

(Please Check Against Delivery)

Acc. No.	NARC	
77	0051	4

SPEECH BY MR LEE KHOON CHOY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE,  
 MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE CELEBRATIONS OF  
 COMMONWEALTH DAY AND TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF  
 THE COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE ON  
 TUESDAY, 15/3/77 AT 7.45 PM AT SINGAPORE CRICKET CLUB

1977 is a special year for the Commonwealth. For the first time in its history, Commonwealth Day is being celebrated simultaneously in all the 36 member countries. Also the Head of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth II, will celebrate, in June this year, the Silver Jubilee of her accession to the throne. I am told that the Commonwealth Society of Singapore is celebrating its Tenth Anniversary as well. To the Chairman and members present, may I extend warm congratulations.

On such an occasion, we can reflect, for a moment, on the institution of the Commonwealth and what it stands for today. Starting as an "Imperial Club" consisting of Great Britain and her dominions, the Commonwealth has evolved into a major and dynamic international grouping. There are 36 member nations with a combined population of over 900 million people coming from diverse faiths, races and languages. Politically speaking, these member nations have a diversity of constitutional systems. There are republics and monarchies, parliamentary systems with one or two chambers, one party and multi-party systems, as well as military regimes. Economically and culturally, they are at different levels of development, some highly advanced whilst the others still undeveloped or under-developed. Despite all the differences and diversities, the commonwealth continues to exist as a unique international organisation retaining its support from member countries. This is so because its members are convinced of its value and that it serves their national interest. It is a useful link providing member countries with many opportunities for collaboration for mutual benefit. Membership and involvement in the organisation has more significance to smaller countries like Singapore, for it enables us to maintain contact with all the major regions of the world. We have neither the diplomatic means nor the economic resources to establish relations with more than a handful of countries which are vital to our political and economic interest. The Commonwealth provides the channel that enables us

to maintain ties with distant countries in Africa and the Caribbean. The personalised relationships between our leaders and those of the other Commonwealth countries built up over the years allow them to meet and talk informally and have a meeting of minds like old friends. In a world of increasing interdependence, Singapore needs many friends who can help each other overcome our common problems and face crucial issues affecting us. The Commonwealth countries continue to be, for us, "a family association" of much significance and sentiment.

One important factor that makes the Commonwealth ticks and retaining its pull is that member countries join it out of its own free will. No country is obliged to become a member of this voluntary association, nor is it restricted from joining any other international organizations. This is an association of the equals irrespective of the size and strength of each member country. So long as no single power within the Commonwealth tries to use the organisation to impose its will like a 'big brother' on the weaker members, the organisation will continue to survive and flourish. The moment this spirit of tolerance and mutual respect is broken, the future of the organisation will be at stake. So long as this spirit is maintained, the Commonwealth will continue to achieve its main objectives as set out in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles adopted in 1971 of promoting peace and understanding, the elimination of colonial domination and racial oppression and the striving for a more equitable international society. With the advantage of the common historical backgrounds, shared experiences and knowledge of the English language, and a membership spreading over every continent and every ocean, the Commonwealth is in a favourable position to contribute towards international peace and goodwill through mutual understanding and co-operation. In fact, the Commonwealth is one of the most valuable instruments available to help overcome barriers separating nations.

Unlike many other international bodies, which deal mainly in the abstract, the Commonwealth is action-oriented. First, it is a forum for Heads of Government to meet once in two years to exchange opinions and act on world issues. Second, the organisation provides all-the-year round contact amongst its member states. These contacts are not confined to the political or governmental levels but also embrace economic, social and

cultural spheres. National leaders and the man in the street are involved. Private organisations such as yours, the Commonwealth Society of Singapore, help to foster the spirit that binds. This is what makes the Commonwealth such a "human" organisation.

I am very happy to be here tonight to share in this double celebration of Commonwealth Day and the Tenth Anniversary of the Commonwealth Society of Singapore.

~~#####~~