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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE DINNER HOSTED BY
THE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA
AT THE WESTIN PLAZA HOTEL
ON TUESDAY, 17 JUNE 1986 AT 7.30 PM

HOW TO BE HAPPY THOUGH A FOREIGN NEWSMAN IN SINGAPORE

It is said that the ancient Mongol Court had a rather disconcerting way of disposing bearers of unwelcome tidings. The emissary, so we are told, was given a respectful and even attentive hearing at the end of which he was ceremoniously escorted by a guard of honour to the courtyard and there summarily and expeditiously executed.

Mr. President, I fear that at the end of tonight's sermon on relations between the Singapore Government and the foreign press some of your members would dearly wish this Bencoolen Room were an ancient Mongol Court.

It is going to be that kind of speech, I'm afraid. In view of this may I request you to dispense with the usual formalities and applaud me now, for it is unlikely that instead of the hoped for standing ovation I would get even a sitting ovation.

Let me make two points which I hope you will bear in mind throughout my sermon tonight. The first is I am not out tonight to convert foreign pressmen and in particular the Western pressmen to the Government's conception of press freedom. In fact I would be most astonished if during the

course of this discourse some of you are sufficiently moved by the spirit, to leap to your feet to proclaim that you have indeed seen the light and that you feel like a born-again journalist. All I am saying is that in Singapore foreign pressmen must abide by our rules of the press game, regardless of whether they privately consider them heathenish and sacrilegious. If the rules have to be changed that had better be left to the elected representatives of the people of Singapore and not to well meaning and not so well meaning here-today-gone-tomorrow newsmen:

If I may say so some of our difficulties with some Western pressmen in Singapore derive from the odd delusion that they are the un-elected guardians of Singapore's destiny and that they are in possession of hidden truths which the powers above have for undisclosed reasons wisely withheld from unworthy and sinful Singaporeans. These Western pressmen hint that they are god's avengers and have been appointed by the supreme being himself. They further hint that all this is inscribed in a tablet handed down at Mt. Sinai by He-who-must-be-obeyed to You-know-who. Its inscription reads: There is no law greater than the freedom of the press and any law in conflict with this supreme law is dangerous heresy to be defied and crushed.

I have singled out the Western press in particular because oddly enough our quarrels over Press Freedom in Singapore have been wholly with the Western press.

Let me at this juncture give you some statistics about the flow of foreign publications into Singapore. Last year Singapore imported some 400,000 titles - books, novels, periodicals and newspapers. Only 0.5 per cent of these were detained either because they were obscene, religiously offensive or contained blatant Communist propaganda.

There are about 3,700 foreign newspapers and periodicals circulating in Singapore. No English language publication (unless you consider "Cosmopolitan" and "Playboy" indispensable intellectual fare) has been banned since about 1965.

And of course all the news agencies, principally Western, have except for one instance recently been freely transmitting and distributing thousands of words daily without hinderance or censorship.

It therefore puzzles me why there is considerable agitation among some (I repeat some) Western pressmen that press freedom in Singapore is in danger. I shall revert later in my speech how the Singapore Government defines "freedom of the press".

Now to the next step of my discourse. My statistics did not reveal the whole story about free flow of information from foreign countries. While we have allowed almost total freedom for the Western mass media we have been relatively harsh on the Communist mass media. We do not allow free importation of publications from China, the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. We allow a very restricted circulation of their publications which confine themselves to proclaiming their countries achievements rather than with denigrating and insulting the leaders and governments of Southeast Asia. In fact all of them strictly avoid telling us how to run our affairs.

So I would like to ask what I will describe as Western J.B.J. journalists one very pertinent question. For the clarification of those of you who may have jumped to the wrong conclusion may I explain that J.B.J. stands for "James Bond Journalism" - a form of Western journalism now on the prowl in Asia and whose devotees believe they have a journalistic licence to destroy the reputation of leaders and governments in Southeast Asia with impunity.

At the moment they constitute a fractional minority of foreign pressmen in Singapore and no doubt some of them are here tonight to get the lie of the land. However I would urge you not to take side-long glances at your neighbour: if you want to keep the peace.

From now on when I talk of foreign pressmen I am referring only to the J.B.Js. The Singapore Government believes that the J.B.Js. are after many years of dormancy on the prowl again. This is no fantasy. We have encountered them before in many avatars in the 50s, 60s and 70s - in the Singapore Herald, in the Eastern Sun, Nanyang, the International Press Institute and the Socialist International among other shapes and forms of what I once called non-Communist subversion.

