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**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER MR GOH CHOK TONG AT MARINE  
PARADE NATIONAL DAY DINNER ON 17 AUGUST 1991 AT 7.30 PM  
AT THE SIN LEONG RESTAURANT**

When my colleagues elected me Prime Minister, I accepted despite knowing that it is a very big job. I am a technocrat, trained as an economist. I am not a professional politician. But since they have confidence in me, I feel it is only right that I dedicate my life to the country.

My mission is clear, as I stated on 28 November 1990, when I was sworn

in:  
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- to ensure that Singapore continues to thrive and grow,
- to find a new group of younger people to serve Singapore, and
- to build a nation of character and grace where people live lives of dignity and fulfilment, and care for one another

I have been in office for nine months now. I have done things my way, listening to people, understanding their problems, and trying my best to meet their aspiration. I began my community visits in June, and I intend to carry on with them after the elections. These visits enable me to meet my grassroots leaders and the people face to face. They are part of my style of open, consultative program.

I believe that for Singapore to progress, people must care for one another. I want to strengthen their sense of obligation towards one another, so that we will care for one another genuinely. I believe we can succeed in bonding Singaporeans to become one extended family.

We must help each other to do better. Over the next few years, I want to focus on three basic areas - education, health and housing. Health will demand most attention. I have already outlined my thoughts on these in my National Day Rally speech on 11 Aug 91.

I am encouraged by the goodwill and support shown to me as Prime Minister by the people and community leaders of all races. My colleagues especially are very supportive. They help me and make my job easier. I am proud to have such a cooperative team.

I have decided on an early general election because I feel that the mood is favorable.

In every Commonwealth country with a parliamentary system, the Prime Minister calls elections at the time most favorable to him. This means a time least favorable to his opposition. I did not settle on the GE date until 12 August, one day after my National Day Rally speech. After my speech, I felt reassured especially after many grassroots leaders congratulated me on my simple, sincere approach to the problems of the less successful in the society. I discussed the date with my Cabinet colleagues and decided to go for election immediately. If my decision turns out to be wrong, I will pay a very heavy political price.

The opposition parties claimed to be caught by surprise and that they were not ready for the General Election. This is their own lack of attention to political signals. I have given several early hints. I started my constituency visits on 2 June, taking over from other ministers. Bertha Henson of the Straits Times, a

young journalist, and foreign press like Asiaweek speculated that there would be early elections. On 4 August, at Cairnhill, someone asked me a question on this. I confirmed that I was thinking of moving the election date forward.

The opposition parties are not new nor their leaders babes in the wood. Unlike me, Dr Lee Siew Choh and Mr Jeyaretnam are professional politicians. Dr Lee Siew Choh first contested elections when I was still a school boy. Mr Jeyaretnam has been in the game for more than 20 years now, and Mr Chiam See Tong, 15 years, about the same time as me. Mr Jeyaretnam is Secretary General of his party since 1971, and has contested in 4 general and 3 by elections. If after so many years in politics, and he is still unprepared for elections at short notice, than he has only himself to blame. I don't think Mr Chiam was unprepared. One day after the PAP introduced its candidates, he was able to announce his 2 new candidates. How could the opposition parties claim that they were caught by surprise? I suppose they have to hide their inability to find the candidates they need.

Mr Jeyaretnam has, through BBC and other foreign correspondents, complained to the world, that my decision to call a General Election is a ploy to keep him from contesting the elections.

This is an absurd and ridiculous allegation - that I am afraid of him. My concern is to win the general elections convincingly. It is not whether Mr Jeyaretnam is returned to Parliament. By calling for elections, I put 81 seats at risk, and if the timing is wrong, the PAP will lose more than one seat Mr Jeyaretnam might have won.

Mr Jeyaretnam, through his own fault, is disqualified to stand for election now. But the electorate will have a chance to decide on him within 18 months. I intend to call by elections then. Since the General Election is being held earlier than usual, I have got the full quota of new candidates to self renew Government. We are still identifying and interviewing candidates. We would like to field at least two women candidates. I guarantee there will be by elections in about 12 to 18 months' time after the new government has settled down. Mr Jeyaretnam can contest the by elections then. He does not have to wait until 1996.

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Now, let me explain why I want your endorsement as Prime Minister.

Constitutionally, I am the Prime Minister with full powers. However, politically I lack political clout because I inherited the position of PM and did not win it in election. I will not have the political strength until I face the people and win. I am like Mr John Major. As Prime Minister, John Major has full powers.

But he does not have the political clout to carry out any firm policies of his own, different from Margaret Thatcher from whom he took over the Premiership. He will get that strength only when he leads his party in a general election and wins.

This was also the case with Prime Minister Jim Callaghan. He inherited his position as Prime Minister from Mr Harold Wilson who resigned mid term in 1976. When he went to elections in 1979, he lost to Margaret Thatcher.

Callaghan again had no political clout to do what he wanted because he had not won the endorsement from the people. It is also like Gerald Ford. He was Vice President to President Nixon. Nixon resigned in 1974 mid term. Ford became President, but could not carry out any fundamental changes until he went to elections. When he did, 2 years later, in 1976, he lost to Jimmy Carter.

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By calling an early election, I am doing what Lee Kuan Yew did as Prime Minister in 1968. The British Government announced in January 1968 that they were withdrawing all their military forces from Singapore. He called for elections immediately in early February. Out of 58 seats, 51 returned unopposed. The opposition parties saw big problems ahead, and did not contest to form the government. In the 7 seats contested, the PAP won all 7 with an average of 84.4 per cent of the votes. That gave Lee Kuan Yew, then as Prime Minister, the strength to carry out fundamental reforms, like the Employment Act by which he altered our industrial landscape and assured investors and employers of their right to manage, without union obstruction over promotions, dismissals and redundancies. This and other important changes brought in the investments which have transformed Singapore. Without the resounding 84.4 per cent endorsement in 7 seats, he could not have carried out these transformation policies and programs that followed British withdrawal. Every vote counted, for every vote increased his strength to carry out major changes.

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I want the political strength to pursue my style of consultative government and my program. Edusave, Medifund, Open University, assistance to help the bottom 10 per cent to own flats - these are major initiatives. They will cost more than \$10.0 billion. 10 thousand million dollars, equal to ~~1/4~~ our reserves. Not every one supports these programs, especially the old who think that I am being

too liberal and too accommodating, and too free spending. Without your endorsement, I will not be able to move quickly and decisively on these programs. That is why I have called for an early election, at a time when I think the mood is sweet.

Every vote that you withhold from me, or worse, you give to the opposition, will weaken my political position after the election. Every vote that you give me will increase my political weight, in the country, in the Cabinet and in Parliament. I seek every vote. I need every vote you can give me.

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