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Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, AG MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS
AND MP FOR BRICKWORKS, AT BRICKWORKS CONSTITUENCY NATIONAL
DAY DINNER AT ALEXANDRA HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL ON SATURDAY,
23 AUGUST 1980 AT 8.00 PM

National Day dinners like this tend to put us in a reminiscent mood. We are tempted to look at the past and count our blessings whilst casting our thoughts to the future. However, we can consider ourselves very fortunate to be in a position to do so.

As we all very well know, the present Government has been in office for the past 21 years since 1959 during which time, many enormous problems have been overcome. Singapore is what it is today is attributed to the leadership, planning, policies and effective implementation of the PAP Government.

In the next few years, we must be prepared for difficult problems and a tough period. We are entering a period of economic uncertainty. Oil prices may continue to increase. Even at increased prices oil supply cannot always be guaranteed. Tensions will still exist in Southeast Asia as the result of events in Indochina and increased Soviet ambitions in the area.

It is important for Singapore to be aware of these problems and dangers. Whatever it is, we must continue with the process of nation-building nonetheless. While circumstances and problems may be new and new solutions sought, the Government will continue to adopt the same approach and the same qualities ie honesty, integrity, incorruptibility and effectiveness.

So much for the future. I now turn to the more pressing problem of the care of the aged which has been on mind for quite some time now.

The two extremes of life - at infancy and at old age - both phases of life are marked by helplessness. It is ironical that the attitudes and

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and treatment accorded are different for the persons at the different stages of life. In infancy, care is lavished out without stint, whereas in old age care is often at best given as a duty but sometimes even grudgingly.

Here is Brickworks, as in many other constituencies, we have young families living away from their aged parents. Physical separation from parents in many instances is perhaps unavoidable. I am glad to note, however, that young couples, as a general rule, do visit their aged parents frequently and, in cases of need, offer financial assistance.

My Ministry and I are, however, concerned over the small minority of children who neglect their parents in their old age. These are the people who would rather spend their leisure hours in search of amusement than in the company of their aged and lonely parents. They choose to spend their money on acquiring all the appurtenances of modern life, with none to spare for supporting the old folk. They prefer the old folk to be looked after by institutions for the aged. The number of such irresponsible children is, fortunately, not large.

We have inherited a system of family law which places an obligation on parents to support their young children and on husbands to support their wives. Our family law derives from societies which by and large do not recognise any responsibility on the part of grown-ups to support their aged parents. It does not reflect the value systems of the major ethnic groups in Singapore. We should be prepared to change the law if necessary. The weakening of family ties is an unhealthy trend which must be checked.

Civilised humans cannot neglect the helpless aged. They cannot be abandoned.