It is in anticipation of a possible coming conflict with a new J.B.Js. that the Government has made the first move to safeguard Singapore with the proposed amendment to our press laws. The vast majority of foreign pressmen need have no fears about discharging their professional responsibilities adequately. This amendment is not directed against professional foreign journalists discharging their professional duties. Despite all the alarms about Singapore's persecution of foreign pressmen we have expelled - not executed - less than a dozen foreign pressmen during the 27 years we have been in office. One or two it is true left voluntarily much to our astonishment because we did not know until then that they too had been in the James Bond game of non-Communist operations against an electorally too dominant P.A.P. government.

So what I would like to ask the Western J.B.Js. is why, if their mission is to set alight the fires of press freedom in Singapore, they had not made representations to the Singapore Government on our crippling restrictions on

the free flow of information from Communist China and the Soviet Union? They do not require the consent of the Soviet Government to do this since some of the J.B.J. operatives in Singapore have not bothered to ask the Singapore Government's permission to manipulate our citizens to demand unbridled freedom for the Western media on Western terms.

Obviously the boon of freedom of the press is not for all mankind. Only the Western press is worthy of bearing the journalistic version of the old white man's burden.

Let me tell the J.B.Js something worth pondering over. It is about modesty and good breeding. Of course the Soviets and the Chinese are not at all happy that we should give the Western press what is tantamount to a most favoured nation status in respect of press freedom. On one or two occasions a Soviet ambassador has in my presence privately referred to this discrimination between the free flow of publications from the Western world and almost shutting it off from the Soviet Union - but more in sorrow than in anger. We had no long and abusive lectures from the Russians about press freedom. Their Government and their press take the view that an independent Government has the absolute right to lay the ground rules on how Soviet pressmen should operate in Singapore. May be the communists have other and more subtle ways of influencing and subverting foreign governments but I would like at this juncture to contrast Soviet conduct on the question of press freedom with the crude, loud-mouthed and essentially Colonel Blimpish approach of the new breed of English speaking J.B.Js.

A typical but possibly extreme example of Western J.B.J. reaction to alleged violations of press freedom and human rights in Southeast Asia was the outrageous public

conduct of a few Australian and American J.B.Js recently in Bali. Most of you are already familiar with the Sydney Morning Herald's rather curious exercise in good-neighbourliness. It has succeeded in convincing or rather panicking Australians, according to a recent poll, into believing that Indonesians rather than the Soviets are now Australia's principal enemy.

The free press of Australia has with one karate flick of its J.B.J. pen achieved what the Soviet Ambassador and the K.G.B. have failed to do for 70 years - that the Soviet Union is no longer a threat. Thanks to the Sydney Morning Herald's press diplomacy Australia has lost an old and distant enemy and gained a new Asian enemy next door - possibly the first of many new Asian enemies lined up outside Australia's doorsteps.

Perhaps the prize for outstanding boorishness should, I am sorry to say, go to a lady columnist in the Washington Post, a Mary McGrory. Writing in a prose style betraying the final stages of total hysteria she upbraided President Reagan for treating President Suharto with unbecoming courtesy, instead of telling this member of a lesser breed some home truths. She referred to President Suharto as a "murderous right-winger who had killed half a million of his compatriots". Further "He is as corrupt as Ferdinand Marcos; as repressive as General Pinochet and Pol Pot the butcher of Cambodia." and other vulgarities.

Now I can understand this exercise in elementary literacy being scrawled on one of the walls in the meaner streets of Washington but that it should be reverently transcribed in the pages of an eminent newspaper like the Washington Post is a measure of the extent to which the new journalism, in the name of press freedom, has infected the Western press.

The best judgement made on the repellent mentality of the new style journalists came from the "Financial Review" of Australia. "It is hardly deniable" it wrote, "that although libel dangers are always in the mind of journalists writing about leading Australian figures, such considerations often disappear when it is prominent overseas figures who are being discussed or exposed."

This journalistic display of amok over Indonesia was set off by an article by a Mr. David Jenkins and may be he today regrets his ill-advised venture into James Bond journalism. I recollect an episode in English history known as the war of Jenkin's ear. It is about a British sailor who went about English pubs displaying a severed ear which he claimed was lopped off by the wicked Dutch and which added fresh fury to the Anglo-Dutch war.

It would be odd indeed if in the next century some Australian schoolboy were to read a historical episode known as the "War of Jenkin's article."

I am however reassured by the response of the Indonesian Foreign Minister to the Western media's display of bad manners. It was an amused and composed response and as far as I know the Indonesians have not even bothered to take a Gallup poll about who is their enemy No. 1. Why should they when they know that at least 37 per cent of Australians have scared themselves into believing that they must now stand guard, this time, to ward off a brown peril.

