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**SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE FORUM ON
"THEORIES AND PRACTICES OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY"
ORGANISED BY THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE SOCIETY,
AT THE GUILD HALL, KENT RIDGE GUILD HOUSE
ON MONDAY, 22ND DECEMBER 1986 AT 7.30 PM**

The first proposition I would like to put forward for your consideration is that all prevailing political systems, democratic as well as anti-democratic, are all in various phases of disintegration before their final collapse in another generation or so. This is so because the old industrial society which spawned today's major political institutions, ranging from capitalist, socialist and communist systems to Nazi, Fascist and Soviet dictatorships, is itself crumbling. The economic systems these political doctrines reflected and justified are also coming apart. Communism is not an independent doctrine but an offshoot of capitalism -- a reaction against the brutalities of early capitalism. Capitalism is in total disarray and while everyone is hoping for the best they are silently preparing for the worst. In so far as some demoralised economic pundits offer tentative remedies they do so more in the spirit of the man who sold amulets during the Lisbon earthquake shouting: "Amulets to stop the earthquake. Amulets to stop the earthquake." When a passerby stopped him and argued that amulets could not possibly stop earthquakes, the hawker, with unanswerable logic, retorted: "Of course I know that. But have you a more credible alternative?"

Once upon a time socialism and communism were put forward as alternatives to collapsing capitalism but we know now that socialist and communist economic systems are in an even more sorry state than capitalism.

In fact more and more countries, including socialist and communist devotees, are furtively returning to the capitalist fold, even though that too looks unpromising at the moment.

The malady has infected not merely the political and economic institutions of an industrial society but also all other institutions associated with it -- morals, concepts of law and authority, sexual and family mores, music, art, literature and much more.

It is against this sombre backdrop that I propose to discuss the topic you prescribed for me some months ago -- The Theory and Practice of Parliamentary Democracy -- though had you waited a little longer you would no doubt have chosen a more topical but hazardous subject.

Let me, before I proceed, assure you that the backdrop I have painted is not a projection of some inevitable and irreversible doomsday -- the end of all things. As throughout history, all changes, even cataclysmic changes, simply mean the end of one phase of human history and the phoenix-like emergence of a newer, more vigorous, untainted and more hopeful world. In a time of crisis, such as the one we are now passing through, even as you focus attention on the death pangs of a passing order, you must also become aware of what is struggling to be born because the latter is the future. This future comes unformed and malleable. It is up to you present here and who are going to live through most of that future to understand the past and shape the future without repeating the errors or embracing the superstitions of a preceding generation.

This will be my approach to contemporary democracy -- whether parliamentary or otherwise.

All the varieties of democracies we now know -- capitalist democracy, liberal democracy, socialist and communist and soviet democracies, new democracy, proletarian democracy and parliamentary democracy -- will, in my view, have no place in what is vaguely termed the post-industrial society which is emerging out of the crumbling structure of the old society.

In the new order of things there will undoubtedly be room for the traditionally-accepted ideals of democracy though these ideals have been variously defined, throughout the ages, by adherents of democracy -- ranging from anarchism with its invitation to violence to Rosseau's totalitarian democracy.

That is why I do not propose this evening to touch on the theory of democracy, including parliamentary or Westminster democracy because it is a veritable snakepit of truths, half truths, contradictions and high-minded deceit.

That is why I would like to preface my discourse on the practice of democracy as distinct from the theory of democracy with a remark by the novelist V.S. Naipaul. "Certain subjects," he says, "are so holy that it becomes an act of virtue to lie about them."

I would, therefore, like to refer to some lies about democracy so that the residue left after it has been purged of such lies can reasonably be accepted as the truths about democracy.

