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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL
INSTITUTE STUDENTS' UNION BALL AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL
ON SATURDAY, 8 AUGUST 1987 AT 8.00 PM

The theme prescribed for tonight's technological orgy, which I understand will extend into the small hours of the morning, is: "PHASES, FACES AND CHANGES". It is a challenging theme though I am not quite sure myself what it means. Nevertheless, as a seasoned politician, I have never allowed lack of understanding on any matter to stand in the way of talking confidently and possibly intelligibly about it.

I take it that your theme is about the many faces and aspects of technological change. May I therefore state at the outset, despite what I may say thereafter, that I am basically on the side of technological change, simply because there is no way of halting or dismantling the technological process whether for better or for worse.

My view of technological change, to which I presume the Nanyang Technological Institute is also dedicated, is a mixed one. What one gains on the swings of technology one may lose on the roundabouts of life.

To illustrate my point, I would like to draw your attention to one recent major technological discovery which for some unknown reason has not attracted the acclaim it properly deserves. I suspect this technological innovation has been more or less publicly ignored because it deals with a rather delicate and sensitive activity of mankind - or more precisely of womankind.

So I would therefore like to take this opportunity tonight to retrieve it from its undeserved obscurity though I am not so sure even now whether airing publicly so sensitive a matter even before a group of reputedly broad-minded students would not result in my being hauled up for intensive and hostile interrogation, possibly to be followed by an obscenity charge, by our all seeing Ministry of Home Affairs.

However, since the subject in question has been referred to in November last year by OMNI - a highly reputable scientific and cultural American journal - I might just about get away with it. This earthshaking technology was referred to under the heading: "FIRST FEMINIST TOILET". Its purpose, so its inventor claimed, was both scientific and moralistic. The invention, so it was argued, would rectify what women liberationists have long regarded as blatant discrimination against the fair sex by the chauvinistic unfair sex. The object of discrimination is a bit of technological contraption sited in that part of the house to which men reputedly vanish to "wash their hands" (though no man has actually been caught doing this) or "to see a man about a dog" (though no man with a dog had ever been seen either to enter or leave this particular room).

The women also seek refuge in this indispensable room, allegedly to "powder their nose" but since no man has ever been permitted to actually witness this improbable ritual (because unlike washing hands, nose powdering can properly be done in more public places) one must take women's word that this is what they rush to do in the secrecy of this room.

According to a Mr Greg Janek, who is responsible for the remarkable invention, the discrimination refers to the way in which a crucial technical equipment in the powder room is constructed.

Let me quote Mr Janek on what he describes as "one of the nation's most dastardly problems". He then goes on to comment about "the unthinking husband who goes to the bathroom in the middle of the night and leaves the toilet seat in the up position, thus rendering the toilet a watery trap for the unsuspecting sleep-befogged wife or any other woman who follows".

He continues: "A lot of women don't check the seat when they go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. They consequently fall in, get wet and accuse their inconsiderate husbands of doing it on purpose".

The toilet, Mr Janek alleges, with some justification, was designed wholly for the convenience of the chauvinistic male. This is why, unlike the unfortunate female, no male has ever fallen in and got wet in the wash room - unless of course he happened to be dead drunk.

Now as students of technology you would obviously want to know how Mr Janek solved a problem which must have greatly inconvenienced and even embarrassed thousands of trusting women.

According to OMNI, Mr Janek's solution, like all good technological solutions, was elegant and simple. The treacherous seat was made to rest on a special hinge that contained a hydraulic locking device. When the seat was left raised in an upright position by an inconsiderate male, the lock gradually bled out the air to lower the seat to a safe horizontal position in about two minutes. In one flash of inspiration Mr Janek had made the washroom a safe place for our long suffering women.

For those of you who may be interested the cost of this extraordinary contraption is US\$49.50 and is available

in six soothing colours. It has yet to make its appearance in Singapore, but after my speech tonight I foresee a feminine stampede for it.

I have dealt at length with Mr Janek's invention not only to show that no problem is too big or too small for a truly creative technological mind but also to draw attention to the fact that there is a price to pay for every technological advance.

True Mr Janek certainly made bathrooms safe at night for women. However, it would appear that as a result the room has correspondingly become an unsafe place for the equally unalert male.

Apparently, the ingenious hydraulic seat requires about two minutes to be coaxed back into an upright position when required. What is more ominous is that the last few seconds of the seat's upward journey is terminated with a sudden snap against the cistern. If the sleep-dazed male does not withdraw his fingers quickly enough, he may require the ministrations of an orthopedic surgeon.

