

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY MR CHIN HARN TONG, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(HOME AFFAIRS), AT THE ALJUNIED CONSTITUENCY NATIONAL DAY
VARIETY SHOW AT THE ALJUNIED COMMUNITY CENTRE
ON SATURDAY, 2 AUGUST 1986 AT 8.00 PM

Every National Day since 1965, when Singapore first attained nationhood, has been celebrated with the right degree of pomp and splendour in an atmosphere of fervour and enthusiasm. This year's National Day celebration is of no exception.

It speaks well for the resilience of Singaporeans that we are able to celebrate our National Day in a befitting manner, despite our far from cheerful economic circumstances. National Day commemorates the anniversary of our national independence. It is fitting we celebrate our National Day with great rejoicing because with political independence we become responsible for our own destiny in this world.

We all hope to arrange our destiny to our own best advantage. But what we seek may not be what we get because of various circumstances, many of which may be beyond our power to control or influence. We try our best to anticipate likely events and to make plans to deal with these events when they do occur.

But sometimes events we did not anticipate take place. Then we have to cope as best as we can with the unexpected. This present economic recession, for example, we must admit, came as an unexpected event. With the benefit of statistical hind-sight, some of us blamed the

Government for not seeing the writing on the economic wall and for not taking the necessary steps earlier to counter the recession.

It is always easy to blame others or to make negative or destructive criticism, because words cost nothing as any opposition politician can tell you. But deeds are costly affairs in terms of not only money but also the time and energy spent in planning and implementing them, and the possible alternative uses for the valuable resources that are allocated to particular projects. The Government and those who have to plan and decide are always faced with the tricky business of choosing the best option for a future they cannot foresee or predict with any certainty.

Take the problem of flooding. We all know what causes flooding in Singapore - the flat and low-lying terrain which does not allow rain-water to run off quickly enough after a heavier than usual downpour. One solution is to have more trees and foliage to retain rain-water, which means less housing development. It is not a practical solution, given Singapore's limited land area; and it certainly would not be popular with most Singaporeans who have expectations of owning their homes.

Another solution is to construct a sufficient number of drainage canals and sewers to cope with the heaviest possible downpour and the highest possible tide Singapore can ever experience. It is not a practical solution, given Singapore's limited resources, as canals and sewers are costly to build and maintain. During a long stretch of normal rainfall, the Government would be severely criticised for wasting scarce funds in building too many canals and sewers.

Thus the practical solution is to have a drainage system which will generally meet our needs and which we can

comfortably afford. We have always to make the difficult decision of allocating our limited resources among our endlessly competing wants or many different projects, each of which is just as important or desirable as the next.

Our Government is faced with the same difficult choice in planning and managing our economy. We can insulate ourselves from the ups and downs of the world economy by opting for a stagnant economy. I don't think any Singaporean would relish the idea of living at a subsistence or even starvation level. To survive, not to say progress, we have to trade, which means, making ourselves vulnerable to the winds of change in the world market.

Our Government could have opted for a free-for-all economy as in Hongkong, with minimum or no intervention by, and, consequently, minimum or no headache for the Government. Many of us would not have been too happy with that kind of situation. With little or no Central Provident Fund contributions, we might still be renting instead of owning our homes. But to ensure Singaporeans benefit from the economic development of Singapore, our Government opted for active participation in the economic development.

When the economy was booming and we benefitted from the Government intervention, we consider such benefit as a matter of right, without bothering to thank the Government. But in a downturn, as at present, our Government has to make unpleasant adjustments to the economy with a view to reversing the downturn. Because these adjustments adversely affect us, we tend to get angry and blame the Government for the economic recession.

It is a natural response, but it is a negative reaction nonetheless. Singapore is not only a political entity but also a national economic enterprise. As Singaporeans, we are all shareholders in this enterprise.

When a company makes profit the shareholders benefit. When the Company hits a poor patch, the shareholders have to adjust downward their expectations accordingly, at least until business improves.

It is ridiculous to blame our Government for the past economic downturn simply because the Government is in the driving seat. If a driver has negligently caused his vehicle to collide with another vehicle, the driver deserves to be censured. But if a driver slows down his vehicle because of poor road condition, I should think the driver deserves praise for his prudence. For us to keep on carping that the driver should have studied the road-map carefully or should have taken another route, we are being as helpful as back-seat drivers.

Back-seat drivers are not so much a source of annoyance as a source of danger. They may confuse and distract those in the driving seat with their loud and conflicting opinions. Wrong signals may consequently be given to others on the road. In the end it may make it that much harder for us to get back on the road to progress. If we have good cause for being aggrieved with our Government's performance, let us by all means make known our grievances. But don't let us confuse our own wishful thinking with genuine grievances. Where we know our Government has done its best in a situation which comes about through circumstances beyond its power to control or influence, we should give our Government all our co-operation and support.

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