The first fact about democracy rarely mentioned is that as a system of government it is something of a freak,

an intruder in human history. It first emerged in Ancient Athens just over two thousand years. It burnt brilliantly for a few years and then disappeared very much under circumstances prevailing in democracies today -- break down of regard for law and authority, an infestation of shifty demagogues, endemic riots, rampant inflation, debased currencies and desperate rulers who try to fend off murderous mobs with bread-and-circus policies. Eventually, not just Athenian democracy but the concept of democracy as a method of government disappeared from the face of the earth for over two thousand years. It was reincarnated in its present form of rule by, more or less, popular election only about two hundred years ago in Western Europe. Prior to this, for thousands of years, empires and magnificent civilisations were created by systems of government that were basically despotic -- monarchy, theocracy, aristocracy, plutocracy and autocracy -- but no democracy.

Some of these were benevolent but most were inhuman, violent and depraved.

Throughout its long and dazzling history, Asia lived and flourished under what a German sociologist has called Oriental Despotism. The practice of government revolved around a simple idea -- the division of people into rulers and ruled. The ruled worked and produced enough wealth to pay taxes and spent their spare time thinking of ingenious and safe ways of evading taxes.

The rulers extracted taxes and patronised high culture from sophisticated music, poetry and literature to building palaces, temples and monuments.

The most notable of their public functions were building massive irrigation works (some of which survive to this day) and networks of roads and fortifications.

These served a dual function. They enabled a ruler to collect taxes efficiently and to ensure the security of his kingdom.

The despot was tolerated and even venerated by the people provided he satisfied his subjects in respect of their two overriding preoccupations -- internal political stability and security from internal and external dangers.

Apart from this the single-minded aim of the citizen was to escape the fatal attentions of the ruler who sat in formidable remoteness at his capital.

Supreme authority was not something the ordinary people wanted to come into contact with, let alone confront it with demands about the right of the people to choose their rulers or harangue it about human rights.

The Chinese Emperors, however, made a minor modification to despotism. They set up what were called Imperial Censors. These were officials well versed in Confucian philosophy whose job it was to monitor and, if necessary, reprimand the authorities including the Emperor in accordance with accepted norms of political conduct.

Incidentally, the inclusion of the Emperor as a target for constructive criticism was, I am afraid, a bit of democratic eye wash. If there had been any such headstrong official, imprudent enough to exercise this right, I am afraid, he has not lived to tell the tale.

However, in ancient times, the most important constraint on brutal tyranny and other excesses of despotism was the sheer technical backwardness of authority's reach. The further a man and his family were away from the Imperial Palace the freer they were.

Even the most despotic ruler lacked the technological means to enforce his authority uniformly throughout the realm.

Though there was no way of voting out a totally unsatisfactory ruler, there were informal ways of getting rid of a particularly odious ruler. One was to organize an armed revolt against the ruler and towards this end the Chinese invented the improbable fiction about "Heaven's mandate" having run out.

The other was palace coups when the ruler is found stabbed, poisoned, suffocated or flung from imperial towers by people close to him. That is why the Indian Machiavelli, Kautilya, in his text book on the art of ruling, has a long chapter on Spying. He advises the ruler to be ever watchful of his Prime Minister, close friends, brothers, wives and his children, in particular, the heir apparent.

Democracy based on universal adult suffrage, after its demise in Athens two thousand years earlier, re-emerged only in Europe at the beginning of this century. The first commoner to ever become a Prime Minister in Britain was Lloyd George in 1905. Between 1905 and 1914, there was a rash of parliamentary democracies until the start of World War I. But after 1918, the trend reversed. One by one Europe's major democracies disappeared.

In October 1922, Mussolini seized power in Italy with the blessings of King Emmanuel. Mussolini was in power for 20 years -- the longest a ruler has ever been in power in Italian history and for that matter any leader in a Western democratic country.

In fact, the political longevity of modern dictators as compared with democratically leaders is phenomenal. Franco, Stalin and Mao among others all died in office -- all presumably of ripe old age.

The high water mark of Western democracy was reached in Europe and America in 1918. This led James Bryce, the American historian, to wonder whether this trend was a freak or did it signify an as yet undiscovered general law of irreversible democratic progress.

However, between 1919 - 1939, the trend reversed. Western European democracies fell like nine-pins. In Central Europe, none of the parliamentary regimes established after World War I were in existence 10 years later.

