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PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH TO THE POLITICAL
SOCIETY OF THE SINGAPORE POLYTECHNIC ON
6TH APRIL, 1961.

You will see from the dual limbs of my talk tonight that I am put to considerable lengths to find a subject which has not been covered in a daily election speech. Tonight we will talk about something more interesting to you and to me and somewhat far removed from issues of the Hong Lim By-election.

I have therefore phrased the subject of my talk in the alternative: "Youth and Politics in Afro-Asia" or "Youthful politics of Afro-Asian". And the theme that I want to propound this evening, one which concerns you is that in a transitional society, it is the youth of that society which sets the pace. The most striking characteristic of the political movements in many of the Afro-Asian countries is that the older generation, the above 40's, definitely the above 50's, have taken a backseat. It is the under 40's and often even the under 30's, who are setting the pace. When a society is in transition from a old set of values in one ordered state of society to a new society, the people in the vanguard of that transition are often the younger generation.

Let me illustrate my point to you in a simple, but vivid way. Japanese society was ordered and fixed before the war. It was a highly stratified, a rigid, disciplined society. You may remember -- those of you who are old enough, the courtesy, the obedience, the absolute discipline of the Japanese student. Then all of a sudden that society crashed. Their values of their hierarchy collapsed. "God supreme ordained the Japanese people to rule the world." That whole edifice, that ideological super-structure of their society collapsed. The disciplined obedient Japanese students became the snake dancers of Tokyo, people who brought traffic and life to a grinding halt in the metropolis of the Japanese empire, and people who were able, through sheer organised indiscipline, to prevent General Eisenhower from visiting Japan in spite of the fact that the will of the Japanese people, as manifested in the rural areas, the older generation, was in support of the Government as they subsequently proved in the elections.

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The reason for it is, that when a society has lost its bearings and is looking at the compass for new bearings, then youth takes the helm. You find this vividly illustrated at the moment in Africa. Mr. Tom Mboya, a man whose party won the last Kenya elections with the largest single number of seats for any party is only 29 years old. That is a society in a state of transition. Most of the older Kenyans, people who had to succumb under different circumstances, in a

different historical epoch, cannot emotionally and psychologically adapt themselves to assume the leadership in a new situation and lead. Therefore the younger people have come forward.

General Aung San, the Prime Minister of Burma, when he was assassinated was 32 years old. And so, I could recite to you a whole series of political movements with youthful leaders, youthful in that they are in the mid-span of life, if you gave 60 to 70 years as the span of an ordinary man's life. In a society where the old maps and old compass is no longer valid and the people are on the march and on the move, at that particular moment in history it is the younger people who assume leadership. What does this mean in terms of good and bad?

It is generally true that the older one gets, the wiser one is likely to be and that I am probably wiser now than I was five years ago, and I hope that in five years from now I shall be wiser than I am today. Then, of course, you reach a peak, and mental decay sets in and with every passing year, you become less effective. But up to that optimum point, which with modern medicine can mean anything up to 70 years -- it does mean that you are entrusted and confronted with acute and difficult problems which you must resolve without having behind you that whole wealth of experience which a long life gives any man. And the

comment that I want to make on the politics of Afro Asia is that to the extent to which youthful leadership has been able to adjust itself rapidly and effectively to the responsibilities of power, to that extent the transition from the old to the new society becomes less painful.

It is not unnatural therefore that with the population pyramid being what it is in Singapore -- and this is reflected throughout most of the Afro-Asian countries -- youth not only decide the leaders, youth become the leaders. The only exceptions superficially are those countries where the transition had taken place a little while ago and youthful leaders have grown old at the helm in the process of the struggle. President Sukarno is 60 years old. Leading an extremely youthful revolution; he himself assumed power in his forties in 1945. The Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Indonesia, which is the largest single organised party contending for power, is about 33. And therefore, when I talk to a group of students in Singapore, I am in a somewhat different position from say, the British Prime Minister when he goes down to an Oxford or Cambridge University Club to talk to his students. If you are an undergraduate in London or in Cambridge or in Oxford or in the London Polytechnic, you do not hope, nor are you expected, to participate in the leadership of your people for another 30 years after graduation. There are old and established people in all ranks. The pyramid is firmly based and you climb your way up slowly and

gradually, gather your experience, make your mistakes in the lower levels and hope that when you reach the top you will make less of a mess of the lives of your people. But the most remarkable thing about Afro-Asia is that the older generation has abdicated, is unable to lead. I was entrusted with leadership some six years after I left the University and I became Prime Minister some eleven years after I took my first degree at the University of Cambridge. It is unheard of in other parts of the world but it is a situation which is endemic in all the societies in a state of transition.

