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TEXT OF SPEECH BY MR. S. RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE OPENING OF THE SINGAPORE
PROFESSIONAL CENTRE CONVENTION '77 HELD AT THE
SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL ON 25TH NOVEMBER, 1977

I notice that among the professions omitted from your list of member associations is one of which I am a practising member - the profession of politics. This is not in any way a formal complaint or even a hint that the Professional Centre should put right this exclusion of the profession of politics from its exclusive ranks. The fact is that even if you wanted to the thing cannot be done and this is because the political profession is in a class by itself and the eligibility rules applicable to recognised professions cannot work for the political profession.

For example it is not at all necessary for a politician to have a documentary evidence, either by way of a certificate or a degree, that he has some knowledge of politics and that he is reasonably competent to govern a country. As a matter of fact there are some politicians who would consider knowledge of politics something of an obstacle to a successful political career.

In fact it is not even necessary for a politician to be able to read and write. An outstanding example of this is President Amin of Uganda. The irrelevancy of literacy to a successful and lucrative political career was accorded international recognition when in October 1975 President Amin was granted the honour of addressing the United Nations General Assembly. I cannot for the life of me recollect the momentous message the President delivered to suffering humanity on that occasion but I can never forget his style of delivery. The bemaddled President delivered his speech seated down and, most remarkable of all, without uttering a sound.

The speech on that occasion was delivered for the President by his ambassador. This was because the President had not quite mastered the art of deciphering alphabets.

Needless to say the President listened to his speech far more attentively and I thought approvingly than did most of us and responded to the thunderous applause that followed with beaming modesty.

But the lack of proficiency with the alphabet did not prevent Dada Amin from becoming President or achieving academic success thereafter. He now sports a doctorate from Makerere University. He is also its Chancellor and not unreasonably also the Head of the University's Department of Political Science.

President Amin is perhaps the most glaring example of how success in the field of political leadership is possible without any adequate knowledge of the subject itself. But to judge by the current state of disarray in both national and international politics, there are many others in this particular profession whose competency, both intellectually and character-wise, are open to serious doubts.

Now as a profession there is no doubt that it surpasses all other professions both in importance and in relevance. Without sound political leadership the integrity and the very existence of all other professions must sooner or later be threatened. In many Third World countries and even in advanced countries many members of recognised professions watch with dismay the decline of standards and the shrinking of opportunities to practise their skills with competence and dignity.

The so-called brain drain from developing to developed countries is due in part to incompetent and irresponsible political leadership.

That is one aspect of the brain drain phenomena. The other is what I would call decline in professional pride. There was a time when men went into a profession not simply to make money but also out of a sense of vocation - the discharge through their particular profession of a social and even moral responsibility to their society and to their fellow men. For example, I am told in

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the early days of their profession lawyers made it a point to openly show their disdain for money. The lawyers robes used to have concealed pockets at the back into which clients could, overcome by gratitude, quietly and unnoticed by the advocate drop such fees as they could afford. I do not know whether the robes of today carry these symbols of a gentlemanly disdain for money but in the early days many professions set great store by being gentlemen first and rich second.

Today this is less so. Today you go into a profession first to make money and then when you have enough of it to settling down to the dreary business of being a gentleman. So some of the brain drain occurs not because it is impossible for a professional to practise his skill in his own country but because the rewards, monetarily rather than professionally, are more attractive in developed countries than in his own. It is true that not all the brain drain from a developing country are motivated by simple cash considerations. Political, racial and religious discrimination and restraints make it impossible for many professionals to contribute fully and with dignity to the advancement of their country. They would be prepared to accept the lesser monetary rewards offered in their own country if pride in their profession, the opportunities to exercise their skills to the fullest extent they are capable of, are not denied them. Unfortunately in many Third World countries incompetent and unimaginative political leadership is converting the brain drain from a trickle into a growing flood. This kind of brain drain is forced emigration and one which must compound the political and economic difficulties of the Third World countries concerned. It means that the developing country is depriving itself of already scarce resources of human skills without which, in the modern world, a country is doomed to permanent inferiority and growing degradation. A number of Third World countries which chased out their loyal men of skills and talents have already reached this point of no return - at least no return for the foreseeable future.

In a way, the men of skills and talents - the professional men - contributed to this sorry state of affairs. This is because when things were going well in their country - and I am referring specifically to Third World countries most of which had after centuries of alien rule realised their dream of ruling themselves

the professional men had for the most part shunned the profession of politics as unworthy and possibly unclean. Politics they said was a dirty business at the worst of times and a source of contemptuous humour at others. Furthermore it was not lucrative either - an assessment which, unfortunately, has turned out to be completely inaccurate in the case of many countries. With independence and the corresponding decline in expatriate power and privileges, the indigenous professionals found many new opportunities for advancement professionally and financially. The hurly burly of politics, its uncertainties and risks and the poor financial returns from investment in a political career further reinforced the professionals aversion to politics.

Since the professional rationalised politics as dirty business, it was perhaps inevitable that dirty men got into politics thus further confirming the belief that politics was dirty. It was only a matter of time before the political profession passed into the hands of the incompetent, the dishonest, the ruthless and the irresponsible. Once this happened there came a day when the professionals suddenly woke up to the fact that politics far from being a dirty business or funny business was a deadly serious affair. By then it was too late. The ignorant and the misfits who had become political masters could now do what they wished with the professionals, the men of skills and the men of learning. They could command them to jump, sit or do somersaults and the professionals had no choice but to obey. Increasingly many found that not only could they not advance professionally but their economic prospects too were shrinking alarmingly. Some emigrated while others remained impotent, humiliated and frustrated.

These need not have happened had not the men of learning and skills dismissed the profession of politics as something unworthy and demeaning.

So this brings me to the question of recruitment of political leadership; of ensuring that the profession of politics attracts the competent, the honest and the dedicated. It is not an easy problem to solve and perhaps there is no fool-proof solution. But I know that not to make any attempt to solve it is to make certain that the profession of politics passes into the hands of the incompetent, the crooked and the brutal with powers of life and death over every citizen.

This is not the time and place to enter into a dissertation of how to ensure that the right people enter the political profession without which there can be no great future for other professions.

One of the topics set out for this convention is described as: The responsibilities of professions as leaders and think tanks in the community.

I agree that one of the responsibilities should be to serve as think tanks. However it is not enough to confine your responsibilities to being just think tanks if political responsibilities and power should pass by default into the hands of unthinking men in charge of armoured tanks.

When it comes to the crunch the think tanks, unfortunately, are no match for armoured tanks.

Those qualified to be members of think tanks must also be in charge of armoured tanks. Then the future will be bright for all of us.

The first necessary step towards this happy marriage of the two kinds of tanks is that the professionals and decent citizens generally should rid themselves of the pernicious and dangerous myth that politics is dirty business - a profession fit only for the scallywags, the social misfits, the psychopaths and the failures in life.

If decent, thinking men shun the life of politics then it must inevitably fall into the hands of the not so decent, the not so thinking.

It is only in recent times that the life of politics has fallen into disrepute. The ancient Greeks regarded the political life as the ultimate achievement for any man. In other societies, politics was so highly valued that it was reserved only for kings, priests and high-born aristocrats. In many countries in the West great families regarded it as great honour and obligation to dedicate their sons to a life of politics.

It is only in recent times, with the introduction of democracy, that the profession of politics has fallen into disrepute. This is not because the idea of democracy is fundamentally unsound but because the men of learning, the professional classes shunned their responsibilities to ensure that democracy worked efficiently and decently.

It is my hope that at this convention you will explore as fully as you can this aspect of the responsibility of professionals toward society and implicitly towards your profession.

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