

31 DEC 1979

Singapore Government

# PRESS RELEASE

Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • (6) 328191 ext. 352, 353, 354 / 362207 / 352271

MC/DEC/32/79 (Foreign Affairs)

79 0051 94

79-RS-16

SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
AT A SEMINAR ORGANISED BY THE SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AT THE SCIENCE CENTRE ON  
THURSDAY, 20TH DECEMBER, 1979, AT 10.00 A.M.

I think I should begin by declaring what vested interest, if any, I have in the Singapore of the year 2000. Regrettably I have none. The probabilities are that I may not be around to ring in the new century but if through a genetic windfall I should be given a reprieve you can take it from me that even then for all practical purposes I will be nearer eternity than the year 2000.

I mention this somewhat bleak prospect not because it would have any great consequence for 21st century history but merely to impress on you the unquestioned objectivity with which I shall approach the subject you have set out for me - Political Developments Towards the Year 2000.

Let me at the outset clarify my views on speculations about the future. There are the practical men who maintain that such speculations are a waste of time and they have no bearing at all on solutions to immediate day-to-day problems. This may have been so in earlier periods of history when changes were few and minute and were spread over decades and centuries. The day to day problems that the son had to tackle were not basically different from those that his father or even his grandfather had to cope with.

Therefore in earlier societies the passing of time was experienced in a two dimensional way - the past and the present. This was an advance on a still earlier period, as in primitive societies today, when men lived in a timeless world. The people lived only for the moment. They had no sense of the past unless it was a legendary past of mythical heroes and improbable gods.

That is why mankind has been able to get along for centuries without clocks and time-pieces. A consciousness of history, in the sense

we understand it today, is a relatively new experience for mankind - perhaps not more than two or three thousand years old. Even then in this two-dimensional view of history, the past took priority over the present. You turned to the past for precedents and inspiration to help resolve the problems of the present. Most societies were tradition bound. Any departure from the old way of doing things was viewed with abhorrence and apprehension. And in times of troubles and uncertainty the prescription offered was a return to a Golden Age which lay in the past and from which men had strayed and were lost. This view of history is essentially pessimistic because it forecloses the possibility of a new Golden Age in the future. A step forward into the future is one more towards damnation. Only in a return to the past can one find assurance and safety.

This two-dimensional experience of time, whatever validity it may have had in the past, cannot help us cope with the problems of the coming centuries. Mankind has entered a phase of history radically different in all its essentials from preceding periods of history. One of the distinctive facts about contemporary history is that it is world history and that the forces shaping it cannot be understood unless we are prepared to adopt world-wide perspectives. Not only should contemporary history be considered as a distinct period of time with characteristics unlike any we have known before but we must also add a new dimension to the concept of time if we are to deal effectively with day to day problems. This three-dimensional awareness of time is necessary and vital because we are not only living in a world of accelerating change but also of changes which are global in scope and which permeate almost all aspects of human activity. The consequences of change can flow only in one direction - towards the future. It cannot affect the past because the past is beyond change. We may turn to it to guide future actions and this we must do because it can offer us many valuable lessons - what errors men of earlier times made, why at times they created civilisations that still overawe us and why succeeding generations were reduced to scrambling about their ruins unable even to tell us what the ancestral civilisations were all about.

Since change is about the future then only a future-oriented society can cope with the problems of the 21st century. You must learn to cope with day to day problems not in terms of the present or the past but of the future. The present too like the past is unchangeable. What has happened has happened and there is nothing you can do about it. What is more important is what you are going to do about the consequences of

what has already happened.

The practical man would say: "Let us think about the immediate consequences and let tomorrow take care of itself." This, in my view, is not a practical approach because in the kind of world we live in the consequences are of infinite duration and ad hoc solutions without long range calculations are a gambler's approach to human problems.

In thinking about the future we should approach it more like a chess player than a gambler. The chess player plans his every move by thinking many steps ahead. A one-move chess player is out by the time he makes his second move.

I admit that the game of life is far more complicated than a chess game. In the game of life the chess pieces run into billions and unlike chess-men the pieces that make up the life game have unpredictable wills of their own. Therefore in the real world, thinking many steps ahead cannot be precise as in chess. This comes very close to fortune-telling and prediction and no genius, not even a super-computer can predict what the consequences of an action or an event would be five, ten or twenty years from now.

