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**SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO AND
SECRETARY-GENERAL, NATIONAL TRADE UNION CONGRESS (NTUC)
AT THE DINNER HOSTED BY NTUC AFFILIATED UNIONS, COOPERATIVES
AND ECONOMIC ENTERPRISES AT MANDARIN HOTEL
ON 5 OCTOBER, 1980 AT 7.30 PM**

Speaking after or even before Devan is always a formidable proposition. In fact sharing the same platform with a veteran and a very accomplished speaker is both an honour and an ordeal. The latter being that porkmarks and pimples get magnified and good points if any, get overlooked. There is one of three ways to get out of such a predicament:

- tell a very dirty joke to get laughter;
- deal with a topical issue with tremendous aplomb to get attention; or
- make the speech very short in order to receive some appreciation from the audience.

Telling a very dirty joke in such a distinguished company is out of the question, otherwise this restaurant's licence may be revoked by the Ministry of Culture.

The second option of dealing with a subject in a becoming manner is not something one can cook up or place an order for at short notice; you either have the panaché or you don't. Since I am not suitably attired for any song and dance act tonight, I shall have to give this option the miss.

I am therefore left with the third choice of making a very short speech. This suits me fine and shall be my way out of the spot.

Much has /2.

Much has been said and written about the relationship between the NTUC and the PAP Government. This makes it even more compelling why my speech has to be short. I shall therefore devote my response to Doan's speech to just one point.

The question has often been asked - "Which side has more to gain from a close relationship between the NTUC and the trade unions on the one hand and the PAP Government on the other?" In other words, does it mean that one party can gain from such a relationship only at the expense of the other? Is this a zero-sum game? Does one side have to sacrifice basic principles in order to benefit the other? The answer to all these questions is a resounding and a definite "No".

I do not propose to trace the genesis of the NTUC-PAP link and the subsequent development of this relationship, and how it has contributed towards the well-being of our workers and our nation during the past 20 years. The annals of Singapore will lay out very clearly, much clearer than what I can hope to achieve over a dinner speech, the way in which NTUC and its affiliates have contributed towards our national achievements; and how trade unions have thrived and grown from strength to strength as a result of the cooperation between union and PAP leaders.

It has been said recently that the present generation of PAP leaders in government have a soft spot for labour. This is as it ought to be. After all, the PAP came into power with the total and unflinching support of the workers and their unions. It was with the commitment of our workers towards national development that has brought out people success and prosperity. In short there was complete trust and co-operation between the workers and the PAP.

Doubts were cast as to whether the next generation of political leaders will be equally concerned with the interests and welfare of workers. Such apprehension is valid but at the same time the question is also rhetorical in our context of a freely elected democratic socialist government. Let me try and put it in another way.

The needs and aspirations of workers must be given serious consideration by any government in its plan for economic and social development. In fact this is a condition for the success of any political party which aims at staying in power or attaining power. This means that a government or a political party which goes out of its way to ignore the reasonable demands of workers does so at its own peril. The reason for this is simple.

Workers are also nationals and they form the major part of the electorate. Ignoring the basic and level-headed demands of the electorate will be political folly. Here, let me hasten to add that a government which allows itself to be beleaguered by powerful and militant unions will soon run out of hand-outs and find itself out on a limb before long. That government will not last long either. The crux of the issue is that a sensible balance must be struck.

Hence there is no question of the next generation of political leaders being unmoved or deliberately disregarding the aspirations or problems of the unions and workers. The fact that they did not have the opportunities which earlier political leaders had of growing up with the unions is not a tenable excuse for not understanding the needs of our workers. The question then really is how can the younger political leaders understand the problems of the unions? Or putting it another way, how can workers get across to the political leaders their problems and hopes in the most effective way?

One way is of course for workers and unions to demonstrate openly through various means, both fair and foul, their thinking on certain basic issues. Strikes can be organised, campaigns can be mounted, and slogans can be mouthed to get the attention of the powers that be. This is obviously a very effective way of getting unions' views across. Those with vivid memories of the 1950s and the early 60s can surely testify to this fact.

However we are now in a different ball-game from the one we were in during the '50s. We no longer need to fight for independence nor demonstrate against the gross injustice

of a colonial government nor rebel against the exploitation of the masses by unscrupulous employers. There may well still be a small handful of unenlightened managers in existence sprinkled around the island but they can be easily handled.

We have progressed during the 15 years of our nationhood. The Government has enjoyed the massive support of Singaporeans for 21 years. Political stability has been and still is one of the attractive features of Singapore as an investment location. These factors have created a better standard of living and a higher quality of life for our workers and citizens. We have prospered. Therefore the critical question we ought to address ourselves is "How do we go higher up the ladder of achievement and prosperity?"

This leads us back to the question I posed earlier. By what means should workers and unions transmit their aspirations to the political leaders? Do we resort to the channels of communication we had used in the 1950s? Or is there any other way which is just as effective if not more so in getting our views across without jeopardising whatever we have built up? For if we do adopt the open-confrontation approach, some may call it the more exciting approach, workers will end up communicating with the Director of Unemployment in the Ministry of Labour.

The rationale for strengthening the NTUC-PAP relationship is to establish one such communication channel for the next generation of political and union leaders. This link will enable workers to have access to decision-makers. Workers' views and comments become inputs for policies, not just reactions to policies.

A strong NTUC-PAP relationship will therefore create a situation where it is not so much one of party views and union views being separately formulated and then accommodated, but of continual mutual shaping of views into similar positions for the benefit of everyone. It is clearly a much superior process which ensures that policies do reflect the views of workers and unions than one where attack and retreat are orders of the day.

No one side is therefore at a disadvantage in such a relationship. There can be no losers if the relationship brings about greater benefits to all.

Here, allow me to digress my remarks to a more personal level. I am taking the liberty of doing this in view of the fact that you have all so graciously and generously hosted this dinner in my honour.

Despite my belief that a strong NTUC-PAP relationship is a positive mean of ensuring continued prosperity for Singapore workers and a definite avenue for unions to grow from strength to strength, I was initially hesitant in accepting the appointment to a Ministerial post. The subject of my appointment was first broached by the Prime Minister and by Devan (President, NTUC) many months ago. My gut reaction was that I needed time to weigh the pros and cons.

It was not a question of status, nor was it one of prestige and rank. Neither was it just a question of workload. I was concerned with what is best for our workers, for their future and their security. The benefits and in expediency such an appointment could bring to the NTUC and the unions had to be carefully weighed. I had to consider the trade-offs, the need to balance the advantages for NTUC with the negative points. Will I be more effective in furthering the basic interests of our workers and their families? That was the primary question I had posed myself.

You may have recently read in the press and heard in discussions around the coffee shops and common rooms about the consternation of women because they have not been selected to participate in politics though they are more than keen and willing to stand up and be counted. Yet, here you have a person who has been asked to consider a Ministerial appointment and he needed many months to ponder over it. Is he crazy?

I hope I am not. Otherwise I won't be here. The length of time I took to ponder over this is because it is a very serious matter which warrants very careful consideration. I am confident that I have made the right choice. Your support tonight has given me every reason to be confident.