

Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE DINNER ORGANISED BY
THE MALAY/MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS TO CELEBRATE HIS APPOINTMENT
AS PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE AT HYATT HOTEL
ON TUESDAY, 19 JANUARY '82 AT 7.45 PM

I thank the Malay and Muslim organisations represented here for your great kindness in honouring me tonight.

The labour movement, which I come from, does not recognise barriers of race, colour or creed. It stands for equality of opportunity for all citizens, and for equal rewards for equal skills and equal performance. These are principles which are entrenched in the Constitution of our Republic. They are implicit, if not explicit, in all government policies.

The Constitution of Singapore also has a unique provision. There is a Presidential Council for minority rights. This Council goes through bills passed by the Parliament and advises the President if any provision in a bill discriminates against any minority group in the Republic. If it does, the President will refer the bill back to Parliament for correction or amendment. I know of few countries in the world which have similar constitutional safeguards.

The principle and practice of equality and non-discrimination in Singapore has made it possible for us to regard all Singaporeans, regardless of race, religion or language, as constituting the majority in our Republic. It is the non-Singaporeans who constitute the minority.

Malay workers have contributed significantly to the economic development of Singapore. The 1980 census revealed that Malay workers comprise 153,214 persons, or 14.27 per cent of the entire workforce between the ages of 15 and 65 and above. A fair and increasing proportion of these are semi-skilled and skilled. And Malay workers have always worked shoulder to shoulder with

their fellow /2.

their fellow workers of other races, both at their work places and in their trade unions. Our workers are becoming more Singaporean-minded and less ethnic orientated in their attitudes to each other. The labour movement, unlike a number of other organisations, is multi-racial and national in composition.

Malay Singaporeans have proved in the past that they can take up the challenge of non-traditional areas of achievement. For example, we have Malay graduates and students in medicine, engineering, computer science, banking, accountancy, architecture and business management, a development which few expected 16 years ago. From 230 in 1970, Malay University graduates increased to 679 in 1980. This number can be improved upon. What is important, however, is that this proves that the abler and hard working Malays, given the opportunity and the ability, can achieve professional levels of performance. Academically inclined Malays owe it to themselves and to their community to pursue excellence in all academic fields.

As a trade union leader, however, I have never been unduly concerned about the well-being of University graduates. By and large, the market value they can command is as high as their expectations.

My concern has been the fact that the majority in our school-going population of all races never make it to tertiary institutions. It is the case also with the Malay community. From the Census figures we know that 63.5 per cent of the Malay population have not reached 'O' levels. And of this 63.5 per cent, 42 per cent have not passed the PSLE.

I believe the revised education system can decrease this wastage. It is of vital importance to help and encourage all our students, not just the prospective graduates, to realise their fullest potentials. It would be social folly not to do so.

Of course, the able and highly qualified citizens have special obligations to discharge.

First, they need to remember that a good part of their education was paid for from public funds. All our educational institutions, from primary level right up to tertiary levels,

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including the University, are heavily subsidized from public funds - which means your money and mine. And any self-respecting citizen must try to return more to his society than he took from it.

Second, the social value of our high-fliers will be measured, not by how much they contribute to themselves, but by how much they contribute to the majority of their fellowmen, who are unable to climb the same peaks of educational achievement.

The major issue we face is how to ensure that the standards of education and training of this majority of non-fliers are also improved. We must recognise that if we ignore the progress and well-being of the majority who are at the base of the social pyramid, we shall do so at grave social peril. High-fliers will never be able to take off if there are no launching pads to take off from. And the generality of our workers, provided they are well trained and motivated, constitute the launching pads in our society. Which is why, the better educated and more qualified in every community must concern themselves with improving the lot of their less favoured brethren.

However, it is not charity that we should have in mind. On the contrary, we have to ensure that the capacity of the majority to earn higher rewards and incomes is constantly improved.

The restructuring of Singapore's economy is an opportunity we should grasp. It will offer more skilled jobs and higher pay for these jobs. We therefore need to give our students more education and better training. The future of the majority of Malay Singaporeans, as with the majority of Indian or Chinese Singaporeans, depends on the application and industry of young people in acquiring new and higher industrial skills.

An organised social effort, involving parents, teachers, social and community leaders, is necessary to ensure that Malay youngsters are actively helped and encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity to acquire new skills, and improve on existing skills.

If such a community effort is to succeed, as I believe it can and will, it is important, above all, to aim for practical goals. We should strive to progressively increase the levels of

competence of our youth. In other words, to progress to the next stage of performance which each one is capable of: from unskilled to semi-skilled, from semi-skilled to skilled, from skilled to technical grades, from technical grades to professionals, and so on. Everyone can and should be encouraged and helped to climb the next few rungs of the ladder above him. The ladder of achievement applies to everybody, from the unskilled worker to the university graduate.

It will mean a steady improvement in the standard of living of all Malay Singaporeans. Higher skills mean higher incomes. From one-room flats people can move up to two-room flats, while the two-room flat dwellers can aspire to three-room flats, and so on.

I am impressed by the efforts already being made by local Malay/Muslim organisations to ensure that Malay children achieve higher levels of performance in training and education. Mendaki is one such organisation, which deserves the support of all Malay parents.

It is important and encouraging to know that the better educated and qualified Malays are spending time and effort in activities like special tuition and guidance programmes which will lift up their fellow Malays. I am confident that national professional and social organisations will be happy and willing to assist or complement such programmes.

Singapore's success so far has been due to the inculcation of positive attitudes of mind to learning, hard work and achievement in our young people. If every young man and woman in our midst develops the confidence that there is nothing which he or she does today which cannot be done better and more efficiently tomorrow, our progress will be that much more certain, and that much faster. All parents and social organisations must become increasingly conscious that the best investment for the future is in the training and education of our children. Like money in a good bank, such investments increase in value with every passing year.

Given positive attitudes and the determination to improve on present standards, Malay Singaporeans will make greater contributions to the progress of Singapore. They will also improve their own stakes in an expanding economy.

The Government will give every support to self improvement programmes. They are more successful than Government-led programmes, because they generate more enthusiasm and confidence in members of the community whose leaders set out to help their less well endowed to rise above their present stations. Such have been the experiences of social workers in Europe, in America and indeed in Singapore, with the old clan associations amongst the Chinese, and the mutual help societies of various Indian sub-groups, and of the early Boyanese, Javanese and other groups of early Singaporeans. Self help is always and in all places, the best help.

Once again, I thank you all for this opportunity to speak to my fellow citizens of the Malay/Muslim community.

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