

Release No: 26/JUL

02-1/95/07/15

95-GCT-17

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE STRAITS
TIMES 150TH ANNIVERSARY GALA DINNER AT THE SINGAPORE
INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE,
CONVENTION HALL, LEVEL 6, SUNTEC CITY ON SATURDAY, 15 JULY
1995 AT 8.00 PM

THE SINGAPORE PRESS: PART OF THE VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF GOOD
GOVERNMENT AND GOOD SOCIETY

In 1845, when the Straits Times first appeared, it faced no competition from the telephone, radio and television. It could not have written about the clash between communism and democracy because Karl Marx did not publish his Communist Manifesto until three years later. But it could report on the opening up of China. Not the present opening up to the outside world but the forced opening of her cities to the British, “for the purpose of carrying on their mercantile pursuits, without molestation or restraint” as a result of the Treaty of

Nanjing in 1842 following China's defeat in the Opium War, followed later by the Americans, French and Germans through similar 'unequal treaties'. Only seven buildings in Singapore have remained from 1845, all of them churches, mosques and temples.

Very few organisations survive a hundred and fifty years. Fewer newspapers do. The Straits Times is the oldest existing newspaper in East Asia today. Tonight, we celebrate the 150th birthday of an institution, which seems only to grow stronger with age. The Straits Times has lived with Singapore through a mutiny, a devastating World War, and racial riots. But it has also recorded Singapore's Caesarian birth, and the joy of a young nation making it to adulthood. Your history is intertwined with the course of our nation. You have chronicled our life and times.

 "I read with interest this anecdote which one of your columnists referred to earlier this week. I thought I should recount it. When S R Nathan was invited in 1982 to be the Executive Chairman of the newspaper, Prime Minister Lee told him that the Straits Times was like a china bowl. "You break it, I can piece it together but it will never be the same."

Then the Prime Minister added, “Try not to.”¹ Prime Minister Lee’s advice acknowledged that the Straits Times, for all the criticisms it receives, plays an important role in the life of this country.

This anniversary is a tribute to the Straits Times. But it also places a heavy burden on the newspaper. It has to live up to the exacting standards expected of it. A newspaper’s success, unlike other business enterprises, cannot solely be measured by profits. Its corporate citizenship, or political and social role, is scrutinised daily. A newspaper provides the first drafts of our history. It shapes perceptions within the society and the perceptions others have of us.

Perceptions of Singapore

In having Singapore as your primary beat, you see the Singapore story unfold before your very eyes and have your own feel for what the moral of the story is. Yet when you turn to the English language media coverage of Singapore from Europe, America and Australasia, you might occasionally wonder whether your interpretation is right.

¹ Mary Turnbull, Dateline Singapore - “150 Years of the Straits Times”, pg.337

Singapore is an enigma to many Western press commentators. Outwardly we are westernised. But the way we do things does not fit neatly into their conception of what a modern state should be. Nor, I suspect, have they quite accepted the fact that while many societies aspire to enjoy the material well-being of the West, not every society wishes to share the cultural and societal norms and values prevailing in the West today. As a result, the way Singapore is governed is often ridiculed and attacked. In 1988, author Ian Buruma wrote an article in the New York Times Magazine dubbing Singapore as a City of Fear.² To this day, many liberal journalists, especially those who have never even been to Singapore, ritually refer to us as a police state or an Orwellian state, ruled by dictators and a repressive regime.

Those Singaporeans who unthinkingly jump on the bandwagon of foreign criticisms, should think through and understand the wider backdrop of these criticisms and our replies to them. Some have called this backdrop the clash of civilisations. I see it as a contest of ideas on what make societies work. This debate is ongoing because liberal democracy has not solved, and might even have caused, many of the present ills in Western democratic countries. Western liberal society has become too liberal, too focussed on

² Ian Buruma, "Singapore", New York Times Magazine, 12 June 1988.

individual rights. There are now variations of the democratic model that may yield better social organisation and results. We are quite comfortable with the values of an earlier period of western society. Whatever the outcome of this contest of ideas, the result may only be known in 20 to 30 years' time. But we have to choose how to organise ourselves now, and not wait until the final whistle is blown and a winner declared.

The journalists working in the English medium is particularly buffeted by ideas from the Western world. This is because of the western influences and literature they are exposed to. A comparison of how the Straits Times, Zaobao and Berita Harian angle their stories is revealing. Zaobao and Berita are direct, matter of fact, underlining what they think are important from the national viewpoint. Their headlines of important policy speeches appear to come straight from the shoulders of the Ministers. The Straits Times goes for human interest.

