

# Singapore Government **PRESS RELEASE**

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**SPEECH BY MR LEE KHOON CHOY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION AT THE PRESENTATION OF LONG SERVICE AND STAFF COMMENDATION AWARDS IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE PA DAY CELEBRATION AT THE PA AUDITORIUM ON SATURDAY, 27 JUNE 1981 AT 12.00 NOON**

I sense that most of you are in a festive mood today as we celebrate the People's Association's 21st Anniversary. I am rather reluctant to disrupt this gay mood, but it seems necessary for me on this occasion to clarify certain matters which concern the functions of the People's Association and to review our performances. Those of you who read the Straits Times must be aware of the conclusion of the so-called survey conducted by their Research and Information Department which claimed that "Community centres appear to have failed in their ability to serve the community". In other words, the 'survey' claims that all of you who have been serving at the 157 community centres, plus the 2,200 Management Committee members, 700 Women Sub-Committee members, and the 1,200 Youth Executive Committee members have failed in their ability to serve the community. What is more disturbing is that based on the findings of the cursory survey, the newspaper thought it fit to write an editorial questioning the wisdom of the government's subsidy to community centres which the 'survey' claims "are increasingly becoming the haunt of a minority (who are) the better educated and the higher income wage earners".

Never in the history of English-language journalism has so much space been devoted to the work of the community centres. I am delighted to see the Focus magnifying the problem of the social attitude of Singaporeans vis-a-vis their neighbours. I am inclined to agree with the observation that Singaporeans generally are not the cordial type and that

'friendliness is ..... /2.

'friendliness is missing in us'. This is nothing new to me for I had observed this trend of unfriendly habit of minding one's own business in Cosmopolitan Singapore 34 years ago when I first arrived from the less sophisticated but friendlier atmosphere of Penang. As I travelled to more bigger cities of the world, I noticed the same phenomena of the aloofness of city slickers. As the cities got more affluent, the city dwellers became less friendly and more withdrawn into their individual shelters of privacy. In an affluent society, technologically improvised consumer products for easy comfort and quick pleasure such as refrigerator, TV, video tapes and cars are made so easily available and in abundance that they help to reduce human contact. They also encourage people to reduce the amount of time spent worrying about the goodwill or hostility of others. All the increasing volume of technological gimmicks aimed at providing entertainment and pleasure at private homes do have an impact on the lifestyle of the affluent society. They make city slickers tend to withdraw from the whole system of values and obligations that has historically been the basis of public community and family life. That explains the significant sentence as reported in the Focus that "Despite their feelings about their neighbours, Singaporeans in general appear to be highly satisfied with the way they live".

No one doubts that the community centres were built as a meeting place to promote socialising, encourage neighbourliness and to bring people together. For some years, the community centres have been organising get-together tea parties, family picnics, excursions and other similar activities to foster and develop a sense of community spirit and identity among our citizens. During the 12 months ending in March 1981, community centres organised a total of 1,072 tours and outings involving 53,000 residents, and 216 other neighbourliness activities involving another 14,500 residents. The subsequent formation of the Residents' Committees which are now widespread throughout the island was aimed specifically to help boost the efforts in promoting good neighbourliness. In a free and democratic society, the attitude of friendliness can only be encouraged and stimulated and not imposed. The community

centres and the Residents' Committees can only generate activities and provide the atmosphere of friendliness, but they cannot be made responsible for the behaviour or attitude of Singaporeans.

I would now like to correct some of the wrong impressions about the community centres created by the so-called survey: "Community centres are increasingly becoming the haunt of a minority (who are) the better educated and the higher income wage earners".

First of all, let me reiterate that it is never PA's aim to attract every man and woman to the community centre. This is not possible because not everybody needs the services of the community centre. Some people as I have explained, prefer to enjoy their own privacy and indulge in their self-absorbing entertainment. Our aim is to help those who cannot meet their recreational and educational needs. This was indeed the rationale for the establishment of community centres. Over the years, we have constantly been monitoring the changing needs of the people and made the necessary adjustments in programming. A comparison of the community centre programming in the early 60s and 70s and the present day will reflect the changes. In the early days in the 60s, the community centres offered only a limited range of activities, mainly table tennis, cooking and sewing classes. In the 1970s, the range of activities expanded rapidly to include many types of cultural, sports and continuing education activities to meet the more sophisticated needs of our more affluent population. Notwithstanding this, PA ensures that a balanced programme is maintained: activities appealing more to the middle-income groups such as squash, deep-sea fishing, ballet, and piano classes, and activities appealing to the lower-income working class, such as culinary arts, tailoring, table tennis and basketball.

For the financial year of 1980/81, 35,800 participated in the regular classes of community centres. During the same period, the community centres organised a total of 5,000 ad hoc functions/activities involving 40,000 volunteers and 820,000 participants, not to mention that about one million

audience/spectators enjoyed Telefun and Chingay Procession. There are also 329 interest groups with a total membership of 16,000.