On the other hand I do not subscribe to the view that the consequences are totally capricious and that we cannot make informed guesses about their general drift. We do it most of the time for if there were not some measure of predictability about what human beings would do tomorrow or even the next year all societies would be in a state of total anarchy.

So while thinking many steps ahead may not ensure success in every case it is nevertheless true that those societies which think many more steps ahead than others are more likely to do better in the uncertain decades ahead which only think one step at a time or who, frightened by the future, take one step back towards the lost and unrecoverable Golden Age. In a small and modest way Singapore has demonstrated the efficacy of thinking many steps ahead; of thinking in terms of the future than of the past. Of course we are fortunate in that Singapore has no Golden Age to lure it away from the future. If there were such Golden Ages then we must inevitably trace them back to India or China or Indonesia and since we have decided to be Singaporeans we can do this only surreptitiously and without great feeling behind it.

So we are stuck only with a future and a conscious past starting from 1819. And as a nation we are only a 14-year old teenager. The

absence of a Golden Age has, of course, its drawbacks when we confront others with a lineage which can be reckoned in centuries. That is why when a curious visitor asks Singaporeans for a brief run down on their national history, the visitor is startled to find the run down briefer than he expected.

The only consolation I can offer is that the Singaporean of the year 2000 can be a little more long-winded about Singapore's past. If all goes well he would be talking not about a dead society but of a living, dynamic and thriving community of peoples who had successfully coped with the challenges of the 21st century and who are still future oriented.

So this brings me to the next and most crucial question implicit in the topic you have set out for me. And it is this: Granted that Singapore is future-oriented, is that enough to see it through into the 21st century?

My answer is: No, it is not enough. Something far more important than being able to make informed guesses about the future is necessary to see Singapore safely through the turbulent and dangerous decades ahead. Even if you can make correct guesses about future trends and developments and even if you stumble on the correct solutions the decisive factor is not knowledge but the determination and courage to act upon them. Without this will to action knowledge and perception about the future are useless. There are nations which have perished because they did not know how to save themselves. They should enlist our pity. But it is a tragedy of greater proportions when a people perish not out of ignorance but because they lacked the will to respond to the dictates of their wisdom.

The rise and fall of great civilisations can eventually be traced not to irresistible, impersonable forces of history but to a single human factor - failure of nerve.

Here I must turn to the past for guidance on this matter - to those great thinkers who had watched with dismay, sorrow or anger the unnecessary disintegration of their civilisations - Plato, Confucius, Thucydides, the Jewish Prophets and Machiavelli to name a few. All of them tried desperately to educate their rulers on how to cope with the problem of change; the crises of their times. They proved, alas, to be incorrigible students.

Machiavelli in the 16th century deeply concerned by the strife and turbulence of petty tyrants who were undermining the greatness of Florence offered the following advice to a Saviour Prince. He said all societies were moved by two forces. He distinguished between what he called fortune - the capriciousness of history - and virtu - the ability of a ruler to show mastery amidst the flux of things. Fortune are the objective forces of history stemming from economic, social, cultural, political and technological changes. These are like winds. They are unpredictable; they are impersonal and they can be destructive.

But a ruler or people who have virtu can harness and tame these winds to serve man's needs; to build great civilisations. It is the presence or loss of virtu in rulers and people which decides the fate of societies and civilisations.

So the question arises: "How is virtu acquired and lost?" This fundamental of all questions has fascinated thinkers since time immemorial. Unable to resolve this question they invariably pinned responsibility on the Creator. It was punishment for man's wickedness and this view has wide appeal even today in the face of a contemporary world seemingly nearing collapse.

I too have been thinking about this problem since receiving your invitation to address this seminar. I happened at the same time to be also thinking about Ayatollah Khomeiny. Since the Ayatollah claims to be spearheading an Islamic Revolution I decided to supplement my meagre knowledge of Islamic civilisation by studying its rise and fall a little more closely. I therefore sought the advice of Professor Hussein Alatas who promptly loaned me a massive three-volume work entitled "Maquaddimah: An Introduction to History".

I was doubtful whether it would be worth my while ploughing through these massive tomes. For one thing it was written by a man called Ibn Khaldun whom I had never heard of and who is rarely mentioned by modern historians.

Moreover the work was completed in 1377. Of what relevance, I asked myself, could the outpourings of a man from over 600 years ago be to our times let alone the year 2000.

