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ADDRESS BY MR C V DEVAN NAIR, PRESIDENT, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE AT THE NTUC CULTURAL SHOW, RALLY AND DINNER ON WEDNESDAY 11 NOVEMBER 1981 AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE

WHAT SINGAPORE MEANS TO ME

I thank the leaders and staff of the NTUC, its affiliate unions, and all those concerned with the co-operative and other enterprises of the NTUC, for your great kindness in honouring me at this function.

My contributions to the labour movement have been referred to in glowing terms. What has not been referred to are the contributions the labour movement has made to my own growth. It would be truer to say that the labour movement made me, rather than that I made the labour movement. I know I did not.

I recall with pleasure and pride, a number of older generation persons present here today, without whose understanding and support, my own personal contribution to the NTUC would have been considerably diminished. And those of you here who were present at the inauguration of the NTUC in 1961, will have fond memories of brave and loyal comrades, who have since left the mortal scene, without whose dedicated and active support the NTUC may have turned out to be a stillborn child, strangled in the very womb of the turbulent political and social milieu of those times.

I hope my successors in the NTUC will have the same good luck that I enjoyed, in terms of loyal, large-visioned and dedicated comrades-in-arms.

I count my election to the Presidency of our Republic more as a recognition of the role the labour movement has played in the making of modern Singapore, than as a recognition of my own more modest virtues and attributes.

I do not doubt the sincerity of your motives in wanting to honour me. However, I do suspect that a number of you are also a little relieved that as President of Singapore, I will no longer be able to scold or lecture you. Presidents and Heads of States are expected to be nice and gracious to everybody. My doctors tell me that this will be good for my health. I have no doubt that it will also be good for my soul.

None of my trade union friends need feel that you have lost your President. You have not. I am still your President. The only difference today is that I am also the President of employers and all others in Singapore.

Allow me now to ascend from permissible levity to a more solemn subject. I do not know what you feel when Majulah Singapura is sung on National Day by assembled choirs of school children, with everybody standing to attention. I know what I feel, and what I believe the Prime Minister and his senior colleagues feel, on such occasions.

Personally, I struggle against tears of pride as I mentally scan the last 40 years. I know it is difficult for the younger generation of Singaporeans to appreciate the reasons.

I had occasion some time back to refer in a speech I had made to the passion which went into the making of modern Singapore. I was told that some young persons had wondered aloud what on earth I had meant. They could not understand, simply because they have inherited a milieu which they assume had dropped ready-made from heaven.

Now, I do not doubt that these young persons are good and loyal Singaporeans. Many are reservists in our army, and would no doubt be ready to die for Singapore, should that become necessary. But of course, they are fairly certain that the occasion will not arise, and that they will die natural deaths. I sincerely hope so.

The difference between my generation and their's is simply this. We were not merely ready to die for our beliefs. Many of us expected to die, whether in communal riots, or from the bullets and knives of communist assassins. Frankly, I consider it a near miracle that we are alive today. For there were a number of occasions when Singapore might have been snuffed out, politically or militarily. In which case there would have been neither Singapore nor Singaporeans today.

Other memories too come crowding in. I knew Toa Payoh as a dirty malaria-infested slum. Jurong was a swamp, shacks, grimy and overcrowded shop-houses, and dirt tracks stood where the skyscrapers of Shenton Way stand today. The sea covered much of the lush green East Coast Parkway of today, and the plush housing estate of Marine Parade did not exist. Neither did the townships of Telok Blangah, Bukit Merah, Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Tampines, Changi, Hougang, Kampong Chai Chee, Clementi, Marsiling and a lot of other places. They were either slums, swamps, ramshackle kampongs, or coconut and rubber plantations. Public housing as we know it today was non-existent. Singapore was a dirty and shabby place.

The most startling fact for the younger generation today is that there were no Singaporeans even as early as 21 years ago. There were only Chinese, Malays, Indians, Ceylonese, Eurasians and other races.

The population seethed with bitter resentments, against colonialism, against the exploitation of workers, against corruption in public life, bribery and nepotism. Naturally, the populace were easy prey for communists masquerading as socialists and nationalists, and for communalists, who did not need to masquerade as anything but themselves. And there were riots and strikes galore, arson and social and political tensions of the most acute kind.