Then in quick succession, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Austria and Spain went Fascist.

Only the Scandinavian countries, Britain, France, Holland and Belgium remained faithful to democracy. Western parliamentary systems thrived in the last four countries for reasons rarely mentioned. British, French, Dutch and Belgian democracies rested on a solid foundation of disenfranchised majority of imperial subjects and on the wealth they brought to the imperial coffers.

Almost all thriving democracies whether in ancient Athens, Europe or, for that matter, in the United States, had at some point or other rested on a foundation of numerous and toiling disenfranchised slaves.

This is a fact that is hardly mentioned in eulogies about the vigour of Western democracy. It is no accident that the crisis in Western democracy today coincides with the loss of empire and the enfranchisement of former slaves.

I will now pass on to another white lie about democracy. After 1939, Nazi invasion brought down the remaining enfeebled democracies of Western Europe, except Britain and neutral Sweden, like a house of cards -- and

with little or no resistance because, among other things, the peoples of Western democracies had lost the will to resist, to sacrifice, to win.

Successful democracies have a way of enfeebling the moral resoluteness of a people -- of inculcating in them a determination to run away from challenges and realities.

Yes, it is true that Western Europeans encountered a powerful German war machine. Then so did the Vietnamese when they faced an even more powerful American military machine, and yet the Vietnamese won.

Certainly, machines count though had the Western democracies not gone in for soft options during peace, they could have easily built a military machine as strong or even stronger than that of the Nazis. Western democracies had the money. They had the men. They had the resources too. But they lacked the will.

I now move on to the next white lie about democracy. Who broke the back of German military might? The conventional explanation is that Germany was defeated by the Allies.

It is the truth but not the whole truth. What really contributed to Nazi defeat was the superhuman grit, tenacity and incredible capacity for sacrifice that the Soviet rulers were able to mobilise and instil in their people. It was this that broke the mighty war machine and the ruthless efficiency of the Germans.

I am not for a moment suggesting that without the armoury provided by American industries and the air assaults on Germany from Britain that men alone could have broken the military might of the Nazis.

Soviet manpower by itself may not have won the war but it is more than possible, having regard to the character of Soviet man that he would not have conceded defeat either -- as the Germans did when they had no more machines to reinforce manpower.

Now to move on to the last and final point about Western-style democracies. At the end of World War II, there was a blossoming of democracies in liberated Europe, Asia and Africa. Their membership was dramatically augmented when some 90 or more liberated colonies were launched complete with red-ribboned Western democratic constitutions.

I don't want to dwell too long on what is a painful and possibly sensitive topic. In all but a handful of what is politely referred as emerging states, Western democracy has passed into the realms of ancient folklore. In many of Third World countries, there is far more discrimination, oppression, and persecution of the basis of race, language, religion and even of ability, than was ever experienced under colonialism.

In many of these countries, the age of imperialism is now nostalgically recollected as a vanished golden age.

What of democracy in Western Europe? Here I must be careful about what I say lest I be charged with anti-Western malice. So I have decided to enlist the aid of Europeans and Americans to testify to the sorry state of Western democracy.

My first testimony are a few extracts from a 1981 farewell article Lord Chalfont wrote for The London Times with which he was associated for over 20 years. His censure was directed at British democracy but, in my view, his judgement is equally applicable to all Western democracies.

This is what he wrote:

"It is not the infection from outside which is the greatest concern: it is the cancer within The more deadly virus is that which has brought about the progressive decay of our national spirit. It is a pervasive and potential mortal disease. Its most corrosive form is the fashionable contempt for anything which contains a suggestion of patriotism, authority, tradition or dignity. The police, the judiciary, the monarchy and parliament have become objects of derision and targets of third rate comedians aspiring to be 'satirists'. We have come to accept the 'Establishment' as a term of abuse, as though it described some collection of odious and oppressive monsters. In this systematic corruption of values, the press and broadcasting organisations cannot be entirely exonerated. There are some editors, producers and journalists who arrogate to themselves the role of magisterial arbiters as though there were some kind of symmetry between those responsible for the preservation of an orderly system and those who are bent on destroying it One of the side effects of this debilitating malaise is a detestation of excellence and the elevation of mediocrity into a way of life Style and elegance in the written or spoken word are now rejected as precocious and "bourgeois". The B.B.C. has been invaded by bands of illiterates who disfigure programme after programme with careless grammar, sloppy syntax and strangled vowel sounds of the resolutely uneducated It is symptomatic of the reluctance of many people in this country -- and elsewhere in the West -- to defend and preserve the values of their society The sleep of reason is a false repose. Those who succumb to it often awake in a barren landscape not easily distinguishable from that of a prison camp. Many nations have taken their people that way: none has yet come back."

