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SPEECH BY MAJOR FONG SIP CHEE, MINISTER OF STATE
FOR CULTURE, AT THE MONTHLY LUNCHEON OF THE
SINGAPORE BOOKSELLERS' ASSOCIATION AT THE HOLIDAY
INN ON TUESDAY, 27 JULY 1982 AT 1.00 PM

Censors and senses

Allow me, first of all, to thank you for this wonderful lunch and the honour of having the privilege to address this very distinguished gathering. Even you, who deal in mental food for thought, must also look after your physical well being, and must have taken great care to ensure that the menu should be of acceptable standard. Not being a connoisseur of culinary delights, I can hardly find any correlation between the consumptions of these two kinds of food. But one thing is sure: bad food harms the body and bad mental food poisons the mind. I only hope that your good taste for food may be extended with similar discernment to books.

I should like, with your indulgence, to discuss first what people perceived of censorship. I shall deal with its effects on the book trade later.

Let me, at the outset, make it absolutely clear that there is no censorship of the press in Singapore. The media will have to be responsible for what they print and face the consequences of litigation under the common law. It is sad to note that many ill-informed people still harbour the impression that the press is subject to censorship; some of them peddle this untruth with mischievous intent, including not a few of those very vocal and articulate but otherwise responsible intellectuals.

Much discussion must have been generated among your circle as a result of the publication of the Report on the Review Committee on Censorship. Your President, Mr Patrick Goh, must have something big boggling his mind when he proposed that I discuss this subject today. He asked me several times over the telephone for the title

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of my talk, explaining that it might help ensure a fuller attendance. It was really not difficult to achieve this, I thought. All he had to do was to announce that this lunch meeting would also discuss an increase of members' subscription to the Association, or an increase in your contribution to the regular lunch meetings, or a special project which would entail substantial financing from the Association's members, or better still, a combination of all these.

I suspect he must have had some misgivings, even up to this very moment, that the spirit of this merry luncheon gathering may be dampened by a declaration of retrogressive censorship policy on my part. I must confess that I lacked the ingenious quality to spoil people's merry spirit. May I, in all fairness to him and to you all, assure you that what I am about to say will be as easily digestable as the delicacies you have just partaken, although the process of consumption may not be as pleasant as the food has been delicious.

When Mr Patrick Goh approached me some time last May, I was afraid that the Booksellers' Association was slightly behind time in pursuing this matter of censorship. The doctors, who look after our physical health, in some cases mental health, had scored the distinction of being the first to be enlightened on the subject, and, in an even more merry atmosphere at the Singapore Medical Association's 22nd Annual Dinner and Dance on 25 April. The good doctors' main course for that dinner was a discourse on censorship by my colleague, the Minister of State for Home Affairs and Chairman of the Review Committee, Prof S Jayakumar, whose well-thought out arguments I had the privilege to savour from the newspapers at breakfast the morning after.

I was tempted to earn a free lunch today without having to work for it by recommending for your reading Prof Jayakumar's speech. It was a post-mortem of the work of the Review Committee, most appropriate for a gathering of the medical profession. Prof Jayakumar had, in his speech, competently underscored the more salient points and elaborated at length on the rationale on which the Committee based its recommendations. I entirely concur with his views.

I need not justify the presence of censorship laws for films and undesirable publications, nor do I want to apologise for what the Ministry has been doing and will continue to do. I have been engrossed in this subject since my first tour of duty at the Ministry of Culture. The subject did not leave my mind even during my furlough from this Ministry. When I returned to this Ministry last year, I promised myself that I should not view the Ministry's roles and functions in the same light as when I left it at the end of 1971. Many things have changed and priorities have changed too. I found, however, that my views on censorship have not deviated very much from the basic principle I have held. The only concession I am prepared to concede is the question of whether we should continue to adhere to the same rigidity and stringent criteria, now that Singapore has been transformed into a comparatively more affluent society and people have changed too.

I am not against avantgardism, although misguided ones can be dangerous. But I am certainly not amenable to those who champion any new-found, adapted, or to put it more crudely, aped, inspiration based on social settings totally alien to us. I concede, nevertheless, that there is a need for us to re-examine our attitude to be more attuned to the present day susceptibility and receptibility to changes to our social and moral fabric. Indeed, changes there have been already for several years now. The findings of the Review Committee justified and reinforced our views. I shall show statistical figures later to bear this out.

