

Release No.: 29\OCT

02-1\91\10\27

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER MR GOH CHOK TONG,
AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON “THE ROLE OF
COMMUNITY LEADERS IN THE NEXT LAP”. ON SUNDAY,
27 OCTOBER 1991, AT 9.00 AM
AT THE MARINE PARADE COMMUNITY CLUB

In the last General Election, the PAP adopted as its manifesto “ The Next Lap”. We asked Singaporeans to support the government’s vision and program for the future. The people gave us the mandate. We will proceed to implement the programmes in “The Next Lap”.

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Anywhere in the world, a Prime Minister would be jubilant if his party won 77 out of 81 seats and 61% of the popular votes in the contested seats. But the PAP was not. There are two major reasons. The PAP has done so much for Singaporeans and has set out its vision clearly. Yet more people in this election than the last refused to acknowledge this through the ballot box. Instead of encouraging and supporting the PAP, they chose to do the opposite. The PAP

can only interpret that those constituencies which voted against it preferred opposition to the programmes in “The Next Lap”.

The second reason is that I am apprehensive as to where this trend of voting for a party to oppose the government instead of supporting the ruling party is going to lead us. I think it is going to encourage all sorts of people to stand for elections. It is already happening. I read that nine professionals have decided to stand for the next election with the SDP. There is no cost to standing for election. So we will see more people taking on the government. The big question is whether the electorate will continue to vote in candidates to form the opposition or whether they will realize the danger of doing so in a general election.

I see the number one task of grassroots leaders in the next years as one of helping the government to bring home to the public the danger of this trend. This trend is one of voting against the government based on short term self interest, and very often on single issues.

If this trend of voting continues, the government will either have to turn populist, or risk the danger of being displaced. The government will not become a populist. Once we start appeasing those who show dissatisfaction, people will

conclude that that is the way to get what they want. Very soon, we will end up having to appease all sorts of majority and minority groups, and every interest group. The government, instead of taking the important decisions to sustain Singapore's prosperity and unity, will be taking decisions based on the short term consideration of winning the next election. That will surely ruin Singapore, because instead of strong leadership with a clear vision, the government had instead become a proxy for pressure groups. Pressure groups become the real government, and not those in government.

Since the government will not govern by popular opinion polls or yield to pressure groups, there is a danger of it being displaced if the current voting trend continues. As the grassroots leaders you have to decide whether you back the government and its philosophy of government, or whether you will join the others to put pressure on the government.

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People say that we don't listen. We do listen. The problem is that the government thinks in a much longer time frame than the people, and has bigger concerns than the individual interest of each voter. We understand the people's immediate concerns, but our job is also to anticipate problems that will come 5, 10, 15 years down the road, and take remedial steps before we are hit by those

problems. We cannot just look only at the immediate concerns. Because our time frames do not coincide, we often come across as not listening.

The government's job is made more difficult because more and more people are being affected by our policies. We have what I call a problem of success. Take for example, the issue of telephone charges. If Singaporeans are very poor, and only 20 to 30 per cent of the households have telephones, there would be little public debate over the change to time based charges. There is widespread debate because Singaporeans can afford telephones at home, and 99% have them. Even the so called poor who live in a one room rented flats have them. Of course there is a social cost in the time based system. But are the people prepared to pay for the cost of economic inefficiency? Will they support Singapore Telecom if the annual rental has to go up to \$250, and later \$300? If they are prepared to pay this rate for the privilege of making as many phone calls as they want and for as long as they want, then Singapore Telecom can scrap the time based system of charging.

We want to win the hearts of the people, but it is not always possible. We will try and soften some of our policies, but I am afraid many will still remain unpopular, especially if cost increases are involved. Also, we may have to change some of the old ways of doing things, if better and new ways are found.

But change, no matter how good, requires adjustments, and that can be awkward and painful.

Singapore has succeeded so far because we have dared to take difficult but right decisions, and people are prepared to adjust and support the government.

I just came back from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting yesterday. Seven countries have asked to send delegations here to study how we have succeeded. They have nothing but admiration for Singapore. They want to learn from us.

When I was in South Africa, I read an article in their newspapers on our education system. The writer, a professor, has spent a few months in Singapore studying our system. He was urging the South African Government to learn from Singapore. All these are surely indications that we are doing the right things.

As community leaders, you have to understand how and why Singapore works. That means you must understand the philosophy of the Singapore government, why we do things in a certain way, why sometimes in the face of public unhappiness, we proceeded to implement certain policies like streaming and independent schools.

To play your part in “The Next Lap”, study the government’s philosophy, its policies and its actions. Understand the problems involved, and analyze the solutions offered. Think long term more than short term. Understand Singapore’s smallness and vulnerabilities. Then, if you agree that this is the right government to lead you in “The Next Lap”, rally the people behind the government.

A good community leader must lead. He should not just echo the government or join in the chorus of criticisms. That means he must have an independent, inquiring mind and the courage to speak up in support of the government and its program.

In the Next Lap, there is a lot of work to be done. The government will carry on with the program we have presented. If our vision is also your vision, get the people to support what you and I believe in. That will be your role in the Next Lap.