It occasionally slips its viewpoint in the headlines and through a subtle juxtaposition of stories. It also manifests some self-doubt about the Singaporean approach to problems, which is unnecessary. If you read what the Japanese, Taiwanese and many other publications write about us, you will find that there are many people in the world who hold a view of Singapore quite different from that of the western media.

Confidence of Singaporeans in the Domestic Press

More importantly, the confidence of Singaporeans in the domestic press is high. An academic in Nanyang Technological University (NTU)³ studied Singaporeans' perception of the domestic newspapers in December 1994. A random sample of 494 people was asked what they thought of the overall quality of the local newspapers and their confidence in these newspapers. Overall, about 70 per cent felt that the quality was good or very good and only 3.5 per cent thought the quality bad or very bad. More than 36 per cent said they had a lot of confidence, 54 per cent some confidence, and only less than 10 per cent had little or no confidence in our papers.

An extensive survey on confidence in institutions in the United States was released by Gallup, Harris and the National Opinion Research Centre in February this year. Over a twenty year period, those with a great deal of confidence in the press declined from 28 per cent after the Watergate affair to

³ DR Hao Xiaoming, "Singapore Press and Public Trust", paper to be presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Washington DC in August 1995.

11 per cent in 1993. Americans with hardly any confidence in the press rose to 39 per cent in 1993.

In other words, percentage-wise, three times as many Singaporeans have a great deal of confidence in our press as Americans have in theirs, and three times as many Americans as Singaporeans view domestic press with little confidence. Your readers have handed a great bouquet. It is all the more significant because Singaporeans have easy access to many foreign sources of news from the 4,500 foreign publications that circulate in Singapore, including major English language newspapers, and broadcasts from all over the world.

Debate on Western Press

What are the reasons for the decline of the trust in the press in some western countries? Carl Bernstein, one of the two Washington Post reporters responsible for the Watergate expose accused US journalism of three things: reducing news to gossip, using sensationalism to turn attention away from the real conditions of society and creating an idiot culture in the news by providing nonsense to the readers⁴. George Stephanopoulos, former Director of Communications in the Clinton White House, and presently Counsellor to the US President, said that the American press had become adversarial to the point that

it does not contribute to the understanding of national issues while complex issues are made into personality clashes⁵. Some scholars of American journalism argue that the US press has lost its credibility because journalists have become cynical of everything in its search for the dramatic. The public realises that the issues before them are complex but have become frustrated by oversimplification in the media and its failure to explain the complexities of policy positions.

In the United Kingdom (UK), Anthony Sampson, author of “The Essential Anatomy of Britain” has asked whether the cynical destruction of respect and awe for authority and the institutions of society is a good thing. He added, “The power of the media to undermine the authority is part of a global trend.....(it is) linked to the explosion of individual ambition across the

⁴ Carl Bernstein, “The Idiot Culture”, The New Republic, 8 June 1992, pp 22-28.

⁵ Interview with George Stephanopoulos by Nathan Gardels in New Perspectives Quarterly, Spring 95 edition.

West which is breaking up communal loyalties and challenging collective responsibilities...”⁶

The Western idea of the press as the fourth estate of the realm, as an adversarial watch-dog of government, goes against our goal of consensus politics, of getting Singaporeans to row as a team. Accurately reporting wrongdoings is a legitimate role. You also help make the government better by fair reporting and providing a forum for readers' complaints and debate on national issues. But the concept of the press being all powerful and having the last word smuggles in the power that ordinary citizens do not bestow on them.

I cannot put this better than the Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) who wrote in the London Times earlier this year, "Let us not forget that there is no higher legitimacy than Parliament's. We can and should rigorously challenge politicians; but we should also remember that individual Members of Parliament (MPs) and parties have

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⁶ Anthony Sampson's article entitled, "A worthless world of money", printed in The Independent on 16 Nov 94.

stood before the public and have been elected by them, which we have not.

Politicians have a higher claim to speak for the people than journalists."⁷

There is a serious debate going on about the role of the press in America and the UK. Ultimately they will settle on their society's choice. We have similarly to make our own choice.

To Develop Our Own Paradigm

This Government's view on the role of the Singapore press has been articulated and refined over the last 35 years. The Singapore press should not adopt an adversarial role just because news organisations in other countries have done so. But this does not mean that I want the Singapore press to be a Government mouthpiece. I have no use for "boot-lickers" or "running dogs",.... Or whatever colourful expressions David Marshall learnt from his political era to abuse you.

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⁷ John Birt, "Why Our Interviewers Should Stop Sneering And Start To Listen", The Times, 4 February 1995.

