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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE DINNER ORGANISED BY
THE RESIDENTS' COMMITTEES AT THE ISLAND BALLROOM, SHANGRI-LA HOTEL
ON THURSDAY, 27 MAY 1982 AT 8.00 PM

When I sat down to prepare this speech, my secretary had obtained for me several documents relating to the structure, constitution and so on of Residents' Committees, the activities they were currently engaged in, the problems and difficulties they encounter, and their future prospects. I found them useful, for they helped me focus my mind on what the real significance and purpose of RCs are or should be.

It seemed to me that if once people understood the true purpose of RCs, everything else, like structure, constitution, composition, problems and prospects would fall into place. And we would hear fewer ignorant and irrelevant talk about RCs. The first thing to understand is that, primarily, fundamentally, RCs are envisaged as nuclei for the building up of a basic sense of community among our apartment dwellers, without which our housing estates will develop as soulless monstrosities, in which one's neighbours are anonymous beings in whom one does not take the slightest interest.

The culmination of the Government's housing programme is not the building of more and more apartment blocks, but the creation of socially concerned communities of human beings, who know each other and care for each other, and who share common concerns and pastimes. One need to partake of one's neighbour's joys, success, grief and losses. If we cannot do this, our housing programme, however imposing it is by international standards, will be a colossal social failure.

Crucial to the success of RCs is public understanding and appreciation of the vital social and spiritual importance of developing a sense of community in all our housing estates. Allow me to explain.

As a boy, /2.

As a boy, 45 years ago, I remember people talking about returning to their places of origin. They never said, "I am returning home", but "I am returning to my village", whether in China or India. For the Malay it was "Balekka-kampung" or "Returning to my kampung". Home then meant, not merely one's own house, but the whole community to which one belonged.

This sense of community is one of the earliest and easiest casualties of urbanization. A city state like Singapore, where constraints of space oblige us to take to high-rise living, must take special pains to provide this sense of community. For the absence of a deep sense of community can lead to the most baneful of urban social ills - selfish, concentrated individualism. Translated into simple words, this means: "I live only for myself. Other people are no concern of mine." This is the philosophy of "Everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost." And you know who the devils are? The devils of national disunity, of loss of team spirit, of selfish neglect of one's neighbours and those less favoured than ourselves, of irresponsibility towards the common physical environment we share with our neighbours, and of ultimate failure and collapse as a nation and a people.

If one's neighbourhood is relatively small, a sense of community springs up naturally. One gets to know one's neighbours, and people mix with each other and join in each other's pastimes and festivals.

The Farrer Park of 45 years ago, when I was a schoolboy, was one such small neighbourhood. My family came to know so many people there, and I felt that I belonged. So much so that even today I feel disappointed if the Farrer Park soccer team fails to win the President's Cup, even though the Farrer Park of today has changed beyond recognition.

The way we have tackled our housing problem in Singapore, and our burgeoning new townships, have earned the admiration of the international community. But building homes for our people is not the be-all and the end-all of our housing programme. Buildings do not make a community. Only human beings make one. We need to build conscious communities of people, who relate to each other, because they share a common environment. The cleanliness of your own home,

the facilities you acquire, are your individual responsibility. But the cleanliness and safety of your surroundings, the recreational and social facilities you share with your neighbours, the beauty of the landscaping of your common township, these and other matters are a collective responsibility which calls for a collective concern. And once you can develop a sense of collective concern and responsibility in the people of a neighbourhood, you have a living community in the making, a community of shared interests and concerns.

People need to relate to each other and to belong to each other. This is a psychological and spiritual imperative. It is what made the English poet John Donne say: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" This is the secret of success in practically every field of human endeavour. For it is the sense of community that contributes most to a successful factory, a successful school, a thriving sports group, in fact to successful undertakings of all kinds. The same thing holds true for residential blocks and complexes. If you are a stranger to your neighbour, there must be something wrong with you, or with your neighbour, or with both of you. You cannot be indifferent if your neighbour's daughter is molested by a criminal. It will be your own daughter next. And if you want to ensure your daughter's safety, you had better become equally concerned about the safety of other people's daughters.

In this connection, a high tribute must be paid to those who initiated the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme (NWS), with the encouragement of the police. The whole concept and practice of this scheme is reminiscent of the kampong spirit of yesteryear. A good number of our RCs are involved in this scheme. Let us hope that more will become similarly involved.

The performance of neighbourly functions like keeping a friendly eye on each other's homes, families and properties is the most effective deterrent against crime. The criminal who is himself an anti-social person, finds his easiest victims among non-social types. But he will not dare operate in an area in which he knows there exists a strong spirit of neighbourliness.

Because of the Government's increasing emphasis on developing the community spirit in our townships, much greater attention is being paid to improving the quality of the physical environment in our housing estates.

Adequate recreational facilities are a must for any thriving community. Jogging and running tracks, keep fit corners, obstacle courses, football fields and children's playgrounds should be provided in estates with spacious surrounding greenery. Not everybody in Singapore can enjoy the same facilities as those living along the East Coast Parkway. Incidentally, let us not forget that not so long ago, it was all sea.

Nonetheless, the quality of the environment in all housing estates can be further improved upon. Singaporeans should never rest on their laurels. More elaborate condominium-like facilities, for example, swimming pools, badminton, sepak-takraw and basketball courts, and gymnasiums could also be provided in centrally located estates or in community centres, to enable neighbouring residents to congregate and interact while utilizing these facilities.

I am told that many RCs complain of a lack of meeting or conference rooms within estates. RCs should not be discouraged by the present lack of such facilities. In fact, this is not an insuperable problem, if RCs are innovative and utilize school fields, void decks and community centres for such purposes.

It must be borne in mind that the desirable improvements I have suggested, cannot be obtained cheaply, nor for free, and they cannot be done overnight. These are long-term investments which will yield invaluable dividends in terms of social cohesiveness and social morality.

What the Government can do is only to provide the encouragement for an outflowing of the community spirit among the residents in our housing estates. But it is only communities of residents themselves who can create the community spirit. Not even the best of governments in the world can do this. Which is why Residents' Committees are so vitally important. If they did not exist, something like them would have to be invented, if only to prevent our housing estates from degenerating into vast impersonal edifices, devoid of soul, barren of spirit.

If I were asked what I considered to be the primary function of a Residents' Committee, I would answer without hesitation: "The humanization and socialization of the residential complexes in our housing estates." This means that residents will learn to relate to each other in numerous ways, and develop a pride of identity with their human and physical environment.

Every kampong in the past had its own natural leaders and respected elders. Such people must exist in every one of our residential areas. They owe it to their community and to themselves to come forward. For they will then learn that in helping to make the lives of their fellow residents more meaningful, they will, in the process, enrich their own lives.

I shall feel amply rewarded if all of you here will give earnest consideration to the points I have tried to put forward in this speech. To put it simply, it is the spirit in which you conceive of RCs, and of your work in them, which will prove decisive. Everything else will then fall into place. For Singaporeans are no fools. They possess keen noses for sincerity, intelligence and commitment.

In conclusion, may I congratulate RC members for volunteering their services for the benefit of their fellow-citizens. In doing so, you have set worthy examples for other citizens to emulate.

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