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SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO AND
SECRETARY-GENERAL NTUC, AT THE NTUC CULTURAL SHOW AND RALLY
HELD IN HONOUR OF MR C V DEVAN NAIR ON HIS APPOINTMENT AS
PRESIDENT, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE
ON WEDNESDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 1981 AT 6.15 PM.

Right from the time the NTUC Manifesto was drafted by the first pro-tem committee in 1961 through the union movement's developmental phase in the late '60s, and then onto the 1970s when unions, managements and the Government fully accepted the tripartite principle, Sdr Devan Nair was the driving force behind the unions' efforts to hack out a road to modernity for our workers. He created for the NTUC and our unions a principal role in the political, economic and social development of our nation.

Sdr Devan's main objective has always been to get our workers to see the real values and goals of trade unions in a developing economy. He has constantly encouraged Singaporeans to believe in a vigorous trade union movement which is inspired not by empty and meaningless slogans but by intelligent objectives. Through his untiring efforts workers acquired a sense of belonging to their nation and we soon learnt to recognise and understand that we are, in a very real and tangible sense, the co-owners of our society.

History will undoubtedly preserve for posterity the details of Comrade Devan's contributions to the labour movement. It will be presumptuous on my part to try and list out even very briefly the personal sacrifices he made and perils he was exposed to while pursuing the vision he has for Singapore. Instead I decided to get the NTUC to publish a souvenir magazine entitled "DEVAN - Nation Builder, People's President" which provides a glimpse of Sdr Devan's relentless efforts over a period of 30 years to lay the solid foundation for our workers to build a progressive and prosperous future.

The NTUC, its affiliates and the workers of Singapore are truly proud that one from amongst our ranks has been elevated to the highest office in the land. Sdr Devan Nair's election by the Parliament as the President of our Republic in a way demonstrates the recognition of labour's contributions to the development of our nation. It is indeed a fitting and meaningful decision. Workers join with other Singaporeans in wishing him and our First Lady Mrs Devan Nair good health as they take on this heavy task of heading a united, thriving and dynamic nation and leading it into the '80s. What can we expect in the '80s?

We have overcome the daunting problems of massive unemployment, poverty and squalor of the past and are making our way into the technological age and a modern society. Our challenge now is how to plug ourselves quickly and effectively into the grid connecting the various power stations which are the generators of growth in Japan and other industrialised countries in the West.

To succeed in meeting this challenge we must develop a strong capacity for innovation, not only in production technology but also in management techniques. Unfortunately this capacity cannot be acquired quickly nor increased easily but the effort must be made. We are off to a good start in that unions, managements, and the Government are joined in one objective, the desire to upgrade our workers' skills, increase their productivity, improve the enterprises' performance and motivate our workers through a fair system of reward. This coincidence of interest is necessary and is not something totally unexpected in our strategy to link our own economy with those of the technology based nations. We learnt some useful lessons over the past 16 years.

In 1965, when we first found ourselves having to strike out on our own as a young and independent nation, one of the major areas which we concentrated on was to improve our national productivity. We were aware right from the start that we had to face a highly competitive international market. The solution was to get all the partners in the industrialisation programme - workers, employers and the Government - to pool their efforts and increase productivity. The aim was to strive continuously for lower production costs. Subsequently the three organisations launched the Productivity Code of Practice with the common understanding of "Industrial Progress through Industrial Partnership, Justice and Peace".

We were fully aware then that higher productivity would bring better wages and working conditions, and finally, adequate investment returns, expansion of production capacities and full employment. The translation of this understanding of mutual benefit into practical and sensible policies have enabled us to build up over the past 16 years a thriving industrial economy that provided our workers with a continuing increase in their standard of living.

Sadly the mire and muck from which our society rose are too easily forgotten. Invariably, having savoured the delights of a better life the datum with which we judge and measure further progress rises with each passing generation. This is to be expected and is not undesirable provided the basic principle that reward comes with hard work is not forgotten and if higher expectations spur us on to greater heights of achievement.

