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OPENING ADDRESS BY MR GOH CHOK TONG,
FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE,
AT THE CONFERENCE ON "SINGAPORE AND THE US INTO THE 1990'S"
AT FLETCHER SCHOOL OF LAW AND DIPLOMACY, MASSACHUSETTS, USA,
ON 6 NOVEMBER 1985

SINGAPORE INTO THE 1990'S:
CHANGES BUT CONSTANCY

I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to such a distinguished and well-informed audience. The topic given to me is "Singapore into the 1990s". I do not, however, possess a crystal ball, nor have I learnt the occult art of reading tea leaves. My profession is less esoteric.

As a politician, I want to jump into the topic not from the flimsy plank of a fortune-teller, but from the firm platform of a practitioner who is entrusted by the people to lead them into the 1990s. In other words, I do not want to gaze mystically into Singapore's future. Rather, I want to discuss the manner in which we choose to enter the 1990s, and show you the direction we shall take.

I shall paint you a picture of what we plan to do before and after Mr Lee Kuan Yew steps down as Prime Minister, and describe the measures which we plan to take to ensure continued political stability, and why. I shall then outline the core values of our society, and finally, sketch how Singapore sees its place in the region and the international community of nations.

First, the political picture. Come 1990, barring unforeseen circumstances, Singapore will have a new Prime Minister. Mr Lee Kuan Yew will be 67 years old. He will be two years past the normal retirement age of chief executives of big multi-national companies, as he has put it, but young compared with President Reagan, and China's Deng Xiaoping. But unlike them, he would have led Singapore for 31 years. This is a lot of one's life for a person to give to his country.

But that is hardly the reason for his early retirement.

PREDICTABLE LEADERSHIP CHANGES

In Singapore, we believe that the governing of a country is too serious a matter to be left to chance. Changes in political leadership should be planned, and carried out smoothly and quietly. We don't play poker with it. So we put our cards on the table, face up. If we pick our cards right, Mr Lee's retirement, when it takes place, will be a non-event.

You in the United States have long established political traditions and institutions. You are big, strong and rich. You can afford to change your President regularly, and even unpredictably. Running the United States is like being in command of an aircraft carrier. You will not capsize. Steering a small and young country is more like shooting rapids in a canoe. We are at the mercy of the external elements - the velocity of world trade expansion, the economic rocks, and the international political turns and twists. We need the best skills to survive the rapids. We cannot change our helmsman randomly.

Let me elaborate on this. We have eight political parties contesting our general elections regularly. Imagine if they were of equal political strength and each tried to be the helmsman. Imagine a series of coalition governments, with constant bickering and unending unstable compromises. Imagine the fate of the country, if the outcome of every election were a cliff-hanger. Picture to yourself the frenzied supporters, the jostling for power, the excitement, the uncertainty, the catastrophe. There would be total chaos.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

In Singapore, we have not worked a two-party system. Many people believe that such a two-party system, with two parties of equal but opposing strength, is a necessary feature of democracy. The rationale for this view is that only then will the voters have a real choice of an alternative government. Nobody likes to be given Hobson's choice. That may be so. But for it to work the two parties must share the same fundamental values. For Singapore, our political history has thrown up the model of a major party and a few small ones. The model has worked. I think it has worked because the finite available talent has been gathered to work together for the country, instead of being dissipated over two or more parties. Unlike the United States, our political talent pool is just too small for us to share equally between two parties. Better for us to concentrate our limited talents in one main party and have it represent the broad majority of the population. It does not make sense to keep half of our best people in opposition all the time. That is why we regularly comb the length and breadth of the country for suitable candidates to stand on the governing party ticket. We even co-opt those who disagree with us on certain policies provided they share our core values.

Our political system, therefore, will have to be firmly built on the basis of national consensus. For the foreseeable future, this means one major party and several minor ones. Of course, the system must allow any other political parties which wish to contest for power to do so, taking the risk that should the main party lose the mandate to rule, and one of the opposition parties is elected, the country will probably be ruined. I hasten to add that the major party will remain so only if it espouses the aspirations of the majority of Singaporeans. Its leaders and the people must share the same broad ideals, the same core values, the same vision of what they want their society to be. If the PAP, the party to which I belong, does not do this, then another party which does will become the major party. I believe this philosophy of government will best serve the interests of Singaporeans.

