PRESS RELEASE

SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG
AT THE SIKH SINGAPOREANS AND
SINGAPORE KHALSA ASSOCIATION
NATIONAL DAY DINNER 1996
AT SKA PREMISES,
2 TESSENSOHN ROAD
ON SUNDAY, 25 AUGUST 1996 AT 7.00 PM

I am happy to join you this evening to celebrate our National Day.

Sikhs first came to Singapore in the last quarter of the 19th century. They were employed primarily as policemen or watchmen. Later, some became dairy farmers and money lenders. But over the years, many Sikhs have taken advantage of the abundant opportunities to move up in society. Today, there are Sikhs in all the major professions. Sikhs have occupied senior positions in the civil service, the SAF and the police force. We are honouring several of them tonight, including retired Justice Choor Singh, COL (Rtd) Gurcharan Singh, MP and lawyer Mr Davinder Singh, and this year's Businessman of the Year, Mr Kartar Singh Thakral.

The Sikh community has integrated itself into Singapore society. But at the same time Sikhs have preserved the religious beliefs, cultural practices and value system, which define your identity. Sikhs dance the bhangra not only at your own celebrations, but also during National Day parades. The spirit of the bhangra – robust, energetic and optimistic, reflects the values ingrained in the Sikhs by a

religious culture going back to Guru Nanak, which emphasises tolerance, community service, physical fitness, equality and respect for others. These attitudes and qualities have made the Sikhs valued citizens of Singapore.

The Sikhs have particular reason to celebrate 31 years of our independence. Because you are a small community, with only 11,000 members, you especially have benefited from Singapore's meritocracy and multi-racialism. This is perhaps not surprising. In the early 19th century, Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled an empire which covered large parts of northern India. In his kingdom, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were all equal before the law. Each community was allowed to celebrate its religious festivals. The Maharaja's administration was secular, and contained many non-Sikh ministers and generals. They were selected on merit, not race, religion, or caste.

Meritocracy and multi-racialism are two key principles which underpin our society, and have enabled us to build a nation. In Singapore, every citizen enjoys equal opportunities, regardless of his race, language or religion. Everyone is judged on his ability, and rewarded based on his contribution. Promotions, advancement and success all depend on merit alone, not on which ethnic group a person belongs to, or who his parents are. As one young Sikh lawyer put it in an interview in the Straits Times yesterday (24 August), "For me, the epitome of the Singapore Dream is the son of an immigrant night watchman going to Harvard Law School. And this country has provided me with this opportunity."

In every organisation, whether it is a company, the armed forces, the civil service, or the political leadership, we look for the ablest and most committed individuals to fill the key posts. That is where they can make the greatest contribution, and that is the way to get the whole organisation to work best.

Meritocracy is especially important to us because we are a multi-racial society. We are not one homogeneous people. We share no common mother tongue or universal religion. Instead, we are made up of a collection of individual communities of different races, religions and cultures. To build a nation out of these disparate groups, we need a system of government, a basis for organising our society, which all communities accept as being manifestly fair and just.

In many other countries, a citizen's chances of admission to university, getting a government job, or enjoying the government's asset enhancement programmes, depends on the race he belongs to, the language he speaks, or the religion he professes. Citizens in these countries sometimes simply accept that this is just the way things are ordered.

But imagine what Singapore would be like if we did things that way here. This would be a completely different country. I do not believe Singaporeans, having grown up used to fair treatment and equal opportunities, will simply accept that things have become different. The groups discriminated against would feel a bitter injustice. Instead of upholding and defending the system, they would look for ways to overturn it, if need be with help from outside the country. This will not be difficult, given that all of us are descendants of immigrants. Social tensions would grow, and eventually tear society apart.

Fortunately, in Singapore we have done the opposite. We have sought to bring the different ethnic groups together, to build one country out of the Malays, Chinese, Indians, Sikhs, Eurasians, and other communities. Every community has a stake in Singapore. All work together to build one united nation.

This emphasis on multi-racialism is a second key principle of our society. In politics, the PAP has always stood for the interests of all ethnic groups, and

not just the majority Chinese community. As the dominant party, it has set the tone for politics in Singapore. The system of Group Representation Constituencies guarantees that minorities will always be represented in Parliament. In housing, we have set limits on the racial composition of HDB neighbourhoods and blocks, to ensure that every part of Singapore is racially integrated, and prevent ethnic enclaves or ghettos from appearing. The GRC system, and the HDB ethnic quotas, together mean that political parties which want to succeed in Singapore have to appeal to all racial groups. Parties based on a single race cannot win.

But while we have tried to integrate the different communities, we have not tried to erase their individual identities and cultures, and forcibly assimilate them all into a single Singapore identity. We have not allowed Chinese Singaporeans to impose their culture and norms on the minority communities, or to make them feel oppressed and dominated. All communities have room to practice their own beliefs and observe their own traditions.

Meritocracy and multi-racialism have been major factors in Singapore's success. They are strong incentives for every citizen to give of his best, because he knows that his reward depends on his effort and contribution, and that if the country prospers, he too will benefit. If he works hard, he will do well. In doing so, he will upgrade standards of living for himself, his community and his fellow Singaporeans.