In the past, due to lack of facilities and professionalism, better educated and higher-income groups shunned the community centre. The community centre then was associated with only the poor. Over the years, we have made conscious effort to upgrade CC facilities and improve the quality of services to attract the better-educated professionals so that they would come forward to make use of the CC facilities as well as to involve themselves in community work. We are indeed gratified to note that our efforts are beginning to bear fruit, bearing in mind that the professional people had in the past some prejudices against the community centre. PA will double its efforts to attract more English-educated, middle-income groups to the community centre. The Straits Times 'survey' by highlighting the increasing number of middle-income group using the CC facilities may have given the wrong impression that we have neglected the lower educated and the not so well-to-do income groups.

It is far from the truth that the working class and lower-educated have shied away from the community centres. In the process of modernising our community centres, PA has never sacrificed the interests of the working class. Charges for CC activities are always kept within the reach of the working class. For example, services such as kindergarten classes and child care service are heavily subsidised so that they are within reach of the lower-income group. The idea is to bring about an intermingling and dialogue amongst Singaporeans irrespective of races or economic classes or languages and religions.

The second point I wish to clarify is the misleading remark of the 'survey' which says that "a great majority of those 50 and above, most of whom being uneducated and unemployed, had never been to any community centre". The fact is that the community centre has always been the haven for the elderly in a number of constituencies. Some centres such as Bras Basah,

Kreta Ayer and Havelock attract many senior citizens everyday. The percentage of the senior citizens visiting community centres is not too high because the problem of caring for the aged is only of recent origin. It has been PA's policy since 1977 to make special effort to promote activities for the senior citizens. For example, before 1977 there were no proper senior citizens' clubs although there were other activities for the elderly. Since 1977, efforts have been made to form senior citizens' clubs in community centres. There are now eight such clubs, with a total membership of 992; the senior citizens themselves run these clubs. It is our intention to set up the senior citizens' clubs in as many community centres as possible. The participation of the senior citizens in CC activities is therefore expected to increase in the years to come.

In its 'survey', the interviewers seemed to have confined themselves to adults who are 20 and above. Young people below 20 account for almost 40 per cent of our population. Generally they have made greater use of the community centres than the adults. The PA Youth Movement, established in 1971 has increased its membership of 2,500 in 50 youth groups in 1972 to 36,900 in 105 youth groups in 1981. Besides, there are 81 Children's Clubs with 7,300 members. The Youth Movement has organised a wide range of activities every year. Since 1976, the emphasis has been on getting young people to render community services and not just as recipients of services. In 1978, the Youth Movement launched two service schemes, the PA Youth Aftercare (Counselling) Service for Ex-drug Addicts and the Scheme for Premature School Leavers. A corps of 271 Volunteer Aftercare Officers (VAOs) have been trained and they are now helping the rehabilitation of 179 ex-drug addicts. The Scheme for Premature School Leavers aims at involving premature school leavers in healthy youth activities. Almost 2,000 premature school leavers have been involved so far. Besides these two schemes, the youth groups have been involved in providing free tuition and supervised study classes for 2,140 school children. Another activity worth mentioning is welfare service projects. In FY 1980, a total of 160 welfare service projects were undertaken

by the youth ..... /6.

by the youth groups enlisting 3,758 youth volunteers. These projects benefit some 24,000 residents or inmates of 44 welfare agencies and members of the public. Hence, if the Straits Times 'survey' had included young people below 20, its conclusions concerning the community centres would have been somewhat different.

We do not dispute the fact that fewer people visit small and rural CCs with limited facilities. But we find it difficult to believe the findings of the Straits Times 'survey' that over 80 per cent of the people in HDB housing estates do not visit community centres. We suspect the respondents were those that stay in HDB housing estates which have not yet got their modern community centres. Since 1977 we have built no fewer than 18 new-generation centres, each with a wide range of modern facilities. The facilities of these centres have been fully utilised, especially those located in HDB areas. To cope with the growing demands for more facilities, two of these modern centres have extended their new buildings, and another three centres are now finalising their extension plans. Hence, there is no fear that modern CCs, each costing a few million dollars to build, will become 'white elephants'. We believe that unless and until the facilities in the community centres are wide-ranging and modern, few people would visit the centres. We will therefore continue under the CC development plan (1977-1982) to build more new-generation community centres to replace the old ones so as to meet the increasingly sophisticated needs of the people.

Furthermore, mass public campaigns are held through the network of the community centres. Talks, exhibitions and other campaign activities are held inside or outside community centres to educate the citizens on the dos and don'ts of good citizenship. Without the network of these community centres, these public campaigns would not be able to reach the majority of the people.

Finally, let me put on record once again the Board's and my personal appreciation of those men and women who have come forward to volunteer their services to organise centre

programmes and activities. All of them would no doubt disagree with the findings of the Straits Times 'survey'. Some may be hurt but they need not be discouraged by the 'survey'. Let me assure these dedicated volunteers that we in the PA are appreciative of their contributions towards the creation of a strong united community in Singapore.

I would also like to thank the staff for contributing much to the success of the Association. Without their dedication and high sense of duty, PA would not be what it is today. I am also glad to be here this afternoon to present Long Service and Staff Commendation Awards to the deserving staff members.

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