The new journalism is like looking down a gun barrel and hurling abuse at the man who happens to be at the trigger end of the barrel.

The new journalism now at large in Britain and America are no less scary. The London Sunday Times of June 1 profiled one of these new journalists - a Mr John Pilger.

"Pilger" wrote the Sunday Times, "is contemptuous of that shibboleth of British journalism; the objective news story. Facts did not exist until they were selected and that process was itself a value judgement. Good journalists had to be suspicious of all governments and all forms of authority. Good stories were unashamedly slanted because they had to be underpinned by controlled outrage and compassion. This was and is Pilger's creed and the fact that he was allowed to practice it on a mass circulation newspaper made him one of the most privileged reporters in the country." Apparently his bosses in the Daily Mirror treated this purveyor of controlled outrage and slanted news as an awesome deity whose fallibility his editors dared not question. Says the Sunday Times: "Pilger knew that every word he wrote would be published without having a comma changed or a sentiment questioned by his editors in London."

No mortal could be more of a god than having the editors on the great Mirror in a posture of permanent adoration before this imperious deity.

This is where Mr. Pilger made his mistake. He did not know that the earlier He-who-must-be-obeyed believes only in one god and you know who that is. The jealous god presumably instructed a Mr. Robert Maxwell to buy up the Mirror and on New Year's Eve this year Mr. Pilger was unceremoniously sacked by what I can only describe as the servant of god.

Another less godlike perhaps but just as messianic a practitioner of the new journalism is Mr. Donald Treford of the London Observer. He spoke for all J.B.Js in Western mass media - newspapers, TV, periodicals and cinemas - when at a meeting of the International Press Institute in March 1985 he gave a demonstration of controlled outrage by

thundering that press freedom in Britain was being strangled because "it has become virtually impossible for the media ... to expose official wrong doing without breaking the law." For Mr. Trelford any law which thwarted his journalistic meglomania should be scrapped. What Mr Trelford is demanding is to change existing laws of libel, the rule of subjudice, the right to organise contrary to established laws a higher form of Watergate break ins into public buildings, commit burglary, to encourage disgruntled or avaricious government officials and even Members of Parliament to secure secret documents to enable Mr Trelford and his fellow Grand Inquisitors to publicly hound, castigate and destroy wrong doers - which means their betters and superiors who do not touch their forelocks when the pitiless inquisitors and delegates of god pass by.

One last judgement on the new journalism and this time by a writer in the June number of Encounter.

"When journalists ... pontificate loudly," says the writer, "about 'rights'; 'the people's right to know'; 'the right to free speech'; or 'the right to enlighten democratic choice' these new journalists are not only putting themselves above the law but also above the rest of humanity. The writer says that when this new illuminating mumble about "rights" and "freedom" what they "mean in practice is the journalist's privilege of saying anything he or she likes to the public with impunity, even if this is like shouting "fire" in a crowded theatre; even when it extends to de facto support for a cabal whose aim is the destruction of rights; even when it means the arbitrary ruin of a private citizen or public official for no better reason than the feeding of trivial (but journalistically lucrative) quidnuncery."

To sum up then the new journalism from the West has finally spawned its first brood of journalistic Teddy Boys - flick knives and all. Fortunately they are few in numbers and I do not think they have a future. A survey of major American newspaper editors conducted by the Washington Post last year revealed that three-quarter of adults did not believe the news they read or heard over their mass media.

May be there is hope then . May be this new journalism which seeks to elevate itself from the 4th Estate to the 1st Estate by bringing into public contempt, ridicule and distrust the long established institutions of society - the legislature, the courts, the executive, the police, laws to protect private citizens from journalistic hounding - and establish itself as the unelected voice of the people is, the people will sooner or later discover, in fact the voice of court entertainers or of the mentally sick.

Until that happens we in Singapore will in every way we can prevent the spread of the new journalistic A.I.D.s from outside.

Our conception of press freedom is different. It has to do with ideas about means and ends. The new journalism in the Western press sees freedom of the press as the only and supreme end. Anything that stands in the way of unlimited and unqualified press freedom must be pulled down and stamped down.

The Pilgers and the Trelfords are the end products of this philosophy of freedom.

We in Singapore have just the opposite philosophy. We see freedom of the press not as the end but as means to an all embracing end - the integrity and independence of our country; its security, its prosperity; the eradication of anything that would sow seeds of social, racial and