NEW LEADERSHIP IN PLACE

Singapore has progressed rapidly in the last 20 years under this system of one major party and several minor ones. There has been no tug-of-war for political leadership since our independence. It has known only one ruling party and one Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has given Singapore political stability. He has made democracy work, not just in the sense of holding elections honestly and regularly, but in the real sense of building a nation from scratch and giving its people a better life.

Before Mr Lee retires as Prime Minister, the new leaders will be in place to take over the governing of Singapore. There will be no tug-of-war. We have seen many countries destroyed because of the internal fight for power. Even now, we can see this happening in many parts of the world.

PERPETUATING POLITICAL STABILITY

Our job as new leaders is two-fold: to build on what we have, and to ensure another generation of political stability after us.

Democracy with its one-man-one-vote system is not easy to run. All of us who operate such a system know how difficult it is to persuade an electorate to stick to a government through thick and thin, through good and bad times, through election after election. We have to contend with self-proclaimed "miracle workers", changing public mood, and electoral amnesia.

Electoral amnesia can set in after a prolonged period of peace and plenty. Singaporeans are no more homeless, jobless, or lean and hungry like before.

What all this means is that half the Singaporeans have not personally experienced the pain of prolonged unemployment and hunger, struggle and suffering, racial antagonism and riots. These are the younger Singaporeans under 35 years of age.

As Singaporeans' personal knowledge and recollection of Singapore's birth-pangs and rag-and-bone childhood fade, the old bonds between the people and the leaders loosen. It is these bonds, forged through common struggle and suffering in the infant days of Singapore, that have contributed to our long years of political stability. It is these bonds that may be missing when the new leaders take over from Lee Kuan Yew. It is these bonds between the people and the leaders that must be replaced by new bonds before 1990.

To forge these bonds we have first to reach an accord with our people on how to make political stability endure. We emphasize political stability because it is the pre-condition for peace and progress, development and prosperity.

We emphasize it again and again because we do not take it for granted. We may have had political stability for 20 years, but we cannot simply extrapolate it to the next 20 years. Unlike you, we do not have strong democratic traditions and institutions. We have not even seen any change of national leadership. We recognise that mishaps can happen. To minimise the risk of political mishaps, we shall strengthen the institutions and values that make for political stability.

Parliamentary democracy is still a relatively new experience for us. It is new to Asian societies. It has to evolve in a manner that will best serve the interests of our people.

For a small country like Singapore, we always worry about freak election results. A demagogue, or a honey-tongued politician, can cause an election upset. If he then becomes a great Prime Minister, all will be well. If he cannot follow up his victory with effective government, disaster will befall the country. Once the country has a great fall we cannot possibly stick Humpty Dumpty together again.

IMPROVING THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

We want to build safeguards to our system of representative government. These safeguards will function like the stabilizers of a ship. They will reduce the risk of the country being capsized by unexpected waves. This way, we will make democracy in Singapore durable, not just for the next 10 years, but for another generation or two.

Let me elaborate on these stabilizers - an elected President and devolution of municipal responsibilities.

(A) ELECTED PRESIDENT

We have decided in principle that there should be a popularly elected President for Singapore. This will replace the present system of a President elected by Parliament every four years. The details will take some time to work out. They will be put to Parliament when ready. Under the present system, the President acts on the advice of the Prime Minister. With the proposed system, the President will be vested with veto powers in certain areas. He will not have the powers of President Reagan. The Prime Minister will remain the Chief Executive of the country. But in areas where the President is vested with veto powers, the Prime Minister has to have his concurrence. The areas which we have in mind relate to the use of the country's financial reserves. These reserves, including those accumulated by previous governments from the same party, cannot be freely spent without the President's agreement. The President, for example, may withhold his consent if the Cabinet proposes to spend the reserves on wasteful programmes or projects. This way, we have an additional safeguard against our financial reserves being squandered by a potentially profligate government.

If I may use an analogy, it is like locking our financial reserves in a safe which requires two keys to open it. The Prime Minister holds one key and the President, the other key. For this reason, the President has to be elected by the people, to give him moral authority.

In a sense, this is not unlike the checks and balances of your system, where power is divided between the President and Congress.

I think the Italians will appreciate why we are making this proposal. There is an Italian proverb which says, "Public money is like holy water. Everyone helps himself to it".