Censorship has been given its worst regards by the liberalists. (I use this term in its most liberal sense. To be a liberalist is different from trying to liberate others). Censorship has been variously described by the liberalists as being an instrument of repression, repugnant and obnoxious to modern society. There is nothing wrong to be liberal-minded. I myself do hold high certain ideals, some of which are unachievable during my lifetime but nevertheless remain worthy pursuits. However, I do know that there is also a difference between physical modernity and ethnic morality. Therefore, I have always tempered my own liberal ideals with a conscience and acute awareness of our social, cultural religious and ethnic environment. These are our practical

considerations, concerns, and constraints which I am sure the sober liberals will not hesitate to share with me.

To those well-intentioned people who are conscious of our social setting, they are more kind to us and regard censorship as a necessary evil. These are the well-meaning apologists.

As for myself, I say that censorship is not repressive insofar as it serves as an instrument to enhance society's quality of life; it is not repugnant as it protects the people from social, religious and cultural frictions; it is not obnoxious as it prevents impingement against the pride and moral code of our many ethnic groups and, it is certainly not evil, necessary or otherwise, as it precisely rejects evil.

I call it a social obligation incumbent upon an elected government which carries a mandate from a multi-racial electorate. Who should decide for whom? It is not a question of arrogance on the part of the government. We do not need to apologise for assuming the responsibility expected of us.

There has been no lack of comments in the press on the subject. I must say that I agree with each and everyone of these sometimes highly subjective and, at times, amusing comments. This is not a bold statement on my part which will commit the Ministry one way or the other. I say so in full confidence because there are sufficient controversies among the many critics - with each view counteracting the other, disproving the other, and each adequately representing its special interest group and therefore valid to that extent.

The battle-front seems clearly drawn, though. It looks like the English press versus the Chinese, Malay and Indian press collectively, with the government caught in cross-fire. Those who have been exposed to Western social and moral norms have faulted us, almost incessantly, for being too unrealistically restrictive (to put it kindly) in the application of censorship standards. In a way, they are right, speaking from the stand-points of their own exposure, aplomb, experience and values and on behalf of their like-minded peer groups. I do not want to fault them for their views, quite legitimately expressed. I only

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hope they realise that there are other people who may not have the privilege of being 'sophisticated' enough to be in the same peer groups of ladies and gentlemen. To put it simply, one peer group's pleasure is another peer group's plague.

These are respectable ladies and gentlemen, obviously more gentlemen than ladies; after all feminine modesty is still very much alive in Singapore. I respect them as such, forgiving them at the same time for their rather disoriented vision of Singapore's society. They are 'men of the world' who have seen almost anything and everything. Nothing can 'corrupt' them any more than they have been 'corrupted', figuratively speaking, that is. They claim that they are capable of deciding what is good or bad for themselves and for their children. Their capability in this respect is acknowledged, and their right to do so is not challenged. I concede this. But they cannot, and should not be given the right to decide for the others as much as they accused the government of deciding for them.

Fortunately, those who carry the discussion in the media have not been without restraint. Providence be praised! However, it is not so with those others who, having apparently the good fortune of settling down to a comfortable life, find time and great pleasure in writing anonymous letters. I, and I believe, my Minister and the other colleagues too, have received many such letters. As a rule, I do not entertain anonymous letters. It is an unfair game - one gets indicted on the wrong charge without the opportunity to even mitigate! I am wary of dealing with faceless people.

Sometimes, I do read them though, for amusement and comic relief! I do notice an interesting and distinctive 'syndrome' in these letters. The letters in English were, in most cases, written with very good command of the language, which I admired, but invariably abusive.

My colleagues and I have been called many names - the ultra-leftists and rightists in the mid Fifties and the Sixties had been particularly imaginative and generous in bestowing these 'honours' on us, but they were never as debasing as the new glossary we now acquire from these obviously higher educated gentlemen.

I was treated to one such honour recently. Its arrival was timely and I have kept it instead of consigning it to the waste-paper basket as I normally would do. The presentation was not conventional in this instance, deliberately so to add to the breach of decency, but the language was, as usual, good and of course, abusive. It was consoling only because I have received worse compositions than this.

