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SPEECH BY MR CHUA SIAN CHIN, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
AT THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE MACPHERSON
SENIOR CITIZENS' CLUB AT THE MACPHERSON COMMUNITY CENTRE
ON SUNDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 1982 AT 3 PM

In 1970 there were 118,287 persons aged 60 years and above in Singapore. This works out to 5.7 per cent of the population then. In 1980 the number of persons aged 60 years and above had risen to 173,632. They form 7.2 per cent of the population. According to projections made by analysing the 1980 Census statistics those aged 60 years and above are expected to increase to 305,900 or by 76.2 per cent in the year 2000.

Thus as we go into the 1980s and 1990s our population will comprise more and more elderly persons. This is in direct contrast with the position of the previous 20 years when more than half our population were below 25 years old. Those 15 years and below which formed 38.8 per cent of our population in 1970 and 27.1 per cent in 1980 are projected to fall to 21.7 per cent in the year 2000. This change in the age structure of our population is creating new situations resulting in new kinds of problems, burdens and challenges to our society, families and the state.

In the past 20 years the vast majority of those economically inactive in our population were young children. There was no problem of ensuring that their parents who were economically active would adequately provide and care for them. In fact, the vast majority of Singapore parents worked very hard to give their children the best of everything. This is not only because of the universal human instinct to preserve and perpetuate one's progeny and the family name but following Asian tradition, the Singapore parents expect their children to look after them in their old age. There have never been demands for homes for unwanted children as there are now

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demands for more homes for the aged. We have only a few homes for delinquent youths or for orphans run by charitable institutions or the state. In fact, orphans are greatly in demand for adoption by childless couples.

On the other hand, providing and caring for the old and aged is a different proposition altogether. They are often regarded as a burden when they are no longer economically useful. However, in traditional Asian societies no problem on the care of the aged existed because it was an accepted norm of social behaviour for the economically active members of the family to provide and care for the old and aged in the family. We may call this filial piety or just a moral obligation for sons and daughters to repay what their parents have done in bringing them up. Thus so long as we have the three-generation families this problem does not arise..

Our problem only started with the copying of Western concepts and practices in terms of social responsibilities and family obligations by an increasing number of our people. As a result we now see the break-up of the three-generation family and the trend towards adopting state welfarism. In Western countries under their state welfare system, providing and caring for the aged has become the responsibility of the state. Aged parents and grandparents are usually put in welfare homes. Most of these homes are run by government from taxpayers' money. Thus age-old family bonds have been loosen and broken. Family obligations have become diluted and relationships impersonal. Thus we see many of the old and aged are just left in these homes to wait for their time to die. Being deprived of the love and care of their family members, many of them degenerate very rapidly into senility and continue to live like vegetables. This is the sort of situation we must avoid at all costs from happening in Singapore. State welfarism puts an unnecessary burden and bleeds the resources of the state. It also leads to a rootless and impersonal society with no deep bonds of social or moral obligations towards the family and between one another.

The solution for us in Singapore is clear. We have to immediately reverse whatever trend there now exists towards state welfarism on the care for the aged and bring the responsibility back to the family as it used to be. It may not be necessary or even advisable to do so by way of legislation. However, to attain this objective it is necessary to work out a comprehensive scheme of incentives and disincentives. Singaporeans have always responded well to incentives and disincentives.

In addition we must also use other means to persuade our people towards this objective. One such measure is through the organisation of senior citizens' groups to demonstrate that although they may be retired, they are still active and useful and can also make a contribution to society. In fact, the activities of the senior citizens' groups in Singapore have changed the image of the old and the aged. Far from being a helpless and troublesome burden to their family and society, they have shown that they are quite capable of looking after themselves well. They are also making a contribution to society by helping others.

I am proud to say that the MacPherson CC Senior Citizens' Club is one of the most active elderly groups in Singapore. It was formed in 1978. It started with 20 members. Today it has 170 members. Besides organising activities to keep themselves fit and occupied such as organising variety shows and celebrations of the various festivals, they also do welfare work to help the less fortunate. They have also formed a good choir that had performed in a number of community centres and at the homes of the aged. More than 80 per cent of them are staying in the MacPherson constituency with their families which can be termed as three-generation families. As such they are leading a happy and well-adjusted family life. They are still very much an asset not only to their family but also to society.

Finally, I would like to thank you for inviting me to officiate at your second anniversary celebration. May I also congratulate you for your impressive lists of activities in the past years, and for setting a good example of what our elderly citizens can do by continuing to make themselves useful to society.