The process of transformation which began in 1959 was by any standards a daunting one, calculated to test the character, calibre and mettle of the strongest and most daring. Lesser men would have been intimidated, overwhelmed and crushed by the forces of the redoubtable communist united front, of the communalists, and by surrounding political circumstances. Indeed, international doomsday prophets were in the habit of predicting at almost every turn, that our days were numbered.

They have stopped doing so now.

I said lesser men would have succumbed. I should have added, a lesser people than Singaporeans would also have succumbed.

The world watched incredulously as an industrious and responsive population, led by honest and intelligent men, crested wave after threatening wave, dipped into dangerous trough after trough, and finally emerged buoyant and whole into calmer and more stable waters.

With the right incentives and vigorous promotional efforts, investments poured in. Jobs and homes were created by the thousands for our workers. Schools and hospitals were also built. And eventually, unemployment was wiped out.

Others have recorded elsewhere the political, economic and social developments which resulted in the Singapore of today. There was hard-headed planning and efficient implementation which led to our phenomenal economic growth. And vitally important, the nation-building process also paid rich dividends.

My generation did not begin as Singaporeans. I myself started out as a Malacca-born British Subject of Indian origin. But our children are all Singaporeans. They feel like Singaporeans, comport themselves like Singaporeans, and eat and live like Singaporeans.

For the younger generation, even our recent history is no more than cold print. For us it was far from cold print. Reading about hell, war, unemployment, imprisonment and riots in cold print is one thing. Living through hell, war, unemployment, riots and imprisonment is quite another.

Still vivid in the memories of those who lived through it, are the grisly human heads, with terror and agony written on the faces, stuck on poles outside the Cathay Cinema during the Second World War. It was the military way of terrorizing the population into submission.

I saw a man writhing in flames and burning to death, on a rubber plantation in Johore. Some soldiers had soaked a sack in kerosine, put it over his head and body, and set him alight. I gazed in horror as the

man died in voiceless agony. But the soldiers found it amusing.

Most of us then lived, for days on end, on tapioca or tapioca flour. No fish, meat or eggs. And if you fell ill, no medicines either. Medical drugs were mainly for the military. I remember massive unemployment in the 50's and 60's, made worse by communist inspired industrial unrest. Factories were forced to close down and workers thrown out of jobs. I knew workers who sold their babies in order to keep themselves alive.

Then we lived through riots, some communist inspired, others the outcome of rabid racialist and communal sentiments. During the bloody Hock Lee Bus riots in 1954, a student was hit by a stray police bullet. He could have been saved if he had been taken to hospital straightaway. But communist united front cadres took the bleeding student on their shoulders, and paraded him around the city, in order to inflame public opinion even more. And when, three hours later, he was taken to hospital, he was already dead.

There were times when some of us thought that all was lost, and that Singapore would be overwhelmed by anarchy and chaos, let loose by pro-communist and communalist agitators. I remember with pride persons, some of whom are with us here today who, with their backs to the wall, quietly determined that they would die on their feet, and not on their knees. They were surprised to discover later that, instead of losing, they had won.

Naturally, we would not wish a similar baptism for our own children. We have contributed to the making of the present. But inexorably, sooner or later, we will be referred to in the past tense. As a poet said, the world of tomorrow we cannot visit, not even in our dreams.

The younger generation of Singaporeans cannot really learn from the experiences of earlier generations. For their experiences and their problems will be different. New roads have to be travelled, new paths hewn out, unexpected hurdles cleared, unforeseeable dangers met, and fresh challenges faced and overcome.

We cannot, therefore, pass on to the younger generation a blueprint for the future. The accelerating pace of political and technological changes in the modern world makes it impossible to predict the twists and turns of the future. You will therefore have to prepare your own blueprints.

Having said all this, it would be wrong to assume that there is nothing at all you can obtain from the founding generation of Singaporeans. There are certain constants in our collective social life, the preservation of which will ensure that the core of our society will not be corrupted by dry rot.

These constants are the standards and values we rigorously subscribe to in our private and public lives, and which are primarily responsible for the unique socio-economic progress and stability we have achieved. They include intelligence, married to scrupulous honesty and integrity, social justice and fair play, and last but not least, a sensible and practical equation between hard work and high performance, on the one hand, and personal and social rewards on the other.

Honesty and integrity in public life involve the need to shun the fatal temptation to court cheap and transient popularity, at the expense of telling people the truth. More enduring and much harder to gain than popularity, is public respect.

Moments of truth are devastating, for both individuals and nations, because they often come too late. The only way to avoid them, for leaders and citizens alike, is to try and be sincerely truthful all the time.