I risk opening up a sensitive controversy by attaching a copy of this letter to my speech, minus the page which contained an even more offensive photograph. But I think it is about time we came out to the open and show by this representative example, the extent to which a person, or worse, if the letter was a collective composition, will go to exert his views with total disregard to the sensitivity of, and the respect for, another community. The author apparently knew the government organisation very well. He knew who to address his disgusting composition - he got the departments and titles quite correct. He had the money too, as he threatened to send out 5,000 photo copies (10,000 pieces with the attachment) of his letter. Is there a need to abuse another community to get one's views through?

Although the letter concerned itself with film censorship, it is representative of those others which complained of censorship of publications. I realise I risk the possibility of giving credence to a case of a psychopath, but all the others who have been writing more abusive letters and with even better command of the language cannot be as mad too! Or were they?

I did, however, receive more consoling, and certainly more sensible letters, including a few from religious organisations and people who gave their names and addresses. This time, they faulted us for being too liberal. They were mostly written in Chinese and Malay, and a few in English. The Malay and Chinese petitions have many things in common. They were written with equally good command of the languages as their English-language counterparts. The contents in these letters were philosophical, always attempting to rationalise the subject matter, putting forth their view points in terms respectful to the other communities. In most cases, they were written in earnest and never, never,

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abusive, although a few smack of bigotry and being too puritanical. Most of these complaints made it quite clear their fear and reservations for further relaxation of censorship standards. Many did not hide their disgust for those who advocated for more liberalisation and accused them for being perverse in seeking personal pleasure without regards to others.

The misconception of censorship is widespread. Strangely, it is often on the most decent occasions that censorship has been given its most unfair twist. It is at these social gatherings that the ill-perceived idea on censorship pervades and when the so-called 'ugly censors' had darts thrown on them by these refined, highly educated, and seemingly well-informed personages. On one such occasion, I too became the dartboard. I was unabashed, of course, being quite used to this kind of situation. I was not so sure if I emerged unmarked in the circumstances which I will now relate.

I was confronted, of all the charming ladies present, by the university-graduate wife of a high business executive. She alleged that my Ministry had detained a certain book and banned a certain TV film, and demanded that I should forthwith provide her with the reasons. I asked for the titles of the book and the film. She could not name the book but succeeded to identify the TV film which she enjoyed on video all the same. I congratulated her for her knowledge of that piece of information and enquired how she came to know of the banning, myself being unaware of it, adding that we could probably accommodate her talent in the SBC. She reasoned that if the film was not banned, why was it not shown over the TV! How simplistic! I took pains to explain that the SBC had to cater for four languages and it was not possible to find a slot for this particular film which was not banned at all, and that a better film had been chosen to fill the slot allotted. To enlighten her on the danger of such simplistic and arrogantly ignorant conclusion, I cautioned that one could not naively conclude that because a married couple had no offspring, the marriage was not consummated. It was a rough answer, I admit, but a manly lady was entitled to a manly answer. That analogy put to a stop effectively the interrogation of me. This

episode reflects the disgruntlement against censorship that has been built up by these ladies and gentlemen.

Where do we go from here? Do we want a cumbersome classification of publications? Do we want to declare that a certain book be read only by an exclusive group of people of a certain educational level? That a book which impinges on the sensitivity of one ethnic group be barred for reading by this group only but be made available to the other groups? Do we want a classification of accessibility to publications by race, religion, culture, educational level, income, and social status? This is a ridiculous proposition and a non-starter.

What is the alternative? I believe a sensible censorship policy is the only practical way to balance the diversified interests of our people.

Let me now break the myth that the government has been repressive and intransigent on the matter of censorship (of publications). The attached statistics should break the back of those stubborn protagonists against the censors (Annex A). We have not been detaining publications by the tons, quite contrary to the popular impression.

Only less than half a per cent of the titles imported are detained. Most of these are cheap novels which are morally objectionable. The others have been found to be either blatantly exploiting religious/communal sensitivity, or politically incompatible with the practice of democracy - inciting or advocating subversion of the democratic system by means of violence. Included in the detention list too are many bizarre comics which are harmful to young readers. Comics, as you might already know, have also been used by religious propagandists to capture the minds of the innocent young and to draw them into bigotry and fanaticism.

It is true that one or two best-seller novels have also been disallowed. I have reviewed the detention decisions and upheld the ban as the pith and substance of these books are blatantly obscene, vulgar and exploitative of sex. There was some hullabaloo over their detentions, I was told. I hope it was not inspired by those who had vested interests in their release.