I was never more wrong in my life. This 14th-century Berber, a descendant of one of the Prophet's supporters, is so contemporary that many modern historians in comparison appear traditional. The Ayatollah is certainly less of an enigma to me now than before I read Ibn Khaldoun, though I doubt whether the Ayatollah will be as relevant as Khaldoun in the year 2000. It is incredible that this 14th century man should have anticipated ideas about man and society, about jurisprudence, geopolitics, power, religion, war and peace and many of the great themes about the rise and fall of civilisations centuries before thinkers like Vico, Marx, Spengler and Toynbee elaborated them with greater wealth of detail.

The wrappings which conceal his basic ideas are admittedly mediaeval and unacceptable to modern minds. He accepts the conventional wisdoms of his time. We must remember too that in his time Islamic civilisation was the dominant one in Europe and Africa. The Muslim faith, philosophy and law made up the tower from which he points out to his contemporaries and to us new and wider horizons which no man before or even after him had discovered until very recently. He nevertheless looks on his environment with a detachment and objectivity that was not to be surpassed until centuries later by Western man. He states facts. He observes. He knows the glorious past of his own civilisation. He knows the Caliphate represented the best, the ideal state. But he is aware too that it is gone and he does not want to restore it. He concedes that government based on revealed law is superior to that based on human law. This may be obvious, he says, but it is irrelevant for history moves according to the ways of men and not of god.

What then has Ibn Khaldoun to say about the rise and fall of civilisations that is relevant to us. It is difficult to summarise his thoughts on this without making them sound banal. It is like trying to whistle a symphony. His volumes are as rich and various, as subtle, deep and formless as the ocean from which one fishes ideas sometimes too quaint for our tastes and often startlingly modern.

He allots to all civilisations a finite life-span of about 120 years spread over three generations of 40 years each. In the fourth generation the end is reached and by the fifth the final death spasms.

He says that this is the invariable and predictable course of history though sometimes he seems to offer an escape. For why, he asks, has civilisation proved to be so much stronger in the East than in the

West, in Persia and Iraq, Syria and Egypt than in the Maghreb which was the focus for his great work. He had also seen the merchants of Europe who came to the Barbary ports and had marvelled at their wealth and splendid way of life. He did not pursue this fertile path, for had he done so he might have guessed that Western Europe would soon light its torch of civilisation from the glowing embers of Islamic culture.

What sparks off a civilisation in the first place? He attributes it to a special human quality which he calls, "Asabiyya". It means group solidarity but it takes different forms and meanings at different stages of civilisation. It is initially generated only in the desert among barbarian tribes. In fact it can only be generated in the desert. In the Arab context it had to be the desert since at the time of Ibn Khaldoun, Damascus had already fallen to the Mongol conqueror, Tamerlane - also a man of the desert. But in Europe the barbarians poured out from its forests and icy wastes.

What Khaldoun means is that Asabiyya has to be built up through hardship and great austerity. That is why, says Khaldoun, the Prophet Moses deliberately kept the Israelites whom he had led out of Egypt for forty years in the desert. As slaves in Egypt the Israelites had become subservient and fatalistic. They had been drained of Asabiyya. It took a generation of exposure to the hardships of the desert to renew their Asabiyya. In more modern times it was in Hitler's ghettos that the Israelites of today built up Asabiyya. It was in the desert too that the Prophet Mohammed conjured up the Asabiyya which inspired the great Islamic conquests. Though Ibn Khaldoun wrote of the nomads with detestation as destroyers of culture and not its creators he admired their asabiyya - their courage, toughness, their self-reliance and above all their solidarity and fellowship.

The men with asabiyya, headed by a great leader or Prophet, then take over a dying civilisation and thus begins a sedentary culture - a city culture. Khaldoun makes clear that while the desert generates asabiyya only the city can create civilisation. As long as the spirit of asabiyya prevails the first generation ruler exercises power justly and wisely. The law is fairly applied. Taxation policies are designed to stimulate prosperity and personal initiative. The ruler, says Khaldoun, "does not claim anything exclusively for himself because (such an attitude) is what is required by group solidarity." Given this kind of ruler order prevails

and art and learning flourish. Out of the ashes of the old civilisation a greater and more vibrant culture emerges.