Of course meritocracy cannot degenerate into a cut-throat, dog-eat-dog competition, where each person is out to maximise his own gains, and disregards the needs of society or of his fellow citizens. It must be moderated by a sense of community, and a strong commitment to contribute something to society, and not just to take as much as possible from it. But this need to build a sense of

community cannot mean unequal treatment of different races, to discriminate against some and in favour of others, based on the colour of his skin.

These policies have made us a harmonious and cohesive society, as well as a highly efficient and competitive economy. SIA, Changi Airport, PSA, and the SAF are outstanding organisations, not just because of themselves. Indeed they contain able, dedicated people who work hard to build them up. But they can only be outstanding because they all belong to the same society which puts a premium on performance, which is organised on a rational, fair basis, where people work together to achieve shared national goals, and demand high standards of themselves in everything they do.

This gives us a strong edge over other societies which are organised along other principles. Others can emulate the way SIA or the SAF train their staff and run their operation. But many countries will find it very difficult to reorder their societies to run like ours, and to adopt meritocracy as a fundamental principle.

For Singapore, meritocracy and multi-racialism are not just pragmatic formulas for success. They are core values which we uphold, and which define the sort of society we want to be. They were key reasons why we separated from Malaysia 31 years ago. During our two years in Malaysia, communalists and extremists tried to impose on us a society organised along racial lines, with one race dominant over others. The Singapore state government fought tenaciously for equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of race, as guaranteed by the Constitution. The result was tensions between the Chinese and Malays. These tensions led to communal riots, and would have caused more bloodshed had Singapore not left Malaysia.

Many Singaporeans who have grown up since independence take our system of meritocracy and multi-racialism for granted. They have not

experienced, and cannot imagine, how disastrously different Singapore can be if we abandon these principles. They do not know that this issue was so vital that Singapore's leaders and people of the independence generation fought for it even at the risk of their lives, and that ultimately this issue precipitated the birth of our nation.

If our society had been organised along racial lines, it is most unlikely that the Sikh community would done as well as it has in Singapore. If political parties were formed on the basis of race, and promoted the interests of their race against other races, then the Sikhs, who form 0.4 per cent of the population, would be totally insignificant and marginalised. If we had insisted on merging the different ethnic cultures into a single national culture, the Sikh heritage and values would have been overwhelmed.

But that would not have been the end of the story. Mr Davinder Singh reminded me that it was Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, who transformed the Sikhs into a militant people, ready to defend your beliefs with your lives. All Sikhs are baptised by the sword. During the British Raj in India, the British rulers divided the diverse peoples of India into two types: the martial classes and the non-martial classes. The Sikhs were among the martial classes. They proved their valour and fortitude repeatedly over the centuries. So I am quite sure that if Sikhs in Singapore had felt unjustly treated or threatened, you would not have taken it lying down. And so too the other minorities in Singapore. It has happened in so many places – Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and the Punjab itself. This is a very real danger which Singapore must always avoid.

Of course, meritocracy and multi-racialism does not solve all problems of a multi-racial society. The communities do not all perform equally well. They differ in terms of how well their children do in schools, how successful they are

economically, and what problems their less successful members face. This happens in every multi-racial society.

The best way to deal with these differences is to acknowledge honestly that they exist, and then tackle them realistically but resolutely. The communities have set up self-help groups – CDAC, Mendaki, AMP, SINDA – to do this. The government will help, but it can only play a supporting role, because government bureaucracy and taxpayers' money can never substitute for the commitment and leadership of the community leaders themselves.

The Sikh community has its share of less successful members. Your leaders have worried over falling standards of achievement, and over the number of children who are doing poorly in school or becoming juvenile delinquents. They have concluded that part of the problem is that these children have not been sufficiently immersed in the Sikh value system, and have gone astray as they grow up.

SINDA, the Sikh Education Foundation and the Sikh Welfare Council have been helping Sikh children and their families who are in difficulties to turn around and make good. The Sikh Education Foundation organises the teaching of Punjabi as a mother tongue, works to improve the grades of Sikh students, and awards Academic Excellence Awards to outstanding Sikh students. The Sikh Welfare Council provides financial help to the needy, and counsels Sikh families with problems.

These self-help initiatives have received a strong response from the community – Sikh institutions, temples, businessmen, professionals and teachers. The Sikh philosophy of mutual help and community service fits well with the government's approach to social problems. We rely on the spirit of mutual help

and caring to address the problems within the community. In turn, tackling these problems strengthens the ties which bind the community together.

This is consistent with the spirit of multi-racialism. We do not become a stronger society if we weaken these community ties, because they can never be replaced by new ties, equally strong, which ignore the existence of different communities in Singapore. The Sikh Welfare Council can counsel Sikh families with problems, or admonish wayward Sikh children to change their ways. A government agency, or volunteers from other ethnic groups, cannot easily do so without risk of causing offence or misunderstanding.

After 31 years of nation building, we have built a strong multi-racial society, in which every citizen is treated equally, regardless of race, language or religion. We have integrated the different races into one nation, gradually bringing them together without forcing anyone to give up his heritage or change his identity. Let us cherish and uphold these values which have brought us thus far. They will help us to progress as one united people into the 21st century, to secure a bright future for ourselves and our children.

- - - - - - - - - - - -

MTI(9)/dpmaug25.'96