As I stated at the outset of this somewhat unsolemn and discursive sermon on modern technology, I am, when all is said and done, on the side of technology. All I am drawing your attention to is that technology is like a crocodile. Whether you are its victim or its master depends on from which end you decide to tackle the technological crocodile.

Many responsible thinkers have, with justification, pointed out that modern technology, despite the many marvels it has and will accomplish, can also create seemingly unmanageable and potentially destructive problems. The probability of technology, whose powers are now verging on

the miraculous, transforming men into intelligent beings is about as equal as transforming them into destructive savages.

The unthinking messing about with an ecological balance that nature created through painful and patient trial and error methods over billions of years before the appearance of man is now being recklessly dismantled through technological misuse. This misuse could well reach a point of no return when the planet could return to the Garden of Eden that preceded the advent of predatory man.

To take one of many instances of ecological sabotage is the pollution of cities by industrial wastes. The cancerous growth of motor cars is a case in point. The necessary convenience of being swiftly carried from one end of the country to the other is purchased by giving motor cars a franchise to miraculously and disastrously turn oxygen into carbon monoxide. The choice now before us is to invent a car that can either convert carbon monoxide into oxygen or to breed a race of men who can thrive on carbon monoxide and other industrial poisons. Or learn to use cars intelligently or to alter its technology in less lethal directions.

The technology that can accomplish the instant and total elimination of homo-sapiens is of course military technology. We have progressed beyond the primitive but intelligent technology of disposing of our enemies by bashing their heads in with not always dependable hard rocks, clubs or forged metal.

It takes a long time to catch and dispose of a swift-footed enemy with these relatively time-consuming technology.

Today, we possess the technology not only to wipe out all life instantly but also to reduce the planet itself into cosmic dust - which of course is a sort of final solution to all man's allegedly insoluble problems.

At the moment, this technology is fortunately in the hands of some half a dozen or so nations whose sanity is ensured by implicit faith in a doctrine known as the balance of terror.

But there could well come a day when we would have a few Genghis Khans with atom bombs. There are a couple of them at large today but fortunately they are reduced to exercising their lethal talents with largely surplus non-nuclear weapons which the major technological nations dump from time to time in thriving arms bazaars.

Anyway for Singapore its future has to be as a technological society. Given our size, the absence of natural resources, a small population and the capacity of a human brain, confined within the small space of a human skull, for infinite expansion of intellectual resources, then only a total embrace of technology can ensure both our prosperity and survival.

Undoubtedly, there are risks but we can reduce and even eliminate them by recourse to a little explored area of technology defined in the broad sense of the word - the technology of wisdom. Wisdom is the intelligent and visionary application of bare knowledge which is simply an aggregation of indispensable facts, figures, graphs, tables and what is termed hard data. Knowledge is not everything, especially as computers will become more sophisticated and their capacity to retain and even create new knowledge may surpass that of many human beings.

But the technology of wisdom will, I think, remain a human monopoly - an area no robot, no computer can invade.

I would therefore like to sum up the technology of wisdom with a concluding anecdote.

A Pole sees a Russian staggering towards him with two huge and obviously heavy suit cases. The Pole not possessing a watch asks the Russian the time of day. The Russian clearly ready for a bit of rest, lays down his bags and consults a digital watch bristling with an impressive array of dials, diodes and switches. After a while, he turns toward the Pole and says: "Well comrade as of now, it is 10 hours, 47 minutes and two seconds. It is Saturday, August 8, in Singapore. The temperature is 21.4 degrees. The sun will rise precisely at 5.32 tomorrow. Jupiter is in the sixth house of Saturn and the next bus leaves in 10 minutes".

Needless to say, the Pole is very impressed. He asks: "Where did you buy this wonderful watch? Switzerland? Japan?"

Snorts the Russian, his chest swelling with pride: "This is ours, comrade. A miracle of Soviet technology".

Then as he picks up the bags and begins to stagger away the Pole calls out: "What are in the bags? Watches?"

Breathing heavily the Russian answers: "Watches be blowed, comrade. They contain the batteries".

So every time there is what is claimed to be a major technological breakthrough it may be prudent to first ask: "What about the batteries?"

The benefits of a new technology has to be weighed against its burden.

This is the technology of wisdom in a nutshell.
