first-come first-served policy. HDB has also no control over the increasingly active resale market.

In examining the applications for new flats and resale flats we are beginning to see the tendency for certain HDB estates to attract a disproportionate number of residents of a particular race.

We cannot allow this to go on. We must introduce open and clear policies that will prevent such concentrations from developing. These policies will not disadvantage nor benefit any single community.

Let me hasten to add that no HDB resident, whether he is Chinese, Malay or Indian will be required to move from his present flat. Any measure that we may introduce to remedy this racial imbalance in certain HDB estates will only affect the future allocation of new flats and the resale of existing flats.

The policies are aimed at benefitting all communities by strengthening the bonds which bind us together and ensuring racial harmony for future generations.

They will also force MPs and grassroots leaders to know the problems of every ethnic and social group in Singapore and to support policies that foster cohesion among the different groups. It will make for better political and community leadership. Our aspirations for a better Singapore depend on our ability to convince Singaporeans to pull together in social and racial harmony.

We must persevere in our multi-racial policy and achieve better social cohesion and integration. It is unthinkable to go back to the old days when certain areas were clearly seen as belonging to a particular ethnic or dialect group.

Grassroots leaders like yourselves must play an active role to explain the importance of this subject to as many people as possible through your CCCs and RCs, and through public forums and discussions. We want our citizens to understand our national objective of giving all Singaporeans the opportunity to live in a multi-racial environment in each housing block, neighbourhood, estate and new town. A balanced racial and social mix in practically every constituency today has helped us to avoid social tensions. It leads to harmonious living and better understanding among the races. This policy is necessary for the long-term stability of our nation. It is the way to ensure inter-racial harmony for our future generations. I am confident that we can achieve this goal. I wish you all a Happy New Year.

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