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There has been relaxation over the years. Unfortunately, no statistics have been kept until recent time. From the figures given for the last three years, there should be no cause for alarm. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised when I had sight of these figures, bearing in mind the many constraints we have to exercise and which I explained earlier. Perhaps, what is alarming is that the falsehood on censorship policy persisted and gained credence. You will also note in Annex A that the number of English publications detained constituted only 0.19 per cent for the year 1981 and 0.07 per cent for the first six months of 1982. This should be of particular interest to you as most, if not all of you present here, deal in English publications.

Of course, it may be argued that this does not show the real picture. It is true that by and large, our booksellers have also been exercising some restraint on their part. It would have been quite different if censorship is lifted altogether. What will happen then? The answer is simple. Boom for our publishers and booksellers and doom for Singapore. Given the situation as it is, we have not done too badly.

I do not wish to go through once again the recommendations of the Review Committee on Censorship. They have been given extensive publicity in the media. Two of the Committee's recommendations are of special significance. The first is that the "Guidelines used in the censorship of publications" be made known to the book importers and libraries. I should think the ordinary people should not be deprived of this knowledge. A copy of the Guidelines is at Annex B.

The other recommendation concerns the setting up of an advisory panel. This is a good proposal as it will give our censors the benefit of a continuous flow of third opinions from members of the panel. My Ministry is in the process of scouting for suitable people to serve on the panel. They should come from a cross-section of the communities and they must be able to advise on the possible impact or influence a certain publication will have on the ordinary people. I have proposed to my Permanent Secretary that the suitable candidates should be those who have

experience in community and social work, including professionals who have dedicated themselves to serve the common people. The CCCs, MCs and RCs provide a rich pool of such people in addition to those whom we have identified as having proper insight and appreciation of the peculiarity of our society. Details of their terms of responsibility are now being worked out, including a discussion with the Treasury on the quantum of honorarium for their services.

Censorship notwithstanding, the book trade has done well. Generally, it is in a healthy state and improving in performance. I called for a report on the book trade from the Director of the National Library. The report shows that the volume of import of books increased from 1979 to 1980 but somewhat went down in 1981. (See Annex C). The volume of re-export, however, registered a downtrend from 1980 to 1981. I suspect the slackened performance might be due to international market conditions, or that our traditional clients might have established direct contacts with the overseas suppliers, or due to exchange rate fluctuation. More likely, it is a combination of all these factors.

A healthy trend is detected in the domestic exports of books, that is, books printed or published in Singapore, which nearly doubled in value between 1980 and 1981. Local publishers and booksellers appear to be able to export more local books to the overseas markets. A positive point worthy of note is that local institutional buyers are also increasing, as more school libraries are being set up. The National Library has, in its development programme, a number of branch libraries to be completed in the next few years. Other large libraries are expanding too, thus increasing the volume of business for our booksellers.

I have also asked for statistics for bookselling in Singapore, (Annex D). The figures show an upward trend from 1975 to 1979 but seem to fall below the 1973 value. The 1973 figures included stationery which bore no direct weightage to the sale of books, magazines and paper products. This probably resulted in the sharp drop from 1973 to 1975 but since then, the performance has been impressive.

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The Director, National Library, has given me more valuable advice. In her view, and I agree with her, the greatest need in the bookselling trade is in the area of professionalism in the running of bookshops, and the expertise in market studies on the types of books which are popular with the reading public. Promotional efforts appear to be minimal too. More can be done in this respect than the few promotion programmes mounted by a handful of bookshops, although the larger ones did advertise over the TV.

Another area for our booksellers to look into is the setting up of specialised bookshops. Already, there are a number of bookshops which specialise in scientific, technical or medical books. Other specialised bookshops can cater for the needs of the other disciplines of the professions, such as law, accountancy, architecture and engineering and computer science, etc.

Much has been done to encourage children to read. This is another area which has need for specialised service. Bookshops specialising in children's books are aplenty in many developed countries. This may well be a profitable venture for our local booksellers to embark on, after all, children as a group, are the single largest reading public.

I am afraid that I cannot allow the occasion to pass without thinking aloud my concern for the high price of books. It is a self-defeating exercise when our publishers and booksellers have pledged their support to encourage the reading habit while at the same time, the mark-up prices for books remain high, indeed prohibitive, to the lower income group. I have been told that booksellers generally conceded this but directed the blame to the publisher-agents or suppliers at source. This single factor might well negate the good works of the National Book Development Council and the Ministry of Education. I propose a dialogue be opened between the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Education, the National Book Development Council, CASE, the Booksellers' Association, and the National Library to see if anything could be done to make books cheaper for the reading public. I realise that it is a complex problem but, in the long run, cheaper

books mean more readers and will benefit both the book trade and the people.