I have reproduced this indictment at some length because it is one of the most eloquent, elegant and sincere judgement that has been made by a Westerner on the decline of a great society and a great people under a perverted form of democracy -- perverted because it is a democracy that has not adjusted itself to the imperatives of a post-industrial society emerging out of the falling ruins of a passing order.

A few more quick quotes. This is from William Simon, a former U.S. Treasury Secretary, who quit politics in disgust:

"Public service," he said, "has become so unattractive, indeed so ugly, by a combination of factors -- the press, the conflict of interest laws, the ethics in government business -- that it seems that anybody who has any expertise in any subject is deemed to have a conflict if he is put in an allied activity in Washington."

Like Lord Chalfont, Mr Simon is referring to that perverted form of Western democracy described as "adversary democracy" which has its small band of furtive devotees in Singapore too.

One last quote before my final summing up. This is a quote from a review of a book by Jane Mansbridge called "Beyond Adversary Democracy".

Writes the reviewer: "She reviews and draws lessons from the activities of America's New Left. She argues that America's democrats have allowed their concept of democracy to be influenced almost entirely by adversary tradition. Adversary democrats believe that there is no such thing as a public or a common interest and thus reject the idea of society ruled by consensus. They argue that democracy is best preserved by a system that accepts the constant battle

of interests and gives each group a chance to win something. Conflict, the argument goes, is freedom."

The last quotation is from an expert on Italian democracy.

"The parliament works best when its representatives are either stupid or corrupt; best of all when they are both."

It is also a fact that voters in Western Europe and in America have lost faith in the Western democratic system as a method of solving their nation's problems. In countries where voting is not compulsory, significant numbers of qualified voters do not vote. In the United States, voting percentage has declined steadily since World War II. In the 1984 Presidential election, only 51 percent of eligible voters bothered to cast their votes.

This means that President Reagan was elected perhaps by some 30 percent or 35 percent of the total eligible electorate.

According to Peter Nichols, a British journalist, who has made a close study of Italian politics, Italian Parliamentary politics has very little to do with what goes on outside the Parliamentary walls. Much of its energies are devoted to preventing the periodic collapse of Coalition Governments as a result of Members of Parliament crossing and re-crossing the floor. In between these migrations, national policies may briefly arrest the attention of the representatives.

In fact, politics of the streets, as demonstrated by rioting students in Paris and Madrid a few days ago, augmented by incessant demonstrations and terrorist murders are now becoming features of Western democracy -- may be because parliamentary democracy itself has fallen into popular disrepute.

In other words, Western democracy no longer inspires a significant number of Europeans as an adequate system of government.

Now for the summing up. My presentation has been a sustained and possibly over critical assault on Western democracy. In fact, my criticism is directed at all existing political systems; that none of the existing political and economic systems are equipped ideologically or structurally to cope with the new society which will confront us in the 21st century and with which the lives of most of you will be intertwined. Whether that would be for the better or worse will depend not on rejecting the fundamental goals of democracy but in finding new ways of organising ourselves to achieve our economic and political ideals in a totally new social environment.

Fundamental to democracy is the right of people to freely choose their rulers or reject them by some form of popular decision.

I have deliberately not said anything about what kind of democracy I conceive for Singapore, simply because all I wanted to do in this address was to elaborate for you the larger background to help us remodel our democracy which we must do to suit our needs, our conditions, our limitations and our hazards.

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