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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER ON THE MOTION  
BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AT THE LEGISLATIVE  
ASSEMBLY MEETING OF THURSDAY, 2ND MARCH, 1961.

On several occasions in the past, we have had to underline the fact that Western type parliamentary democracy has to be adapted and adjusted to suit the practical realities of our position. The system of one man one vote, which ensures that the interest of the majority prevails without having to crush and destroy all opposition, can only work if adjustments are made to preserve not the forms, but the essence of a tolerant political system which ensures change in the social and economic order without violence.

One curious fact which emerges from the experiments in parliamentary democracy in Asia is that it works only when the governing party has a clear majority and is strong and decisive. Where a government is weak and has not got a clear majority or is composed of coalition factions, then the system breaks down as it has in Indonesia, in Burma when the governing party AFPFL split the Army took over, in Ceylon in the last government of the late Mr. Bandaranaike when he led a coalition because he did not have a clear majority, and lest we

forget in Singapore from 1955 to 1959 with the David Marshall government and later the government headed by the present Member for Cairnhill, neither of whom had a clear majority and depended on unstable alliances all of an opportunistic nature. Only in India, where the ruling Congress Party has a decisive majority and in the Federation of Malaya where UMNO has a clear majority are there governments successfully working under the democratic parliamentary system. Ceylon has been out of the news for sometime as an area of strife and instability because the present government of Mrs. Bandaranaike has a working majority which her late husband's government did not have. And Singapore has been out of the international news columns of riots and civil commotion, economic unrest and political instability because there has been a government with a clear majority given a clear mandate on its policy. And the conclusion one is forced to draw from these facts is that one of the problems that bedevil Western type parliamentary democracy in its workings in Asia is that the opposition is unwilling or unable to play its role within the constitutional framework. And when the opposition is strong it can and often does foul up the work of Government. A proper opposition opposes the policy of the government by offering to the people its own alternative remedies for economic and social problems, whilst at the same time upholding the institutions upon which parliamentary democracy is founded. One of these institutions, of course, is the elected legislature itself. Unfortunately, most, though not all, oppositions in Asia

are negative in that they have no alternative policy to offer to the electorate, and oppose for the sake of opposing not only the party in power but, as in the case of Singapore, also the institutions of the State.

Our Opposition is feeble not just in numbers. We have tried and will continue to try to make it possible for our Opposition to play its proper constitutional role, albeit limited, to criticise Government policies and to offer their own alternative policies to solve our economic and social problems in order that the people can decide between them and us when the time comes for general elections again. But one thing the Ong Eng Guan issue proved is that this opportunity we have offered the Opposition (The Minister for Culture has asked me to say that when he spoke of the Opposition yesterday, he was referring specifically to the SPA, not the UMNO.) to play up to its proper constitutional role, is wasted. It is wasted because it is an opposition with no principles or fixed beliefs. It opposes on the basis of opportunistic opposing. It has no firm policies, let alone principles, to offer to the people as an alternative to the PAP.

You will remember, Sir, this matter first arose on 19th December last year when the Leader of the House moved his motion of censure. An adjournment was sought by the then Member for Hong Lim and it was adjourned to 23rd December, 1960. The Member for Cairnhill then said that "in the minds and the

hearts of the people outside" that resolution "has nothing but a political motive". On your reminding him that that was a motion which affected the House as a whole without reference to politics or political motives, he said in column 865 of Hansard Volume 14, No.10, "What I was going to say was that we on this side of the House think that the right way to discuss this motion is as you have ruled and that we do not give credence to what the people outside say, although we consider ourselves to be representatives of the people."

