

ey19990806f

To:

cc: (bcc: NHB NASReg/NHB/SINGOV)

Subject: (Embargoed) Speech by Mr Eugene Yap, 6 Aug 99, 7.30pm

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

Please Check Against Delivery

SPEECH OF MAYOR EUGENE YAP, MARINE PARADE DISTRICT AND MP FOR MARINE PARADE GRC AT MOUNTBATTEN 34TH NATIONAL DAY DINNER ON FRIDAY 6 AUGUST 1999 7.30PM AT BEIJING PALACE RESTAURANT OASIS BUILDING

In about four months, three weeks and four days, we will leave the 20th century behind, and move into a brand new 21st century. Whether we are old or young, all of us must be prepared for a more competitive 21st century. It will be quite different, and we should expect the competition to be tougher. Thriving in the 21st century will call for a real change in mindset; a real change in the way we do things; and, a real change in the way we work. If we cannot meet this challenge, we will not do well. We will lose out and the high standards of living we are now accustomed to will fall.

Let me illustrate how much, how drastic and how fast our way of life has changed. Over 2,000 years ago, when you wanted to send word from one place to another, it would take an extremely long time to do so. For example, when the Greeks won the war over the Persians, they sent this soldier called Pheidippides to carry their message from Marathon to Athens. So this chap had to run all the way, 40 kilometres in all, just to deliver this message, "Nikki!" So when he arrived, he shouted "Nikki!" or "Victory!" and then collapsed and died. That was how he had to deliver the message and, that was how the word "marathon" came about. I do not know how long he took, perhaps three hours or so. Today, no one has to run anywhere to send a message or take that long to send a message. Vast amounts of information are sent across oceans in mere milliseconds at just the click of a button. So we are today in the "nanosecond" era. I do not think Mr Pheidippides could have, in his wildest dreams, imagined how fast we can send information today. But it has happened!

50 or 60 years ago, when our parents or grandparents wanted to go from one place to another, a running man pulling a rickshaw transported many of them. So if you wanted to tell your aunt in Chinatown something, you had to take a rickshaw, pulled by a Chinese immigrant with a pigtail and a big straw hat. Those who could not even afford the one or two-cent ride would walk! But today, although it costs much more than one or two cents, practically everyone can afford the convenience of taking the MRT, unlike in the past, where even taking a rickshaw was a luxury not many could afford. So today, if you need to go places, you simply pay a dollar odd, hop on the MRT and it will bring you to your aunt's place in mere minutes! If our forefathers were alive today, I think they too would be only too willing to pay the one-dollar or so for the speed and the convenience, having suffered the slowness and inefficiency of the previous modes of transport! For a better quality of life, we must be prepared to pay for it. But, the more important point is, unlike many in the past, many of us today can and are enjoying a better quality of life.

Today, if you need to communicate overseas, you just pick up the phone and call through IDD. But if both sides are busy, then better still, you just email! For many parents, there is no longer any waiting for weeks for that letter from your overseas son or daughter to arrive -- so different from the days when people would wait at their doorstep for the postman to arrive, only to be told "boh puay"! [Optional: insert story on Fengshan IT Centre Malay lady here] Even more fantastic! Some have even spent a few hundred dollars to set up video-conferencing facilities to see each other! And now, with voice recognition software, you do not even need to know how to type, just talk into your computer and it will do the rest!

So you can see how fast technology has evolved, and how it has changed our lifestyle especially in the last 160 years since Mr. Samuel Morse invented the Morse code. And things will not let up. Competition alone in IT will cause things to change very fast indeed and will continue to dictate our lives unabated. The only way to keep up with this pressure is to change and to anticipate change.

Luckily, we, as Singaporeans, are quite adept at change. With one of the highest IT penetration rates in Asia, we take to new technology trends quite readily. We have some of the highest PC, pager and mobile phone usage and ownership rates around! Many government services are now electronic, and it is possible to conduct transactions without using ordinary postal or "snail" mail at all! And there will be even more changes, and over a very much shorter span of time. It's geometric you know. Let me assure you, some of these changes many of us cannot even imagine can happen, but it will happen.

In the 21st century, an even faster lifestyle will be the order of the day. If we reject change we will perish. It has even caught up with us here in Mountbatten. Old Airport Road POSBank has closed down. This is part of change. Of course, some people will be more badly affected than others will. We have to find some way to help those who are very badly affected: those who do not have younger family members to help make the change, or adjust. I think it makes sense for all of us to do the best we can to help one another adjust than to let the economy suffer and cause many to lose their jobs. But, the closure illustrates an important point -- the bank, too, has to cope with change to stay viable and keep up with the competition! You watch BBC, CNN and Channel News Asia, it is quite common to hear banks in Europe and Asia combining, merging or closing inefficient branches to compete and survive. If we do not do the same thing, we will be finished. Mountbatten is not Shenton Way, otherwise there would be many, many banks here too, both local and foreign. Whether it is POSBank, or any bank or business, they all must discard inefficient, outdated practices and adopt new ones. The only way to move forward is to change, and it is something we should not fear.