If higher expectation means wanting and expecting more for the same amount of effort then we would be in for a rude shock. The truth is that higher expectations without the corresponding increase in effort cannot be met. Unless we recognise and understand this link between work and reward, disenchantment will surely set in before long. Euphoria will soon give way to disappointment and it will not take much for the disenchanted to be goaded into the kind of desperate actions engendered by unfulfilled expectations. When such actions do take place, the consequences bring ruin to everyone.

In the '50s and '60s when jobs were scarce and the majority of Singaporeans were eking out subsistence livelihood in backyard huts or cubicles, the cry for hand-outs and welfare assistance should have been the loudest. Yet much to our credit, a sense of realism had been pervaded amongst Singaporeans. We understood clearly that wealth must first be created before any talk of sharing and distribution was to make any sense.

It was this sense of realism that brought us out of the quagmire we were in and gave us the will to strive, save and build for the future. We are now enjoying the fruits of our level-headed decisions. It would be sad if we succumbed now to offers of instant wealth. Is it really true that all it take to achieve

a better standard of living or to solve the problems of a higher cost of living is to ask for more?

The question really is to ask who for more. Will it be from the employers? Yes, this must be so to a certain extent. We should ensure that a fair and equitable share of the cake is given to workers who have helped to create it. There will be no shortage of good suggestions on how to do this from intelligent and strong unions. And we do need intelligent and strong unions for it takes intelligence and courage to establish what is fair and equitable.

Alternatively, will we be asking more from the Government? Where does the Government get its wealth from? It could print money and hand it out generously thereby gaining popularity and greater support at least for a short while. Those who have been through the exciting and vivid "banana currency" days of the '40s in Singapore will understand the consequences of such generosity. Even a nation as wealthy as the USA is aware that spending money which one has not earned can only lead to one result - national bankruptcy. Fortunately for the Americans they now realise that welfare, subsidies and hand-outs, except for clear-cut cases of destitutes and disowned persons, should be such as not to make people less motivated to strive to become self-sustaining.

The crux is that the success of a Government's policy to enhance the standard of living of a people is not measured by greater subsidies but by less. Similarly, we should measure the success of welfare policies by how many people leave the welfare rosters to become self-sustaining not by how many more people are added to the list of welfare recipients.

We in the unions must therefore help those workers who through no fault of theirs have missed the opportunities to acquire the capacity to earn higher wages by recreating these opportunities for education and training, and creating more and better jobs. For others who are meaningfully employed, we will have to ensure that they receive fair and just wages. The enhancement of our workers' standard of living can only come with effort, everyone's effort - workers, unions, managements and the Government.

On our part, unions over the next few years will strengthen our grassroot leadership so that we are in a better position to work for the advancement of our workers. Grassroot leaders must be discouraged from wasting their energies on petty issues and lost causes merely to attract and retain members. Instead they should concentrate on working for the real interest of our rank and file by helping to create better prospects and a brighter future for them.

In this regard managements too must correct their errant ways. They should refrain from deliberately discrediting unions and their members, particularly union branch leaders. Some unions in the past have difficulty in attracting good workers to serve as branch leaders because those who are elected to such positions are sometimes "marked" by managements. Other managements adopt the policy of promoting branch officials to non-bargainable grades and thereafter put them in "cold storage". Consequently in some cases where promotions are genuine, union leaders instead of viewing such career advancements positively regard these promotions as management's attempts to weaken their ranks.

This mutual distrust act to the detriment of both sides. Better calibre managers and grassroot leaders will have been able to see the common interest of management and workers, and help to work towards it. The crux of the matter is sensible man-management and good human-relations. We shall need to strengthen this capacity to manage effectively in all the organisations responsible for creating the right environment for further progress - the unions, managements and government agencies.

Training and education of managers, workers, unionists and administrators will consequently feature prominently in our policies in the '80s. We shall build up a pool of trained and resourceful labour force over the next decade to secure for ourselves a role in the present world of rapid changes and varied opportunities.

Our main task will be to move a group of educated and skilled Singaporeans to strive for a better livelihood and not relent just because we think that we have arrived. I feel that the best way to honour Sdr Devan Nair on his election as the President of our nation is to reassure him that the NTUC and our unions shall not falter in this task and that we shall build a solid structure on the firm foundation that he has laboured so mightily to lay over the past 30 years.

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