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ADDRESS BY MR GOH CHOK TONG,
PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE,
AT THE CONGRATULATORY DINNER IN HONOUR OF
HIS APPOINTMENT AS PRIME MINISTER
AT RAFFLES BALLROOM, WESTIN STAMFORD HOTEL
ON MONDAY, 29 APRIL 1991 AT 8.00 PM

Thank you for honoring me tonight, and for your open show of support. I will always cherish this occasion. It helps to know that there are people who want to share my burden. I shall do my best for Singapore, for the professionals, for everyone.

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I must be the world's luckiest Prime Minister, or the unluckiest, depending on how you look at it. Luckiest because I took over Singapore in a perfect working condition. The economy hums beautifully. The reserves are sound. We live in harmony. There are no major problems, no ethnic discord, no religious strife. Indeed, everything that has to be done has been done.

And it is precisely because Mr Lee Kuan Yew has done such a thorough job of everything that I may be considered as unlucky to have succeeded him. He has left me with so few things to do. What new hills are there left to climb? What challenges are there to raise your pulse rate? How can anyone improve on his accomplishments?

We already have the world's best airport, the busiest seaport, the best workforce, the best public housing program, the cleanest city, the newest MRT, and an airline which even other people talk about. How does one better best?

But "best" is a relative, not an absolute value. And excellence will slide into mediocrity if we don't maintain standards. Our first challenge is to maintain high standards. We must not let standards drop.

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But we can do more. We have the vision. We have the resources.

Singaporeans have the organization, the ability, and the drive. Over the next few years, we shall go for upgrading. We shall upgrade public housing, roads, schools, universities, hospitals, parks and playgrounds, telecommunications, skills, the economy, the city, the environment. We will tap know how, ideas, our

people's energy to upgrade our quality of life. I see an even more beautiful Singapore in 1999.

We must upgrade not only the material aspects of Singapore, but also improve the intangible aspects of living. People want to be involved in shaping Singapore's future. They want to feel wanted and appreciated. We encourage their constructive participation. Through participatory democracy, I want to involve informed and interested Singaporeans in the serious business of looking after Singapore.

Singapore is not my responsibility alone, nor my Cabinet colleagues'. It is our collective responsibility. My style of participative government is to foster this sense of collective and individual responsibility in protecting and advancing the interests of Singapore. I am pleased that your members understand the need to contribute, to play your part in building a better Singapore. Some people think the political leaders are the runners and they are mere spectators. They are wrong. If the Government stumbles and falls, Singapore is hurt too. We are all runners, competing against other countries for investments, for markets, for economic growth so that we can have a higher standards of living. I am glad that we are running the next lap together.

We want people to share their ideas on how to make Singapore a better and better place. We will actively involve them. In town planning, public housing designs, HDB refurbishing and landscaping, we are involving private sector architects. In town councils, residents assume responsibility for the management of their estates. We invite similar participation in other areas.

Wherever possible, we will provide more information for people to understand better how certain public policies are arrived at. We will, unless there are compelling reasons for secrecy, make public factual and analytical material used in the course of formulating policy. This will allow Singaporeans to make informed judgment and better decisions.

I want to continue with my consultation style of government.

But, I hope that Singaporeans will understand that consultation does not mean consulting every Singaporean on every public policy before it is implemented. That is not possible nor desirable. There are times when it is not possible to consult before announcement. Take for example, the recent anti-hijack operation on the SIA plane. The decision to storm the aircraft was a professional decision. It required judgment. It had to be taken quickly, within a

matter of minutes. If families of the hijacked victims had to be consulted, there would have been a few dead passengers.

Most public policies would, of course, not require the same pressing time frame for a decision to be made. But they would still require the same kind of cool, objective, logical approach, the careful weighing of alternatives, and sound judgment as the anti - hijack operation.

I will practice my consultative style of government so long as it works. I will consult knowledgeable people and experts before firming my decision. But I will never govern by popular polls. To make decisions on the basis of their popularity is the surest way to ruin Singapore.

Singapore is a small place and many people feel hemmed in. We have to create more space for Singaporeans, not just physical space, but more important, economic, social and intellectual space. This is a most important task. Only by making more space for people to move about, by creating more space for their enterprises to expand and by giving plenty of space for the mind to explore can we have a beautiful land, a land of thriving opportunities and a land of exciting ideas.

We can reclaim more land, and create more space for more vehicles by building underground roads at critical junctions. We can allocate more land for social amenities. For example, we will build a couple of public golf courses. Then, those who cannot afford or don't want to pay huge membership fees can still play golf. This will give Singaporeans more physical space to stretch themselves.

Our economy must also expand beyond our national boundary. We will help Singapore companies to invest abroad while remaining in Singapore. This way, we overcome our physical constraints of land and labor. The objective is to have a national economy bigger than the domestic economy of Singapore. We will then have a gross national product bigger than our gross domestic product like the Swiss.

To create social space, we need rules. The ideal is to let customs and social etiquette determine our social space. But since we have not yet arrived at the ideal state we will need rules to regulate our behavior. These rules allow us more personal freedom rather than less.

I am aware of the feeling that Singapore is over - regulating and the joke that Singapore is a 'fine' city. Some people wonder why we must have rules for

keeping dogs in public housing, rules for flushing public toilets and other rules which regulate social behavior. My approach is this. Let me know which rule stifles, which rule is too intrusive, which rule is obsolete. We can then review it, change it, make it less intrusive, or remove it. If we want to retain it, we will justify it.

I want to expand intellectual and creative space. This is the most effective way of overcoming our limitation of physical space. The mind is not just so many ounces of gray matter or so many billions of neurons. It is a free spirit. It allows us to free ourselves from the constraints of physical size. We may be small physically, but we should be big intellectually. We will foster intellectual discussion and a constructive exchange of ideas.

We want to give more room for art forms to grow and evolve, and ample space for creativity. We have reviewed our film classification system. We will review our censorship code to bring it up to date. We should be less prudish. But we will not allow Singapore to degenerate into a crude, profane, violent society. So pornography will still be banned.

But we can be more liberal with the printed word, not pornographic literature but literary works. Reading requires intellectual effort and will not have the same instant influence on young minds like visuals and base comic books.

These are some of the things I want to do - maintain high standards, upgrade and create more space for Singaporeans. In essence, in the Next Lap, we will be concentrating on qualitative goals. I have done no more than point the direction tonight and outline my thinking. The details will have to be filled in by all of us. It will take many years to do all the things we want to do. But I hope that before the turn of the century we can all look back and say, “ We have done this together. We have built the finest country in the world.”

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