We cannot deny that we have been affected by globalisation in the way we work, play, exercise or even eat and drink! But remember, this did not just happen yesterday. It started happening some time ago but the rate of globalisation and its impact on us will be very much faster from now on. Globalisation is not some trick or ill effect brought about by Western society. It is not a form of colonialism or imperialism. It is simply the advancement of life and the result of how competitive life now is. The effects of globalisation are inevitable. It is here to stay, whether you like it or not, whatever you choose to call it. No one wants to turn back or be left behind. So we have to keep moving with the times and not resist them, otherwise we will be left behind. We should therefore not adhere to old ways

ey19990806f

of doing things for the sake of tradition or because "it is the way it has always been done." If we adhere to that mentality, then it will hold us back from progress and eventually cause our downfall. True, it may be the safest or most convenient time-tested way, but it should not be reason to resist change. So is tradition so sacrosanct or rooted that it cannot be changed? Not so. In fact, it evolves and it should evolve! The kilt, for example, that the Scots wear is not the original traditional dress. It took an Englishman to improve it!

Look at the buildings and organisations around you. Take the hospitals, for example. The Singapore General Hospital may still occupy the same site and bear the same name, but within it, the whole system of administering and practising medicine has changed. Latest technologies allow us to look into the body and diagnose and treat illnesses in ways we never thought possible. The way hospitals are run must also change to fit the times. If we kept on running our hospitals, or any other organisation for that matter, like we did 20, 30 years ago, then Singaporeans would shun local hospitals and head overseas instead. Some may not even have faith in the hospitals, preferring instead to adhere to superstition and traditional folk practices like going to the temple and drinking the "hoo chooi". Those whose faith are strong may be cured, but not everyone is like that, and some may die!

The Government is well-aware of the tremendous pace in which things are changing in the world and the severe impact globalisation has on a country's people. It has put most things in place, making sure they do not go wrong and making it simple and straightforward for all Singaporeans. But, those who genuinely still find it difficult to cope with the changes will be treated sympathetically and helped. It does not make sense to ignore them, but it makes sense to help them improve by providing the means to acquire new skills to cope. Because if we do not, what would happen? In the 21st century, those who can cope will surge ahead, those who cannot will be left behind, and a rift or fissure in society will develop. That is why we stress the importance of changing mindsets and finding better ways of doing things. In the past, the social gap was between the rich and poor -- the "oo lui nang" and "boh lui nang", which put a lot of pressure on those who were unable to keep up. Now, technology has widened that gap, between those who have the technology, and those who do not, meaning, the information "haves" and "have nots".

Having recognised the severe impact IT can have on our people and the community, the Marine Parade Community Development Council is committed towards building an intelligent district. And we will build this intelligent district by working with the relevant bodies to set up IT centres and training courses and camps for residents, so that everyone, regardless of education or income level, can acquire these new IT skills. IT is a powerful enabler. The day will soon come when almost everything can be done virtually or, multi-transactions of almost any activity can be done from our homes, schools and offices, simply by pressing a few keys. "God knows what else will be invented."

With this scenario in mind, the Marine Parade CDC will actively work towards setting up IT centres in every ward in the district. In partnership with various grassroots' organisations, we have already established IT centres in Fengshan, Joo Chi at and Serangoon. Another one in Bedok is in the pipeline. The existing IT centres have proved themselves to be viable and financially sustainable. The numbers speak for themselves. For instance, in its first six months of operation, the Contact 123 IT centre in Serangoon (which opened in November 98) successfully conducted 148 courses for more than 4,000 residents. By leveraging on the resources and the experience of the CDC, we can help residents keep pace with the IT revolution.

But IT centres are only a first step towards our objective of building an intelligent district. If I may cast your horizons further into the future, we should build on the existing infrastructure of IT centres to establish one-stop learning centres in the district. We could work with the Ministry of Manpower to develop these centres and provide residents with a comprehensive range of learning opportunities – whether for employment or for personal growth – employment facilitation, and other information services. With these centres in place, we can quicken our march to be an intelligent district – a district where our people embrace the culture of lifelong learning to remain employable and relevant in an ever-changing world.

Increasingly, our challenge is to survive as a community, as one nation, in this rapidly globalising world. No matter how old, we must be prepared to unlearn and relearn. We must learn to share with others our expertise and take the lead in areas we excel in. This will guarantee our survival in this fast-changing world, and make us stronger and more resilient.

To conclude, we must be prepared for the profound economic, cultural and social challenges posed by globalisation and cannot afford to allow these strong forces split us, socially, technologically or economically. So, “Keep up, don’t give up”.

---

National Archives of Singapore