Such, then, are what I hope and pray, will remain some of the constants in our public life. You will jettison them only at grave social peril. You may exceed these standards and values. But it will be a betrayal of our people and their future, if you settle for anything lower.

I have told you as succinctly as possible what Singapore means to the men and women of my generation. Certain basic values and standards have been realised in the conduct of our public life. Modern Singapore

is a living demonstration of this fact, which is why we in Singapore are even now exercising a demonstration effect on other developing countries.

However, the relentless attrition of time will ensure that the founding generation of Singaporeans will diminish with every passing year. The batons must therefore be steadily passed on to younger hands, for theirs is the future. But if the future is to be secured, young persons of dedication, intelligence and ability should not shirk the responsibilities of leadership in the institutions of public life.

In other countries, selfish clinging to power and office on the part of the ageing have been impediments in the path of able and intelligent members of the younger generation. The most obstinate stupidity in the world is that of old men who forget that they are mortal, and to whom the obituary pages of the newspapers fail to convey the message of mortality.

Fortunately for Singapore, persons in high public office are wise enough not to aspire for a gerontocracy. There is genuine concern and changes are made to make way for younger persons. The labour movement, for example, has been among the first institutions in our society to engage in conscious self-renewal.

However, it needs to be emphasised that the right to lead is not transferable. Leadership must be justified, deserved and won.

In a democratic society, the instruments of leadership cannot be acquired through inheritance. There are no heirs apparent in any of our institutions. On the contrary, the right to lead has to be fought for and won at the bar of public opinion. And this is as it should be. The generation which will take over the leadership of Singapore in the late 1980s must accept and prove themselves equal to this challenge. And if they are able, dedicated, honest and fearless in the fight to advance the interests of the people, they have little to fear. Demos is an exacting deity, especially so in Singapore, for our people are neither obtuse, naive nor gullible. They are a sophisticated lot. They have shown in the past that they can distinguish the genuine from the

spurious, the sincere from the hypocritical. Their children will not be less discerning when they mature with experience.

But it is the sacred responsibility of able, intelligent, honest and dedicated members of the younger generation not to leave the leadership of the future to the vagaries of chance.

If the best young people in our midst do not aspire to leadership roles, the field will be occupied by lesser persons. This would be a tragedy, for Singapore requires and deserves our best young persons to come forward.

The lessons of history, and the many examples among other countries, remind us that where self-renewal is left to haphazard chance, the decision-making process in society, more often than not, pass into the province of fickle and irresponsible gamblers with destiny, prodigal with the nation's wealth. They then proceed to mortgage the future, and generations to come will continue to pay for their follies of omission and commission.

I count it a singular honour, as a representative of the founding generation of Singaporeans, to preside over our Republic. I count it an equally great honour to have been able to serve the labour movement, indeed, the one prepared the way for the other.

May I say that my relations with the labour movement in our Republic will remain indissoluble. I shall continue to cherish the personal relationships built up over the years. I have not changed. My basic beliefs and concerns have not changed. I will remain myself. Only my role has changed. I cannot intervene in your decisions. But my concern and goodwill remain. All that I can do now is to advise you, should you seek my advice.

I salute the labour movement of Singapore, in the confident expectation that you will make an even greater contribution to our Republic than my colleagues and I were able to do in our time.

The greatest contribution you can make to the nation is to so constitute yourselves as to become a potent force for the national good. No individual can prosper if the society in which he lives and work goes down the drain. The individual can only contribute to himself if he contribute to the nation. Indeed, it is the quality

and motivation of the individual which determines the quality of achievement of society as a whole.

The transformation of work attitudes needs to be effected at all levels of our society, from managers down to workers. This involves cooperation in place of confrontation, and harmony in place of dissension.

We must avoid being trapped in ugly and socially fatal class antagonisms, in which trade unions, employers' organisations, and the like comport themselves, not as instruments for the national good, but as centres of organised sectional greed and selfishness.

It is for such a transformation that all individuals and organisations, sincerely committed to the national good, should aspire and work for. This is the road to the future, and it is a sunlit road, always ascending to progressively higher peaks of collective achievement as a nation. Any other by-road will lead anywhere but up.

To labour well, and to labour rightly, should be our aspiration for Singapore. I conclude by remembering the motto of my old school, Victoria School:

"NIL SINE LABORE"

OR

"NOTHING WITHOUT LABOUR".
