

Release No.: 67/AUG

02-1/93/08/31

**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER, MR GOH CHOK TONG,**

**IN PARLIAMENT ON TUESDAY, 31 AUGUST 1993**

**TRIBUTE TO PRESIDENT WEE KIM WEE**

Mr Speaker, Sir, I rise to pay tribute to President Wee Kim Wee for his outstanding service to Singapore.

On 30 August 1985, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said in this House when he moved the motion on the election of Mr Wee Kim Wee as President of the Republic of Singapore, "What Singapore needs in a President is a man of integrity and dignity. He (Mr. Wee) is without affectations. His easy manner and his understanding of people will make a good Head of State."

I did not know President Wee personally until he became President. Mr. S Rajaratnam proposed him. He was one of several names considered. I supported his nomination. I trusted the judgment of Mr. Rajaratnam, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and the Ministers who knew him well.

President Wee is exactly what Mr. Lee described - a man of integrity and dignity, without affectations, and who genuinely loves people.

As Prime Minister, I have called on President Wee regularly to brief him on the Government's agenda and priorities, and to keep in touch. Though the President reads all Cabinet papers, I felt it useful to let him know my thinking face to face. My calls usually lasted for about an hour.

Through these calls and other occasions, I got to know him as a person and as a friend. I learnt that he strongly disliked people who put on airs, people who look down on others less successful than themselves. He was concerned that many better-off Singaporeans were measuring a person's worth by the make of his car and the size of his house. He urged me to try and reverse this unhealthy trend.

Some people change when they acquire wealth, power or fame. They become embarrassed by their humble origins, or look down on others they have left behind. But not President Wee. He remains very much the common man.

President Wee's simplicity reflects his humble background. His father was a clerk who became blind at the age of 45 and died when Wee Kim Wee was only eight. The family survived by rearing poultry in the compound of a benefactor. When Wee Kim Wee was only 15 years old, he stopped school to work and ease the family's financial burden. He started as a clerk in the circulation department of the Straits Times.

Through ability and diligence, he progressed from clerk to reporter in the Straits Times, from correspondent to manager in United Press Association, and eventually to Editorial Manager of the Straits Times. Two years before he was due to retire, he was appointed Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia.

Later he became Ambassador to Japan and the Republic of Korea, and also Chairman of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC)

During his eight years in office as President, President Wee's dedication to duty was exemplary. In 1989, he underwent two operations, one for cancer of the rectum and the other for a prostate problem. I visited him in hospital. He

was cheerful. He said that he had had a good innings, and that if it was time for him to go, it was time to go. Happily he recovered, and resumed his heavy schedule.

President Wee has gained the admiration, respect and affection of Singaporeans from all walks of life, regardless of race, language and religion. Apart from the official functions, there were other facets of his work which he did not want publicised. For example, he quietly visited welfare homes and charitable organisations, and supported their activities and functions. He encouraged them and boosted their morale. He also regularly invited public-spirited Singaporeans for lunch or tea at the Istana.

Occasionally, he sent Ministers politely couched notes offering his views and concerns on certain matters based on his personal experience and observations, or feedback which he had received.

President Wee has done a wonderful job. He will be remembered for his friendliness, grace and dignity and as a President who is close to the people. He is the common man with the qualities and temperament of a head of state, who having achieved the highest position in the land, remains the simple man.

On 30 November 1991, the constitutional amendments which conferred on the President safeguard roles with respect to reserves and integrity of the public service came into effect. The Council of Presidential Advisors was appointed. Under a transitional provision, President Wee Kim Wee exercised all the new powers of the President. This made President Wee's second term of office unique. During it he has exercised his functions under both the old and the new constitutional arrangements. I am grateful to President Wee for helping to phase in the implementation of these new constitutional provisions. It has enabled us to test these novel and complex constitutional provisions and to identify areas which need modifications and adjustments.

Because of President Wee's experience, and because he has been such a successful President, he was the Government's first choice to be Singapore's first elected President. I saw him personally in January to invite him to stand for election as President when his current term expired. He told me that he was already making plans for his retirement. I explained to him why he would be the best person to be the first elected President. He asked for time to think over.

He asked to see me about a month later. He declined the Government's invitation. He explained that having been President for eight years, he would find it awkward to now ask the people to vote him in as President. He said that he

loved his work and enjoyed the opportunities for meeting all kinds of people, but he just could not reconcile himself with the need to campaign for votes. He added that at his age, another term of six years is a long time.

We then talked about how he would adjust to life after the Presidency. He said that he would continue working to keep his mind and body active. He would rent an apartment in town, turn it into his office, and go there every working day to write his memoirs. He would also invite friends over for lunch as he did when he was President. He then showed me the small computer which he was learning to use. I was amazed that he was learning to manipulate a computer at his age.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Wee Kim Wee started life as a humble clerk, and rose to become President of the Republic. Tomorrow he will be retiring. Singaporeans will long remember him and Mrs. Wee with deep affection and respect.

With retirement, President Wee's career comes full circle. Mr. Wee will again be an ordinary citizen. He will answer his own telephone, be his own clerk, and type his own memoirs. He will have a wealth of experience to write about, many stories to recount, and numerous relatives, friends, associates and

acquaintances to recall. But we may not get to read his memoirs. I understand that they are not for publication, but are intended to be his family heirloom.

This tribute is not complete without a special word for the First Lady. Like her husband, she took her public role seriously and discharged it with warmth, grace and cheerfulness. Not many people know that Mrs. Wee has suffered from severe arthritis for many years. Often she was in pain while performing her public duty. Yet, she was always there, smiling and warm, keeping up with the President as he moved around greeting guests.

Like The President, the First Lady has no affectations. She has a genuine love for people. She has contributed to the prestige and respectability of the Presidency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Mr Wee Kim Wee is a happy and contented man whether he is President Wee or plain Wee Kim Wee. I am sure all Members will join me in thanking President Wee Kim Wee for his outstanding public service as President and in extending to him and Mrs. Wee our best wishes for their future.

@ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @

PMO(4) /PMaug31. '93/Pgs.1-5

National Archives of Singapore