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Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • tel: 3378191 ext. 352, 353, 354/3362207/3362271

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SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO,
AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHAP GOH MEI RECEPTION
HELD ON 18 FEBRUARY 1981

"DANGERS OF A PARVENU SOCIETY"

Every year, we gather here on the Istana lawn for a party to mark the end of the lunar new year festivities. It is also an occasion when we observe an oriental tradition of a family getting together to celebrate the lunar new year and to pay homage and respect to one another.

This year's celebration marks the first occasion that RC's Chairmen have been invited to a public function. 191 RC Chairmen representing 62 constituencies have been invited. Their presence demonstrates the increasingly important role to be performed by RCs at constituency level.

It also signals the phasing in of the young with the old; the better educated constituents with the socially more experienced and hence politically the more perceptive community leaders. Together they form an effective combination for the benefit of our constituents. But first, the two groups must be able to work as a team, to pull in the same direction, and to succeed in this, certain ground rules must be observed by the younger and the older generations in the same team, such as mutual respect and understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses.

This pre-condition for success is not unlike that pre-requisite for building up a mature and stable society - the respect for our parents and the older members of our community.

The problems associated with the young rejecting the old and the erosion of the extended family system affect society as a whole. It is much more serious than having to worry about providing a greater number of old folks homes to meet the increasing demand for such premises. We not only have to discourage the inclination of children to leave their parents in old age homes but also to arrest the tendency of our younger generation to neglect our senior citizens and pay scant regard to our elders or older workers. In a mature and healthy society this spirit of respect and concern for our elders will manifest itself all around us, in the family, community, institutions, political parties, and even in the office and shop floor. It is basically the spirit of regard for others.

There is a tendency for us to forget the hard times we have passed through and the contributions others have made during those trying times to take us to where we are today. When things improve substantially, memories become even dimmer. Over time, past contributions of old faithfuls are soon forgotten. However, people cannot and should not be discarded like a pair of old shoes. Decent human relationship demands that past contributions are recognised. This is not just a sign of civilised behaviour nor is it something we do to avoid getting a bad reputation. It is part and parcel of the framework of a strong and mature society. Should this framework be undermined, then the very survival of society is at stake.

It has been said that man does not live by bread alone. We can add that a nation does not live merely by economic progress. Prosperity and progress alone do not guarantee a society's survival. The demise of the mighty Greek and Roman Empires provide some vivid reminders of this fact. Singapore, a nation with only 16 years of history, will indeed be able to sustain only a few shocks before it disintegrates unless our social framework is strengthened as we progress. The factor that is holding up this framework is the family unit. We will be courting disaster if we allowed this cohesive force we have inherited from our forefathers to be eroded away.

There is another facet of this problem. Over the past 16 years, we built up a new society with free and easy social mobility. Our best students went on to universities, polytechnics and colleges, and subsequently secured for themselves good jobs that enabled them

to lead meaningful lives. Many of them came from modest and poor homes, sons of labourers, bus conductors, factory workers, taxi drivers and washerwomen. In fact, for the past 10 years over 70 per cent of the top PSC scholarship awards went to students whose fathers were manual, clerical and technical workers. Bright young Singaporeans enhanced their positions in life as a result of our policies based on meritocracy. Inevitably, many married spouses who also have received secondary or tertiary education, or are from a comparable station. This process will continue and will accelerate the leavening effect whereby Singaporeans from humble homes advance themselves to a much higher strata in society. This is the scheme of things which transforms parents' hopes and aspirations for their children into reality.

This phenomena occurs at all levels of society, affecting Singaporeans irrespective of whether they have degrees, diplomas or have graduated from Junior Colleges or secondary schools. Over time, our society will be stretched like an extended concertina, with each Singaporean and his family slotted in an appropriate social niche. Unfortunately, there will also be a group amongst our population who cannot make it up the income ladder at all and are likely to remain at the bottom of the heap. We must ensure that our social attitudes develop in such a way so that this stretched social concertina will not become a social problem. It is the lack of class distinction or consciousness that has enabled us to overcome the overwhelming odds we faced in the past and make such rapid progress. We must preserve this feature in our society.

A strong social framework will help to prevent our society from being divided into distinct class and social groups. In this we come back to the basic tenet that the fundamental cohesive force in a society draws its strength from the family unit. When the son cares for his parent, it is but a short step to the flat dweller showing concern for his neighbour, the manager his employee, the worker his company, and the citizen his nation. When the sense of social obligation is robust and firm, it eases the tension between individuals at different social levels and there will not be social resentment. Those who fail to make the grade will be less resentful of those who have succeeded. It will also help a great deal if every individual,

irrespective of his station, is given a sense of purpose in work and life. A person's feeling of pride and accomplishments must not be diminished because of his lower status. He is part of a team whose members have each a different role to play. The fact that he performs a supporting cast at a lower level should in no way demean his contributions.

The Japanese zaibatsus provide a striking example of the harmonious relationships that can exist in a mammoth organisation with diverse categories of staff and skills. The most humble and unskilled member of the organisation is made to feel that he is as important a part of the organisation as anyone else. He is not neglected nor is he patronised. He is treated as a human being, with dignity and deference, no less; respected for his contributions no matter how modest they are. There is a lesson in this practice for us.

In our anxiety to excel and to do well in life, there is a tendency to pay scant concern to others. This is reflected in the attitudes of our students who are pre-occupied with scoring high marks, selecting the right subjects which stand them in good stead later on in life, and choosing the right career which has the highest market potential. All their energies and effort are directed towards this end. Little thought is given to the fact that they do not stand alone but that they form part and parcel of a larger society. The fact of life is when that society breaks up so will all their hopes and aspirations. No individual can survive if the group collapses. It is critical that our younger citizens should acquire the habit of reflecting on their own well-being in the context of society as a whole.

We can start to foster such attitudes by inculcating in our people a sense of concern for the aged and the less fortunate amongst us, beginning with our own parents and siblings. At the same time we must learn to express our appreciation to those who have given of their best some time during their lives, no matter how modest these contributions have been.

No matter who are, what we do, what our position in life is, in due course we too will become an aged parent and in turn will have to make way for others. This is inevitable. It is part of the cycle of life.

Our younger generation must be able to see that it is in their interest to uphold the oriental tradition of respect for others. If each of us discharges our obligation, then we will ensure that when we grow old, we, like our parents, will do so within the family, not in an institution. When we pay our tribute to and respect those who have contributed before us, we in turn, will be respected in time to come. It is only thus will our society and nation endure.