In the course of the debate, it was quite clear that members of the opposition benches were not interested to see the dignity of this House upheld and standards of honourable conduct maintained. They were intent on helping Mr. Ong Eng Guan to confuse the people. A member makes false and baseless accusations under cover of his privilege in this House against other members of this Assembly and people outside, and the opposition was not interested in the harm it was going to do this House if the whole system of parliamentary privilege was wilfully abused. They were interested in using Mr. Ong Eng Guan as a means to confuse the people in the hope that it would weaken the confidence of the people in the government. Both the legal arguments made in this Chamber and the statements made outside by opposition parties were calculated to confuse and cloud the issue which was simply: Whether it is true that two members of the government were guilty of political corruption and nepotism as alleged by a

member who claims to know the inside story, or whether the member had abused his privilege by spreading wilful and malicious lies. Finally, on 23.12.60, Mr. Ong Eng Guan said that he was going to substantiate his allegations. But when we waited for him to appear on 29th December in order that my colleague the Minister for Labour and Law and I could confront him with the truth, he absconded by resigning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a grave charge was made against the government which if true must mean the resignation of the government and fresh general elections. And it is the duty not only of the government but also of the opposition to see that the truth is uncovered and placed before the people. Someone who had been a Minister alleged that there had been malpractices in high places. But the opposition was not interested in pursuing this grave charge. They were interested in spreading confusion and adding more dirt and slander in the hope of confusing the people and destroying the people's confidence in the government.

The statements made by the S.P.A. either in this Assembly through Tun Lim Yew Hock or outside through him and Mr. Lim Choon Mong, formerly of the Liberal Socialist Party, and before that of the Progressive Party, shows clearly the mind and the intentions of the Opposition with regard to this Ong Eng Guan issue. Accustomed as they are to charges of corruption being made against

them and their members, and having suffered the humiliation of having one charge of corruption proved not only against Mr. Chew Swee Kee but also against others closely related to members of their regime, they have never thought fit to meet and answer allegations of political corruption against them. Perhaps they did not realise that the surest way to a quick political demise is to have the smear of corruption stick against leaders of a party or even members of a party. Perhaps they have got their own different standards of conduct in these matters.

Whatever the reasons, they were not interested in ferreting out the truth. They were only interested in adding to the smear. Let me read out, Sir, two of the statements that have been made, both outside this Assembly -- both intended to smear the P.A.P., but sufficiently vague so as not be actionable under the law. The first statement by Mr. Lim Choon Mong of February 7: "Much dirt hidden hitherto by P.A.P. leaders, has now been revealed. Even the absence of the party's organising secretary from Singapore at this crucial moment is significant."

This statement was published in the Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh.

Then on February 11, Tun Lim Yew Hock as chairman of the party in a signed statement: "The shameful P.A.P. eruptions and events following had sent up plenty of 'dirt'. More would be revealed during the by-election at Hong Lim". So Tun Lim said.

Surely if there is dirt, it is important that it should be ferreted out and cleansed from the body politic? Why were they not in favour of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the truth? What dirt are they talking about? Why not be more specific in order that a proper inquiry into the truth can be made and those in high places connected with dirt can be destroyed? What dirt will come out in the Hong Lim by-election? Wishful thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It was their dirt in their midst that destroyed them, and they can live another 100 years but they can't forget Mr. Chew Swee Kee and the relatives of members of their regime in their iron-mining business in Perak. Mr. Chew Swee Kee was prudent enough to scoot off from Singapore before the PAP took power and he immediately renounced his Singapore citizenship to prevent the Government from investigating his activities further. If the opposition seriously believes that any member of this Government is remotely like Chew Swee Kee let them stand up and say so. It is their duty to say so, and it will be our duty to ensure that these allegations are investigated and the truth exposed before the people. But these vague insinuations coming from people whose past associates include known crooks leave a vile taste in the mouth. I have already quoted what the Member for Cairnhill has said in this Assembly. "We on this side of the House think that the right way to discuss this motion is as you (Mr. Speaker) have ruled and that we do not give credence to what the people outside say, ....." That is what the

Member of Cairnhill said in this Assembly. On 31st December last year the newspapers Nanyang Siang Pau and the Sin Chew carried a press statement issued by the SPA regarding Mr. Ong Eng Guan's resignation in these terms:

"Ong Eng Guan has resigned his seat in the Legislative Assembly. Whether it is because of the Motion moved to condemn him for his dishonorable conduct or because he wished to have his activities in the Legislative Assembly strengthened by the electorate that he tendered his resignation once he stands for the by-election he will have to tell the electorate. Although he started as a Minister before his expulsion through power struggle in the party, he ended as a member of the opposition and in this particular instance, he will, in the by-election, fight in the capacity of the opposition against the party in power, which with its majority in the Legislative Assembly can in many respects unjustly silence the opposition. For this reason, we shall not field a candidate for the by-election.

