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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S BOOK PRIZE 1986 PRESENTATION CEREMONY AT THE REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE AUDITORIUM ON FRIDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 1986 AT 3.15 PM

This is as good an occasion as any to discourse on a book which, as far as I know, has not yet been written. If it ever materialises, its title would be: "Sense of shame and the professions." Since most of you will one day enter a profession - doctor, engineer, teacher, lawyer, banker and should you be of a reckless disposition, possibly an illegal bookie - the theme of my address should be of some interest to you.

Not very much has been written on the subject of shame. Yet I believe it is possible to write a novel history about the rise and fall of nations built around this somewhat neglected human emotion - shame. Countries without a sense of shame relapse into barbarous, shameless and wretched criminal communities. Political leaders without a sense of shame eventually become corrupt, tyrannical, murderous degenerates. So too with individuals and associations bereft of a sense of shame. Ethics, honour, concepts of good and evil are unthinkable without a sense of shame.

I would say that the distinction between superior men and lesser breeds depends not on differences of race, language and religion but on how powerful or weak is the sense of shame in individuals.

Since most men prepare for and practise a profession until they are incapacitated by old age, the reputation of and satisfaction from a profession will depend on how strong or weak a sense of shame is among its practitioners

It is my belief that, for reasons I will not go into this afternoon, the sense of shame is today noticeably weakening in many professions. The professional classes have traditionally been noted for their sense of propriety, rigid codes about what is professional and unprofessional conduct and an-almost ruthless concern to ensure that the reputation of the profession is not further tainted by the presence of a dishonourable member.

Today not a day passes without our newspapers reporting some financial skulduggery, deception, swindle or fraud by high class and low class members of the professional class. Prominent bankers have been caught raiding the bank vaults under their care. Doctors have been charged with treating patients for non-existent ailments. Senior civil servants when caught selling state secrets to newspapers and foreign governments have protested that they were only furthering the democratic goal of freedom of information to the people.

Only a few days ago the local press carried a report that a group of American psychiatrists charged with seducing their female patients protested that seduction was necessary therapy. I am sorry that even men of religion have come to the conclusion that serving Mammon however dishonourably is a better proposition than serving an unworldly and miserly Creator.

Sadder still is the sorry state of the profession I am now in - politics. Here Babylonian immorality has displaced the sense of shame. Pious avarice has miraculously enabled some politicians to enjoy a billionaire's bank account on the basis of regular savings from their modest ministerial salaries.

In short, it is becoming extremely difficult these days to distinguish between low class professional crooks and high class crooked professionals.

I am not suggesting for one moment that there were no black sheep among professional classes in the old days. There were but their fellow members reacted forcefully whenever a sinner was discovered in their midst. Their sense of shame was so powerful that the miscreant was unceremoniously and sometimes ceremoniously excommunicated. The errant member was persuaded to avoid bringing disgrace to the profession by immediately resigning and emigrating to a distant country or better still by quietly blowing his brains out. Before World War II it was not unusual for stockbrokers, financiers and other professionals caught in some disreputable swindle to jump off tall buildings or hurl themselves in front of moving trains.

These acts of atonement were possible because even the sinners had a sufficiently deep sense of shame to do what had to be done. There was a kind of saving grace about the sinful professional of old.

Not so these days. It is rare to read of professionals caught in a swindle or some dishonourable conduct manifesting atonement by a dramatic act of self-liquidation. He is more likely to get out his forged passport from his safe, buy an airline ticket and quickly make a beeline for one of the fashionable holiday resorts in the Carribean.

In some countries today, I am sorry to say, professional bodies even tend to honour their more dishonourable members. Instead of hurting his feelings by censuring him publicly, his fellow professionals crown him king and prostrate themselves before him to proclaim him as the promised redeemer of their profession.

In Singapore, I am afraid, this world-wide weakening of a sense of shame has afflicted some of our professions too. Swindles, frauds and breaches of trust have not evoked strong reactions of outrage on the part of the professional bodies concerned. Some appear to have received the ongoing epidemic of disgraceful professional conduct with a calmness which suggests a total absence of a sense of shame and possibly envy that a fellow professional has profited by unprofessional conduct.

That is why the Government has been forced, much against its will, to legislate to compel some professional bodies to behave as though they had a sense of shame - that they placed honesty and honourable conduct over making money the shameful way.

This is the background against which you should for example see the Legal Profession (Amendment) Bill. The primary purpose of the Bill is something to which no Singapore lawyer or for that matter any honest Singaporean could possibly object. The Bill seeks to bar any lawyer who has been struck off the rolls or suspended from practice for six months or more or convicted of fraud or dishonesty from holding office in the council which supervises the dignity and conduct of this ancient profession. It is an amendment which makes quite sure that the law profession is not elevated to the status of the world's oldest profession.

Strangely enough, at least 62 members of the legal profession, according to a report in yesterday's Straits Times, object to this amendment and intend to summon an extraordinary general meeting of the Law Society to denounce the Government for passing a law to prevent lawyers who specialise not in the theory but the practice of fraud or who have been convicted of fraud from holding high office in the profession.

Some of them object to this amendment because, as one member of the profession was reported by the Straits Times as saying "The society is being told whom we can and cannot have at the helm." All the amendment says is that you cannot have crooked lawyers at the helm and so I assume only lawyers who think that crooked lawyers should not be prevented from directing the profession would object.

I don't want to go into a detailed discussion of the amendment. All I want to do is draw your attention to the fact that there are at least 62 Singapore lawyers whose sense of shame is zero.

Whether they are representative of the majority of lawyers only the extraordinary general meeting of the Law Society would show.

But there is one silver lining in the black cloud that now hangs over a profession which in ancient times was so contemptuous of money that it left the soliciting of paying clients to professional solicitors. The silver lining is that none of the 62 lawyers who oppose the amendment have publicly identified themselves by name. I may be somewhat optimistic, but it does suggest that they may be somewhat ashamed of the cause they are espousing. If so their sense of shame has not been totally obliterated.

On the other hand, this anonymity may be no more than an act of prudence. Clients would be more than wary about trusting their affairs to lawyers who argue that lawyers convicted of fraud should be encouraged to become the Great Helmsman of the legal profession.