You best serve Singaporeans by accurate reporting, clear analysis, and intelligent interpreting of events and developments through Singapore eyes for Singapore minds. Clarify issues and spell out the options in this complex world where every solution has a cost.

Twenty four years ago, Lee Kuan Yew told the International Press Institute that the mass media can create a mood in which people become keen to acquire knowledge, skills and discipline of the advanced countries. We still need to create a mood to advance ourselves, to acquire the many positive characteristics of the advanced countries, and to avoid the wrong turns some of them have taken.

The press has a role to forge consensus and not foment confrontation, facilitate nation-building and not fray the social fabric. T.R. Reid⁸ wrote in the Washington Post how differently the Western press covered the Kobe earthquake from the Japanese press. Western reporters tended to accentuate the negative, focussing on the worst scenes of destruction and the crushing moments of personal loss. American journalists in particular seemed to be on

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⁸ T R Reid, "Rift in Coverage: Japanese and Western Quake Reporting Worlds Apart", Washington Post, February 1995.

the prowl for controversy and confrontation, prodding cold, hungry victims with questions like "Do you think the government has done enough to help?" The Japanese media viewed the disaster through a broad lens that included people and buildings still standing as well as those smashed to the ground. And

Japanese reports focussed far more on the harmony than the discord among the hundreds of displaced victims. In other words, the Japanese press understands that it has a healing role to play in a time of national catharsis.

The Japanese press always plugs away for the national interest. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said at the Fortune Global Forum in Singapore in March this year that “the US-Japan security alliance is a major factor for stability. With it Japan can take on greater international responsibilities, including eventually a permanent seat on the UN Security Council”. The Japanese press reported, on the very next day, that SM Lee “expressly supported Japan’s UN Security Council permanent membership bid, saying that Japan was capable of fulfilling its international responsibilities, including a permanent seat on the UN Security Council”⁹. The Japanese press, always patriotic, never misses a half point.

In working out our paradigm, we need to marry the best of both Western and Asian practice.

One such strength of the prestigious Western press is the in-depth knowledge of its specialist journalists. These are reflected in the commentaries and articles appearing in the op-ed pages. Such expertise could be built up only

over many years, and only if the newspapers recruit and develop talent for important editorial responsibilities.

Mrs Katherine Graham¹⁰ of the Washington Post defined the essential function of the American press as to probe, to ask the inconvenient question, to report fully and fairly what is going on. I accept this for the Singapore press. But do this within a consensus building context, not an adversary system which was the context of Mrs Graham's speech. Do not abuse the freedom given to you. This freedom should not mean a licence to report rumours without checking on their truth, nor a wanton attitude which inflicts hurt on innocent people, nor a disregard for damage to institutions of authority and relations with other countries through insensitive reporting. It is better to

⁹ Nihon Keizai Shimbun dated 9 Mar 95.

¹⁰ Katherine Graham, "The Freedom Of The American Press", speech to Granada Guildhall lectures, 1974, published in The Freedom Of The Press.

abridge the freedom of the press in Singapore than to let it run wild as in some countries. It is also beneath contempt, and shows a lack of guts, if columnists scurrilously sully the reputation of persons and institutions of another country, and then suppress rebuttal while loudly championing the freedom of the press.

Virtuous Government

My job is to ensure that the virtuous cycle of good government is never broken. If a future Singapore government requires the press to check and keep it honest, we would have failed in our mission. The virtuous cycle has already broken down and vicious cycle has set in.

What I am advocating is for you to help perpetuate the virtuous cycle of good government, constructive journalism, cohesive society and strong, stable and prosperous Singapore.

You can do this by explaining to Singaporeans the complex world we live in - how we are to make a living, what are the bigger forces at play affecting our lives. If Singaporeans do not have an appreciation of the big picture, the challenges they face, the realistic alternatives, the level of public debate falls, populism prevails, and the difficult decisions will never get taken. Then the big forces changing the world will overwhelm us, and we wouldn't even know what hit us.

I make this point not to selfishly increase the life expectancy of the present government. That is not how we think nor how politics works. The Singaporean is shrewd. He is won over by intellectual argument, by programmes that make his life better, and values which make him proud to be Singaporean.

Conclusion

For your 150th anniversary, Straits Times commissioned historian Mary Turnbull to write your story. This book looks at the history of Singapore through the windows of Times House. You can be proud of your profession because you have reported without being corrupt, adversarial or sycophantic. Never be defensive or apologetic about the kind of press we have in Singapore, or your tradition of patriotism. You, the Singapore journalists, can put your chests out and hold your heads high. You are part of Singapore's virtuous circle.

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