

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE  
KUAN YEW, AT THE EDUCATION MINISTRY'S RALLY  
OF TEACHERS AT THE HAPPY WORLD STADIUM ON  
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1959, AT 3 P.M.

It is most appropriate that a meeting of all teachers should be held during Loyalty Week, and I have looked forward to this opportunity of meeting you and telling you how important a role the Government expects the teachers to play in building our new nation.

More than fifty four per cent of our people are under 18 years of age. Their attitudes, their values, their patterns of behaviour will determine the nature of our future society. But what they will be depends upon what they learn from their elders and their teachers. Outside the influence of their parents and their homes, the most important influence is the teacher and the school. And so it is no exaggeration to say that our 10,600 teachers in all our schools constitute the most influential group of 10,600 people anywhere in Singapore. In your care is entrusted the impressionable minds of our young people. How you discharge this

trust decides whether in the next ten years we have a united and coherent people, or a more divided and confused one.

We have in Singapore about 320,000 students. Of these 51% are in English schools, 43 1/2% in Chinese schools, 5% in Malay schools and 1/2% in Tamil schools. If we do nothing about it, we shall produce citizens who can only communicate with those in their own language stream. And even in 20 years from now, we shall still have a people divided by the barriers of language into four groups. Hence the tremendous urgency of getting our students to be bilingual, or even trilingual. Malay is the national language and it should be possible, eventually, for everyone to understand each other through this language. But each racial and cultural group wants, at the same time, to study their mother tongue to keep their links with their cultural heritage. And the Government supports this. And for reasons of employment, many wish to study English as their first foreign language. The importance of language teaching has been accepted by all. The problem we face now are no longer connected with agreement on the principle, but with implementation in practice, because of the shortage of language teachers. Slowly, but surely, we shall overcome these difficulties.

But, besides the purely mechanical difficulties of language barriers, which is a relatively obvious and simple problem, is the more difficult one of the content of the education in the various language streams. If in the four different languages of instruction we teach our children four different standards of right and wrong, four different ideal patterns of behaviour, then we will produce four different groups of people and there will be no integrated coherent society.

This brings us to the question of textbooks. Eventually, what we must achieve is a truly Malayan series of readers and books of instruction in all the main subjects which are basically the same in content, although the idiom and the presentation in the different languages may be different. For if we continue the past practice of just choosing textbooks written for English students in England, or Chinese students in China, or Tamil students in Madras, then we can talk about the Malayan concept and Malayan consciousness for the next twenty years and still get nowhere.

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But a more decisive factor in determining the attitude and outlook of the student is the teacher himself. If the teacher is selfish and mercenary, preoccupied with his own personal advancement, wanting only to get as much as he can from society, and to give as little as possible in return, then it is unlikely that he will inspire his pupil to high endeavour in pursuit of ideals beyond the

bounds of petty self-interest. To impart the drive born out of the desire to advance the common good, the teacher must himself have these ideals.

Although more than half our adult citizens were not born here, nearly all our youth and children under 18 are. Even though they may not be aware of it they share a common destiny and will share a common experience. Their minds are still open and free from communal prejudices. It is our sacred duty to keep it free from such divisions. Long before psychology became a recognised and respected subject for learning and teaching, and psychologists carved out a profession for themselves, the great religions of the world had grasped the truth, that if you teach and teach the tenets of a faith over and over again to your young people you will settle basic and permanent attitudes to life, standards of good and bad conduct, values of good and evil. The formative years of a man's mind are decisive. In your hands are the plastic minds of our next generation. And to ensure that no incongruous patterns are set, no antagonistic attitudes are struck, there must be mutual understanding and respect between the teachers of our various schools.

Each one of you have your own special problems. But you have one common problem, to ensure that the future is peaceful, secure and stable for our next generation. Whilst the political leaders are concentrating on cohesion and

unity amongst the adults, you have the more important task of settling the future, and of settling it in a complete and fundamental way.

I hope that the immediate and temporary difficulties caused by the cut in variable allowances and the extra hours of work caused by the six day week and the so-called extra half-session will not obscure the definition of our long-term objectives. There appears to be some difficulty about the so-called extra half-session for teachers next year.

As I have explained, we must increase the scope and extent of language teaching in our schools. This cannot be done unless teachers put in a few extra hours of work, without thought of any extra monetary return. The Minister for Education has already told you about the magnitude of Singapore's expenditure on education compared to other items of the national budget. It is about the highest rate anywhere in the world. Further, thousands of adult citizens want literacy classes and Adult Education classes. The community as a whole and the teachers in particular, must respond to these demands. I ask you to look upon the few extra hours of work you will be called upon to do next year as your contribution to the national endeavour. I am sure that if you understand the urgency of the problems that confront us you will meet the challenge that is posed to it with forbearance and enthusiasm.

What is at stake is not just a few dollars less and a few hours more work. What is in the balance is the very basis, the very foundations, of our society. For if we are not to perish in chaos caused by antagonisms and prejudices between water-tight cultural and linguistic compartments, then you have to educate the right responses amongst our young people in the schools. I am confident that there is sufficient resilience amongst our teachers in the English Schools for you to rise up to the tasks before you. For the teachers in the Chinese schools, I am sure that having struggled and fought successfully to establish the Chinese school education system against the opposition of colonial governments, you will respond to the call to higher effort and endeavour. For the Malay school teachers, never before has any government given you the place of honour and respect which this Government has given to you by placing emphasis on Malay as the national language and giving the Malay schools an equal status with the others. And so with the Tamil teachers.

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The future is ours to make. In our youth of today are the leaders and citizens of tomorrow. It is for you to teach them and make them the homogenous and united people of tomorrow. As the Government, it is our duty to create the conditions and give you the means to fulfill your tasks. That we shall do. But the achievement of these noble ideals of unity of a people depends upon you.

DECEMBER 8, 1959.

(Time issued 1500 hours)

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