The next four stages are one of progressive decline. The easy democracy of the first stage vanishes as the new ruler claims total authority over his people. Authority is no longer shared. He becomes a tyrant demanding subjects who must manifest servility and unquestioned obedience. The asabiyya is being drained out of them. Discontent and resentment dissolve group solidarity. The tyrant is succeeded by vain-glorious rulers also lacking in asabiyya. They build monuments and palaces to testify to nothing. They hire mercenaries to protect themselves from a people they now fear and no longer trust. Nepotism and corruption become the rule of law. The burden of taxation grows and incentive for creation of wealth consequently dies. Then comes the ruler "who is content with what his predecessors have built." Since his civilisation has lost its capacity for growth, the ruler tries to arrest its decline by reviving and adhering strictly to old rituals and meaningless traditions.

And finally the death pangs of a great civilisation. Here I can do no better than quote Khaldoun himself:

"The fifth stage is one of waste and squandering. In this stage the ruler wastes on pleasures and amusements (the treasures) accumulated by his ancestors through (excessive) generosity to his inner circle at their parties. Also he acquires bad, low class followers to whom he entrusts the most important matters (of state) which they are not qualified to handle by themselves .....

(In addition) the ruler seeks to destroy the great clients of his people and followers of his predecessors. Thus they come to hate him and to conspire to refuse support to him. (Furthermore) he loses a number of soldiers by spending their allowances on his pleasures and by refusing them access to his person and not supervising them properly... Thus he ruins the foundations his ancestors had laid and tears down what they had built up. In this stage the dynasty is seized by senility and the chronic disease from which it can hardly ever rid itself, for which it can find no cure, and, eventually, it is destroyed."

He might well be describing with deadly accuracy the state of many nations in 1979.

He goes on to add that the end of the dynasty is clearly in sight when the hard-up ruler, unable to squeeze his subjects any further, takes part in trade and commerce and tries to monopolise it to the detriment of his trading subjects.

By then the Asabiyya, bred in the desert, has been drained of its last drop. The city, the soil of true civilisation, has become a wasteland.

What happens then? A new lot of desert nomads bursting with asabiyya take over the dying city to once again restore vigour and once again to suffer the same fate.

In a way Singapore was built by nomads, though none of us come from the desert. Our forefathers had asabiyya and this has seen us through for a little over the 120 years that Khaldoun allotted a dynasty. On second thoughts he was not all that wrong because it took that many years for the British dynasty to retreat from Singapore.

So in a manner of speaking Singapore's destiny is in the hands of only the first generation of rulers. It is today prosperous, thrusting and dynamic. But as Khaldoun warns the comforts, distractions and ease that a prosperous city offers its peoples and rulers can exhaust the asabiyya so necessary to nourish it.

Khaldoun says that there is no way of bringing about a fruitful co-existence between a city civilisation and asabiyya - civic solidarity. Asabiyya is also Machiavelli's virtue. At the heart of both these lies the question of human will. Despite Khaldoun's assertion to the contrary it can be bred, I think, in cities as well as in the desert. Khaldoun's dismal cycle can be broken if the people so will it.

In any case we are not today dealing as Khaldoun had to with an isolated regional civilisation but with a world civilisation. World civilisation is too pervasive for it to collapse and vanish totally. In the 21st century there may be collapse of individual states which have not woken up to the facts of life about the 21st century. But those who are awake to it and do not squander their asabiyya or virtue in the pursuit of wealth and progress can break the circle that Khaldoun said could not be broken but had at times wished that it would be.

By telling us in his enthralling Introduction to History how and why civilisation suffer mortality he has also offered a prescription for its immortality. If you know why you went wrong you come closer to doing things right.

The next two decades are going to be for Singapore as for the rest of the world years of uncertainty, turmoil and surprises. So was it for Ibn Khaldoun and for humanity ever since it went in for civilisation building. As far as I can see civilisation building has really never stopped. Only its builders and architects have changed from time to time.

For Singapore the next two decades will be a matter of learning to steer safely through fortuna - the capricious play of world forces. To steer successfully we need what Machiavelli called virtue, what Khaldoun called asabiyya and, if I may add my widow's mite, a future-oriented outlook.

Given these qualities I see no reason why Singapore should not find its way successfully into the 21st century. And if some time during that century I should happen to run across Ibn Khaldoun in that timeless region I think he would be delighted to hear from me that his vicious circle had at last been broken.

If not I shall most certainly avoid him.

---