

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS,
AT THE BRICKWORKS CONSTITUENCY NATIONAL DAY DINNER
AT ALEXANDRA HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL, HOY FATT ROAD
ON SUNDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 1984 AT 8.00 PM**

1984 is a significant year for us, Singaporeans. Not only does it mark the 19th anniversary of our independence, but also represents 25 years of nation-building. To members of the People's Action Party, 1984 marks the 30th Anniversary of the PAP. And who knows, 1984 could also mean Elections in Singapore.

Singapore became an independent, sovereign nation in 1965. The period between 1959 and 1965 was a difficult one for the Prime Minister and his generation of leaders -- politically, socially, and economically. They had to fight the communists (1961-63) and the communalists (1964-65). Singapore experienced her first communal riot on 21 Jul 64. We were in Malaysia at that time. It was a tragic end to the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Procession. It was a culmination of months of racial agitation by fanatical politicians. Of course, thugs and secret societies took advantage of the situation and created more trouble. Indications showed that there had been organisation and planning behind this outbreak to turn it into an ugly communal clash. All it needed was someone to trigger it off. I was a young Assistant Lecturer then, having joined the Singapore Polytechnic at its former Prince Edward Road campus about two months before the riot broke out. I can never forget that day. It will always remain in my memory for as long as I live. Do you want to know why, I was caught in that riot and almost lost my life, that's why! A

second riot on 4 September that same year, and sparked off by the mysterious murder of a Malay trishaw-rider saw more violence, casualties and damage to property. The whole country was in utter chaos. In both riots, the casualties were almost all Chinese and Malays. The lesson I learn from this experience is that no amount of soldiers or policemen or what have you, would be able to stop the conflict if there is real hatred between the ethnic communities. The decisive factor depends on the goodwill between neighbours. And this was true of Geylang Serai and Kampung Ubi where the Chinese were protected by the Malays. Likewise the Chinese in their own areas protected the Malays.

Besides fighting the communists and the communalists, the Government at that time also had to overcome the problems of massive unemployment, housing shortage, education for all and better health care. When we broke off from Malaysia in 1965, many thought that Singapore, with no natural resources and a small territory, could not succeed.

Well, we have proved them wrong, haven't we? Despite numerous crises, and adverse circumstances far more formidable than those faced by many other developing countries, this Government has succeeded in providing more than enough for 2.5 million people on an island of 616 sq km. We have transformed massive unemployment to a tight labour market; industrial strife has given way to industrial peace and a more equitable sharing of the fruits of labour; nearly 80 per cent of the population now live in public housing with about 65 per cent of them owning their own homes. In which other country in Asia do we find such a significant percentage of its citizens owning homes? Our per capita GDP is the second highest in Asia, and compares favourably even with the developed countries.

The question now is: How can we ensure continual success?

Well, it depends on all of us, working together, each playing his part. We must be prepared to work hard, increase productivity, quick to adapt, willing to learn new skills. In the final analysis, it is human qualities that will determine our future in whether we retain the will to work and the drive for excellence. If we are not prepared to do all this, Singapore will find herself squeezed out of the world market by increasing protectionism and competition from other exporting countries. We learn from the history of many nations in the past which had achieved great power and glories, but were reduced to mediocrity or destruction because the rulers and the people have ignored the maxim that while it is already difficult to reach the top, it is even more difficult to stay at the top. Singaporeans should learn from these historical lessons.

Another factor we must remember is that we must never allow social tension to threaten our painstakingly built-up cohesive society. My younger Cabinet colleagues and I might not have fought the communists and the communalists. But we remember the perilous route of our senior Cabinet colleagues that took us from the colony of Singapore into independence through merger with Malaya in the Federation of Malaysia, and on to separation as the Republic of Singapore. We certainly remember the riots of 1964. I for one will never forget them. We have a duty to ensure that communal riots would not happen again in Singapore. Harmony between our ethnic communities must be preserved at all cost. We must have love and loyalty for Singapore strong enough to sweep aside all racial differences and cultural prejudices so that it unites all ethnic groups in one common national identity. This love must be the cornerstone of our nation-building and the motivation for us to cherish and defend our country.

But the most important factor of success for Singapore is the continuity of an honest and efficient government. It is this Government that fought for our self-government in 1959; it is this Government that saw us through crisis after crisis by sound policies and far-sighted planning. It has been no easy task to identify, train and deploy our only resource - manpower - to the greatest advantage. As I have mentioned earlier, the initial years of self-government were characterised by tension, crises, violence. But with a firm hand and an impressive track record this Government is able to lead us to where we are today.

Now that the Elections fever is very much in the air, opposition political parties will soon become active again with their promises of subsidies and free hand-outs to win votes from the people. But in Singapore, such hand-outs will only lead to an indolent people always asking for more. The end result will be bankruptcy. We have no natural resources to fall back on and no one is obliged to come to our rescue. You have heard the Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech on 19 August. In one five-year spending spree, he said, Singapore can be rendered prostrate and bankrupt. That is why the Government is thinking of a blocking mechanism whereby the President can block the spending of any reserve which the government in office has not itself accumulated. But, of course, this Government will continue to look after the destitute and the poor who cannot look after themselves.

The task of nation-building was daunting. After a long struggle and concerted effort, we have not only survived but also succeeded in many fields. We can now look back at our past with pride and into the future with confidence. Let us solve the problems of the future together. Let us stand up for Singapore.