(B) DEVOLUTION OF MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITIES

In addition to the concept of an elected President, we are exploring another idea. This is to devolve municipal responsibilities to the Members of Parliament, and local community leaders, where practicable. We are considering the feasibility of forming several town councils to manage our larger public housing estates with Members of Parliament in charge.

Let me explain the objective of this idea. We want the voters to share in the responsibility of looking after their own environment. We want them to share this with their Members of Parliament. We want them to pay greater attention to the competence and integrity of the people who are entrusted to run their constituency and the country.

We think it is too easy for anyone to enter Parliament. All that is required is that he be a Singapore citizen and at least 21 years old. Stringent criteria, like those required before one can become an airline pilot or public accountant, are missing. There is no test of competence. There is no requirement of integrity of character. This is a task left to political parties but not all parties screen or pre-qualify their candidates. The responsibility is then passed on to the electorate.

The voters cannot really know the competence, or even the integrity of the candidates, particularly, if they are new candidates. But they can be encouraged to pay greater attention to this.

The practical way to do this is to let voters experience more directly the impact of their choice. Getting elected Members of Parliament to perform also as local councillors, is a practical way to bring this about. Voters will benefit if they elect competent MPs, and realise very quickly if they have elected incompetent MPs. With such a system, voters are likely to scrutinise election candidates more thoroughly and vote for the party they want to run their lives. This way, we also compel political parties to upgrade the quality of their candidates. Thus, we minimize the risk of the country falling into incompetent or wrong hands.

There can, however, be no institutional solutions which guarantee absolute safety for a nation. We can add stabilizers to the political system to make it harder for the country to be capsized. But we can never prevent it if the people are bent on rocking it. True stabilizers must be found in an educated, responsible and realistic electorate, who know the pitfalls of their political system, and by their actions steer clear of these pitfalls. Our institutional changes are designed to remedy some of the pitfalls. They are part of our political maturing process.

A SHARE IN THE COUNTRY

We are still evolving our political system to ensure democracy endure under local conditions. The real foundation for stability, however, lies in giving our people a stake in the country. No group must feel that it is excluded from progress and prosperity. Let everyone have his share of the fruits of progress.

What stakes do we give Singaporeans? There are many - a way of life, security, freedom from fear, freedom to pursue a purposeful life. These are intangible, but

nevertheless, very real stakes. We also give them tangible stakes. Let me touch on two of these - social security through high personal savings, and a home for every family.

Every employee is required to save 25 per cent of his monthly salary in a Central Provident Fund. The employer contributes another 25 per cent. In other words, workers save 40 per cent (ie, 50 per cent out of 125 per cent) of their wages every month. These funds are the nest-eggs for old age, and for meeting certain contingencies like hospitalisation expenses. They can be used to buy a home and for other investments like shares and gold.

At present, about 70 per cent of our people own the homes they live in. We aim to make Singapore a fully home-owning society by 1999. We will work towards giving every family a home of his own, not a rented one, but a home bought and owned by the family. Then Singaporeans will have an interest in making Singapore succeed.

CORE VALUES

Now, let me move on to briefly discuss the core values we want to entrench in our society.

Singapore is a free market economy. We encourage free enterprise and reward it accordingly. The driving force of our progress is the desire of each citizen to develop himself, to fulfil his potential to the fullest. We recognise the same urge in those foreign companies that come to Singapore. We have heard, more frequently of late, that Singapore is over-regulated, that our rules and regulations inhibit creativity and enterprise. It may be true. Or it may be just a feeling. But we are looking into it. Rules, regulations and bureaucratic practices which inhibit enterprise and creativity will be loosened, or removed. For we believe in the free market.

But Singapore will not be a free-wheeling society. Free-wheeling may get us the quick profits but they will not make profits permanent. Our older businessmen used to settle deals worth millions of dollars with just a phone call or over a meal. No contracts. No fancy paperwork. No Harvard MBA's. Only each other's reputation. In business relationships, there are no greater assets than honesty, integrity, trust and credibility. These are the assets we want to enhance.

We will entrench these values, and other core values like integrity of government, incorruptibility of the civil service, equality of opportunity, reward according to performance and contribution, and pursuit of excellence. We have no natural resources. These values will have to be our natural resources. If we lose them, we will have to depend on wheeling and dealing to make a living. That is not the kind of society we want to build for our children. To lose core values like the integrity of government and meritocracy is to dig our own grave. These are values which any rational western democracy would have.