The book trade has a bright and profitable future, even with the presence of censorship laws. From the business point of view, I should think that censorship is a lesser obstacle, if at all it is, than the lack of professionalism and entrepreneurship in this trade.

On that count, may I submit that the government be cleared of the charge for the 'offence' it has committed in the interest of and for the good of our people. Defence rests.

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STATISTICS ON PUBLICATIONS1 9 8 0

	<u>Titles Imported</u>	<u>Titles Detained</u>	<u>%</u>
Chinese Publications	48,395	352	0.73
English "	135,020	284	0.21
Malay "	2,935	-	-
Tamil "	4,587	-	-
Other "	45,455	84	0.18
TOTAL:	236,392	720	0.30

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Chinese Publications	45,988	250	0.54
English "	146,821	283	0.19
Malay "	2,276	33	1.45
Tamil "	6,618	20	0.30
Other "	36,701	41	0.11
TOTAL:	238,404	627	0.26

1 9 8 2 (JAN - JUN)

Chinese Publications	33,593	103	0.31
English "	86,084	60	0.07
Malay "	876	2	0.23
Tamil "	3,636	-	-
Other "	27,071	78	0.29
TOTAL:	151,260	243	0.16

NOTE: The above figures refer to printed matters only.
Gramophone records and cassette tapes excluded.

CENSORSHIP GUIDELINES FOR PUBLICATIONS

1 The recommendations on censorship guidelines by the Review Committee on Censorship are at pages 31 - 33 of the Committee Report.

2 A summary of the guidelines is given below:

- (a) Publications depicting undesirable themes eg sexual permissiveness, sexual perversions, incest, indecency, drug abuse and excessive violence etc are considered objectionable.
- (b) Publications with vivid and detailed sexual descriptions are not allowed. However, where the publications are well-written, the main theme and purpose are not objectionable and the sexual descriptions are not crude, they are released.
- (c) Nude pictures and photos are allowed in educational and scientific books. They are also allowed in photography books and magazines if they are not obscene.
- (d) Books with illustrations of sexual positions are not allowed eg Joy of Sex.
- (e) Calendars portraying nudes are not allowed because, unlike magazines, they are displayed openly in offices and public places.
- (f) Songs that have lyrics with drug or obscene connotations are disallowed.
- (g) Publications eg posters and songs which are mainly intended for public display, viewing or hearing should come in for the closest scrutiny.
- (h) Publications which include illustrations and photographs and publications which consist exclusively of illustrations (these include comics) should also be carefully scrutinised.
- (i) Publications which consist exclusively of printed words can be treated more liberally, provided that the pith and substance of the book is not obscene, vulgar or exploitative of sex.

Import and Export of Books, 1979-81

	<u>IMPORTS</u>		<u>DOMESTIC* EXPORTS</u>		<u>RF-EXPORTS**</u>		<u>EXPORTS#</u>	
	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Value(\$)</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Value(\$)</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Value(\$)</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Value(\$)</u>
1979	15,446,346	46,557,646	38,273,366	64,431,078	6,541,932	27,210,782	44,815,293	91,641,860
1980	26,895,336	68,020,000	26,583,563	45,495,000	20,160,319	59,599,000	46,743,892	105,094,000
1981	19,477,871	66,083,000	45,110,829	96,100,000	6,538,839	39,253,000	54,649,663	135,358,000

Items include: dictionary & encyclopaedia, textbooks, other printed books
& booklets, textual matter in sheets & children's picture books.

Source: Singapore Trade Statistics. Imports & Exports 1979-80.

* i.e. originating wholly in Singapore

** i.e. imported into Singapore and re-exported without any addition
or change in product

Domestic exports + re-exports.

Summary of Bookselling Statistics 1973-

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>WHOLESALE</u> ¹	<u>RETAILS</u> ²	<u>T O T A L</u> <u>\$000</u>
1973	166,347 ³	58,421	224,768
1975	65,856	61,370	127,226
1977	87,366	78,979	166,345
1979	110,923	94,159	205,082

1 Includes books and magazines

2 Includes books, magazine and paper products

3 Includes paper, stationery and publications

Source: Report on the census of wholesale and retail trades, restaurants and hotels, 1973-79.