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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR GOH CHOK TONG,
AT THE THIRD ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE DINNER
AT THE MARINA MANDARIN BALLROOM
ON FRIDAY, 5 JULY 1991, AT 8.00 PM

When Singapore first became independent, the problems before the government were basic and overwhelming. I was then a young Administrative Assistance working in the Economic Planning Unit. Joe Pillay was the Deputy Secretary in charge. The priority then was to create jobs, and to lay the foundation for sound economic and social development.

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Unemployment was high, above eight per cent. We had what we called “an army of unemployed”. Many people lived in slums and squatter colonies without electricity, piped water and modern sanitation. The British gave notice to pull their armed forces out, aggravating our economic and security problems.

The Government developed Jurong Industrial Estate. It built houses at the rate of one flat every 45 minutes, ensured that all children received a basic education, provided basic health care services, constructed roads and other infrastructure, and started the SAF.

In the 25 years since 1965, the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP at 1985 prices) increased almost nine fold from \$6.6 billion in 1965 to \$57 billion last year. Per capita income increased by more than five times from \$3,500 to \$19,300. Today, no citizen suffers from want. He has a proper home, is better educated, healthier and far richer than before.

As we have solved our basic and quantitative problems, the expectation of Singaporeans today is different. They will not be satisfied with more of the same. They expect higher quality and standards - in homes, education, health services, everything. The Civil Service must take cognizance of the fact that Singapore is now a prosperous middle class society, not a poverty stricken one.

It is not enough just to deliver more material goods. We have to take care of their intangible needs as well. Our worry now is not how to create more jobs. But how to prevent the economy from over heating, how to curb the demand for foreign workers and foreign maids, and how to allocate the use of scarce road space. These are the consequential problems of success.

The 1990 Census reports that the proportion of the population with secondary or higher education has almost doubled in 10 years from 1980 to 1990. The number of English speaking households has also doubled. These, together with television and overseas travel have influenced the values of Singaporeans and their attitude towards the Government. Our citizens will increasingly question the way things are being done in Singapore, and will not accept things as readily as they did in the past. They want to have more choices, more space for expression, and more influence in the way the country and their lives are being run.

In response, the government has emphasized consensus building. Major policy changes were referred to Parliamentary Select Committees to give concerned Singaporeans an opportunity to participate and contribute. The Institute of Policy Studies provides senior executives and professionals a forum to debate national issues, and offer alternative views and constructive suggestions. The Feedback Unit was set up so that the public can conveniently give their views on policy issues. A system has also been set up to get more capable people in the private sector involved in statutory boards and other public bodies, where their talent and experience can be tapped for the benefit of the nation as a whole. The Civil Service can support this participative style of

government by being more people - oriented and people - friendly. Its efficiency must be tempered by care and concern for the Singaporeans as people, each with his own problems, fears and hopes.

We should regard people in the private sector as partners and not as strangers on the other side of the fence. The Administrative Officers will need to transcend the boundaries of their environment, understand how business operate and help them to succeed. You must know how the decisions you make, and the policies you carry out, affect business and ultimately the dynamism and competitiveness of our economy. Facilitating the needs and operations of the business community, and not administrative convenience, should be your main consideration. Regulatory powers should be exercised judiciously. They should not stifle legitimate business.

Within the Civil Service, Administrative Officers will remain the main interface between the political leaders and the machinery of government. Your responsibility is to provide Ministers with reliable, comprehensive data and analyses on which policy decisions will be based. You will also have to ensure that these decisions are properly, fairly and sensitively implemented.

Policies and regulations which have served their purpose should be either modified or discarded. As senior civil servants, you should take a pro active role in reviewing these policies and procedures. That is why we have set up the Service Improvement Unit (SIU).

Administrative Officers should have political sensitivity. An understanding of the history of our young nation, and how it has influenced the attitudes and perceptions of the various communities in the population, is necessary. So too is the need to know the thinking and value system of the political leadership and electorate. The recommendations you put up must be made within the context of a multi-racial population and our political value system.

Many of our Administrative Officers are bonded scholars educated in the best foreign universities. While this exposes them to the latest advances in the developed countries and enables them to distil the best ideas and apply them to Singapore, our Administrative Officers might end up with a less than adequate understanding of Singapore and our ASEAN neighbors. For this reason, young Administrative Officers are attached to grassroots organizations and taken around the ASEAN countries as part of their induction program to give them an insight into the issues and problems faced by the people in this region. There are some

postings which are viewed as less glamorous by Administrative Officers, for example, the Ministry of Community Development and the NTUC, but these are precisely the places that can give you a better feel for the people. A stint in these organizations should be part of the normal career development for Administrative Officers.

Our people expect very high standards of our Civil Service. We have to attract some of the best and brightest to join the Service. The Government will continue to review salaries and other terms of service to keep pace with the private sector so as to recruit and retain able officers in the Service.

Top talent in the public sector are spread beyond the Administrative Service. By design, some are placed in the SAF and the Police. An average of about seven SAF and two Police scholarships of equivalent calibre to the prestigious Overseas Merit Scholarship are awarded each year. Good people also find their way into the Professional Services and statutory boards. Some government departments have been hived off as statutory boards and government linked companies, and these have taken along with them some able administrators.

The SAF, Police and statutory boards individually may not offer sufficient exposure and a wide variety of jobs to challenge the officers with high potential. On the other hand, some other organizations may have a shortage of suitable officers for proper succession planning. Government must therefore be able to reliably and consistently identify good people wherever they might be, and distribute them optimally across the entire public sector. The system of potential appraisal that has been implemented in the public sector over the last decade provides the best tool available so far for spotting, nurturing and deploying talent.

I have been pressing for the Corps of Senior Administrator (CSA) Scheme to be implemented for some years. I am glad it has been launched last year. The CSA Scheme will formalize and centralize the identification and deployment of top talent within the public sector. It will enable the best officer available to be selected for the job, regardless of which organization he or she might be from.

The Scheme is overseen by a Supervisory Committee headed by the Chairman of the Public Service Commission. The Scheme will facilitate proper succession planning for key positions in the public sector.

The CSA Scheme opens the full range of public sector jobs to Administrative Officers. But it is not a birth right of the Administrative Officers, or for that matter the SAF scholars, to be in the CSA Scheme. They must prove

themselves worthy of being in the Corps of Senior Administrators. Promising officers from the rest of the public sector will also be considered for the CSA. You will be assessed along with other able officers, both from within and outside your service, for entry into the CSA Scheme. With the CSA Scheme, we would be harnessing the best talent in the public sector to solve the many challenging problems that Singapore is bound to have in the years ahead.

In conclusion, let me congratulate Mr Moh Siew Meng, who has been promoted to the grade of Permanent Secretary, those who have been promoted to the grade of Deputy Secretary, and those who have been confirmed in the Administrative Service.

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