We respect personal freedom and we respect the individual's right to choose the government he wants. But as an Asian I believe that for a society to endure people must not place their individual sectional interests above the collective interests of the society. Singapore certainly will not survive, if, for example, each ethnic group seeks to advance its own interests by trampling over the interests of others. Ours must remain an oriental society. We need eastern values not only to give us a sense of history and perspective, to know where we have come from but also because these values are still germane. They will help us to survive together in a rapidly changing and often confusing world.

VIEW OF THE WORLD

Now, let me pass on to our place in the world. I will be singing a familiar tune here. But I thought you would like to know that the song does not change with the singer.

Singapore is a small country, but we do not drift aimlessly. We are not a piece of flotsam. We have a definite place in the world, and a definite view of life, and of what is right and wrong. Whether it is 1985 or 1995, I expect that we will be guided by the same basic philosophy that every country, big or small, has a right to be itself. It has a right to live, a right to its own way of life. From this philosophy, springs our foreign policy, and our defence policy. We will be friends with anyone who wishes to be friends with us. We are not, and will not, be aligned with any bloc, though our ties are closer with the West than with the Communist bloc of countries.

The reason for this seemingly asymmetrical relationship is simple. We have a free and open market. We live on trade and trade to live. We trade more with the West than with the centrally planned economies. Our political and economic institutions are patterned after the West's. We are plugged into the Western grid.

Our ties with the West, particularly the United States, are close, both in economic and strategic terms. The West and, in particular, the United States are our major source of capital, markets, managerial know-how and technology.

What is even more important is that the United States is a key factor in the global balance of power.

Its presence in Southeast Asia makes an essential contribution to regional stability. Another important element is ASEAN, the Association of South-east Asian Nations comprising Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore.

All the ASEAN countries have benefited from the stable environment that their regional cooperation has helped to create. Singapore is neither a gladiator nor a spectator in the ASEAN economic arena. It is an equal shareholder of ASEAN. It benefits from and contributes to the development of its neighbours.

In the next decade, there is likely to be a new set of leaders in five of the six ASEAN countries. Except for the Sultan of Brunei, the present leaders of Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, will move into their 70s, in that order. We see the need for the likely successor leaders to build bridges now.

Over the last decade, a relatively stable regional order has emerged through the efforts of the ASEAN countries to minimise their differences, achieve closer cooperation and oppose foreign aggression in Cambodia. There is a very high degree of self-reliance. We are the dominoes that did not fall. But the current tranquillity should not be a reason for inaction by the US. The huge Soviet military build-up in the 1970s and 1980s has meant an increased Soviet military presence in East and Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union is poised to challenge the US in the Asia-Pacific region. It is in the interest of the US and other free societies in the region that the Soviet build-up be matched by an enhanced American presence, economic and strategic. The United States has managed well its relationship with the ASEAN region. It must build on this amicable relationship with renewed vigour and spirit.

CONCLUSION

Now let me sum up my main points. Come 1990, we would have an elected President working in tandem with a new Prime Minister. The Singapore Cabinet will not have men from the Old Guard. It will consist entirely of men from the New Guard. Actually, the term "New Guard" is a misnomer. My colleague, the Second Deputy Prime Minister, will have been in politics for 17 years. I will have been at it for 13 years.

There will be no compromise on getting the best to serve the country. Singapore, being a small nation that can be tossed about by external events, needs her best sons and daughters to steer the country.

There will be no compromise on fundamental values. There will be no erosion of the core values that are essential for Singapore's survival. Singapore will be nimble in responding to external and internal developments. Policy measures may change but its philosophy of government, its values, and perception of its role in ASEAN and the international society will remain unchanged. It will speak out for peace and stability. It will work for peace and stability in the region.

Singapore is a young nation. It is a society on the move. Its political system will evolve to serve its own needs. There will be changes in the face of the city, and a change of guard in government. But when you come to Singapore in 1990, and move around the changed city, even without Mr Lee Kuan Yew in the driver's seat, you will not get lost amongst the new developments. You will see the familiar sign posts, the same core values and operating principles of government, and feel the same warmth of welcome. There will be changes, but we will remain constant. You will find in Singapore a stable, honest and reliable friend.

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