We deeply hope that the by-election will be held without inordinate delay as the

resignation of Ong Eng Guan and the events leading up to it has aroused public attention." Within six days the Member for Cairnhill had changed his views from

"the right way to discuss this motion is as you have ruled" to repeating Ong Eng Guan's fantastic allegation that the Government wanted to "silence" him.

Yesterday, March 1, Tun Lim said it was a fight between two factions of the PAP. But on the 11th January on the Motion for the adjournment, Column

975, Tun Lim said this: "The Government has no right to think that this by-election is a fight between Mr. Ong Eng Guan and the PAP." and he went on in column 976 to say: "We did say this: 'that because of the fact that the by-election is going to be a battle between the opposition and the Party in power which, by reason of its majority, could unjustly use its powers to silence the opposition'." The issue according to the Member for Cairnhill was not as you, Mr. Speaker, have ruled, i.e. whether privilege has been abused but was a battle between the opposition, i.e. the Member for Cairnhill, Ong Eng Guan etc., -- the SPA versus the Government which the Member for Cairnhill alleged wanted to silence the opposition. It's the same line that Mr. Ong Eng Guan has been taking that the Government wanted to silence him. Our opposition does not understand that what the government want it to do is to open its big mouth wider like Ong Eng Guan did before the Commission of Inquiry so that it can be destroyed by its own foolish utterings. Another statement was issued by the SPA on the 4th of

February (Nanyang and Sin Chew): "The Hong Lim by-election is a struggle between the Government Party and the Opposition Party. The "brother-in-law" and "bigamy" controversy between the present and the past PAP leaders has no bearing on the Hong Lim by-election, the important point is whether or not the Opposition, under the oppression of the Party in power, has a chance to survive or to speak -- a question of principle." The statement goes on to say: "Although the people of Singapore are waiting for the report of the 'Inquiry Commission',

they are all the more earnestly waiting for the 'political judgment' the people of Hong Lim area will make on the PAP in the by-election."

The SPA were not interested in the truth which the Commission was appointed to investigate. They were most interested in leaving the truth hidden by unproven allegations and counter allegations and on their own to add more smear by vague charges of dirt and scandal. Another statement by the Secretary-General of the SPA was issued on the 7th February. It had this astonishing proposition that: "if the positions of the rival leaders were reversed, and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew were in Mr. Ong Eng Guan's shoes today the SPA would similarly not oppose Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, as he should not be denied the chance and the right to defend himself before his electorate." A curious proposition. Never mind if the man is a perjurer and a bigamist. Never mind about the rights and wrongs of the issue. Add to the lies and the confusion and support the man. Support him openly because he is trying to bring the Government into disrepute, but of course deny any sympathy for him in case people are revolted by his low tactics. These statements are all from the SPA. And the Member for Cairnhill on 11th February said in a press statement: "We like to make it clear that news releases are the responsibility of the party executive. The Chairman and the secretary general are the officers authorised to sign such releases, and in their absence, the vice-chairman or deputy secretary general.

The real battle is between the pro-Lee Kuan Yew group and the pro-Ong Eng Guan group" said Tun Lim. A new line -- from opposition v. government to Ong Eng Guan v. Lee Kuan Yew. What he stopped short of saying is that the pro-Ong Eng Guan group consists of the Member for Cairnhill, Mr R.C.H. Lim, former nominated member of the Labour Front, Mr. David Marshall who has called Mr. Ong Eng Guan a "hero" for lying, the Member for Joo Chiat, and the animal lover of the Peoples Congress. These people have not got the courage of their own desires. What they really want to do is to form -- What Mr. Marshall has been trying to do and is still trying to do -- a united anti-PAP front, of right-wing adventurers, political opportunists and all the political left-overs of past regimes. The Citizens Party has dissolved and merged into the Worker's Party. Calls have been made to form a broad united front to fight for independence, which according to Mr. Marshall, will be guaranteed by trusteeship under the United Nations. The SPA now also believes in anti-colonialism and independence for Singapore. This momentous decision was told to the world in a statement by the Secretary General, Mr. Lim Choon Mong, on the 2nd of February. The Member of Cairnhill said yesterday that they have decided this several months ago. But they kept this a close guarded secret until Mr. Lim Choon Mong leaked it out to the press four weeks ago.

Why not have the guts to form this united front openly, back each other openly and put these slogans before the people in Hong Lim? Have the courage to field their own candidate, to stand up for what the SPA and Ong Eng Guan, and Marshall and R.C.H Lim believe -- this new united front. Or if they cannot find a candidate why not openly back Mr. Ong Eng Guan, shout anti-colonialism and independence and attack the PAP openly, and let the people decide on it. But all they can do is to fight by proxy -- find a stooge, secretly, and opportunistically support him, but of course publicly denying all sympathy for him. They do not support Mr. Ong Eng Guan, but they admit he is "fighting the battle of the opposition party". The Government is trying to silence him, says Mr. Ong Eng Guan, and so also says the Member for Cairnhill, and echoed by the Secretary-General of the SPA, Mr. Lim Choon Mong. But the opposition are not prepared to come out into the open and stand up for what they intend to do.

The Member for Cairnhill made an explanation yesterday of how Mr. Ong Eng Guan knew of the move to condemn him. In his explanation, Tun Lim denied that he alerted Mr. Ong Eng Guan, although he did see Mr. Ong Eng Guan who thereafter went to see you at his suggestion and that when Mr. Ong Eng Guan came back from seeing you he told Tun Lim that there was a surprise move but that the Speaker was a gentleman and he was going to demand notice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you cannot take part in this debate. For the purpose of record I should mention briefly that you had told me you were surprised that when Mr. Ong Eng Guan came to see you he already knew that a motion was being considered against him and that you told him you were looking into the procedure on the question of notice.

I accept your recollection in preference to the version of the Member for Cairnhill of this event -- i.e. that Mr. Ong Eng Guan already knew of the motion before he went to see you, not after he saw you, as the Member for Cairnhill suggested.

I would not have mentioned the matter but for the fact that the Member for Cairnhill chose to make disparaging remarks about the nature of my evidence before the Commission of Inquiry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was a public Commission and the Member for Cairnhill, if he felt that the Commission was being misled, was fully entitled to appear before the Commission to give his evidence and be cross-examined on it. However, I can quite understand why the Ministers of the last regime had a pathological fear to appearing in the open to be cross-examined on oath. I remember myself the tremendous Government resistance to a subpoena being served on a Minister to appear before the City Council Inquiry. But to adversely comment in this privileged Chamber on evidence which he did

not see fit to rebut before the Commission is a sad commentary on the sense of propriety of someone who once held Ministerial office.

I listened with interest, Sir, on their stand that the opposition will not support or oppose this Motion. They voted against the PAP on the last motion to have the original Motion debated. They have tried to confuse the issue in the hope of using the man. How could they vote to condemn him today and confuse everyone including themselves? All they could do is to abstain and pretend that they are not interested in this whole matter. Whatever they intended to do, they have succeeded in forfeiting their own self-respect and dispelled any hope anyone may have had that weak though they are they can yet fulfill a role as the balancing counterpoise within the frame work of parliamentary democracy. This Motion formally condemns a proven liar, but more important it condemns all those in the opposition who tried to cover up Mr. Ong Eng Guan's lying tactics by confusing the issues.

National Archives of Singapore

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