But, of course, once having led the transition, I think it is extremely unlikely that a newer and younger generation of students are going to push the youthful leadership out of place for a long time. That is a point which I think is worth your attention.

On the history of a people, once the old can no longer command, the young take over and lead, and then they keep on leading until either they succeed or they perish. But once having taken and assumed leadership, it does not pass back to the old because the old has abdicated. That is the society you and I find ourselves in today. And it is not just in Singapore. With the exception of Tengku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of the Federation, the Federation Government is also a young government. The Deputy Prime Minister was my

contemporary. He is about a year older than I am. We represent a phase in the historical development of Malaya -- the change from the old order to the new order. It is not because of the greatness of the individuals, but because of the given circumstance of history in which power is entrusted by default upon the younger generation.

Today, you are students in the Polytechnic; in three or four years' time you will have to take your place in the active leadership of your society; be it in your professional organisation as an accountant, an engineer, or an architect or be it as a political leader. That is the most striking feature which you find in all these new societies and what I would like to invite you this evening to discuss with me are the problems and the opportunities, which such a situation provides. We neither desire nor object to any historical situation. It is there confronting us and our task is how to live up to the enormous responsibilities which have been entrusted upon us. Not just those few who happened to be in actual positions of power but all of us, a whole generation of which you and I are one, which has been given this rare privilege of leading the country and settling the pattern for the future.

A former Government in Singapore once believed that by giving citizenship to all the older people and they would knock out the influence of the

PAP, because the PAP was leading the younger people. And I thought to myself, then, what an utterly futile hope that was: just because they were older they are going to vote for a more conservative line of action. And in three successive elections since then we have shown that when the older generation lacked the formal education, that worked and slogged for the benefit of their children, often they took the political line from their children whom they sweated to educate. That is a fact. A society in a state of transition has the young people in the leadership. And I can think of no better note in which to end my brief introduction for my topic tonight than to say that that epitomises the leadership of youth in a society in a state of transition. It is only the rare instance where you find the elders of the family laying down the letter of the law to the family. Instead, it is the bright young man in the family, respected and loved, educated at considerable cost to the elders, who is asked for his views on how to build a brave new world. They don't understand it, the elder generation. They were brought up in a different world and they are happy to understand what is happening to the young children whom they sweated to educate. Therefore you and I as a generation have been entrusted with the responsibilities which I hope we have the courage and we have the will to live up to.

Q.1 May I ask whether the youthful leadership of the future would come from the English-educated or from the Chinese educated?

A. Your proposition can be in respect of a Singapore situation, or in respect of a Federation situation, or in respect of a Pan-Malayan situation. There is a different answer for each one of these three different situations.

I believe that if you take a Singapore situation by itself, then the leadership that would emerge, given free play, must be leadership of the largest and most active group and therefore, the leadership of the Chinese-educated. That is in the nature of things. The largest number of heads being counted are those who speak the Chinese language, and if as individuals they are equally if not more active than the others, then they must lead. But we are in a curious position. The English educated is politically, not numerically, a force.

But the Singapore position does not exist in isolation. And the Federation and Singapore situations are inseparable. In a pan-

Malayan background, given a constitutional set up, where political power is predominantly in the hands of the Malays, then it must mean that predominance goes to the Malay-educated, whose leadership is also English-educated, because nearly all the Malay leaders are bi-lingual. This means that the link between the Malays, and the other races is first through the English-educated. Let me explain this in a different way. If you are purely Chinese-educated in a Malayan situation, then you will be isolated from the other communities. You will be less isolated if you are not only Chinese-educated but also English and Malay speaking. Then you are able to bridge the worlds. You see, no Malay is Chinese-educated. That is a fact. The leadership of the Malays is English-educated and will in the foreseeable future continue to be so. That is their wish and their decision. We notice it in our own situation here where we offer free Malay schooling and free English schooling and the majority of Malay parents prefer to send their children to English schools and learn Malay at the same time, so that they are able to bring up their children bi-lingual, knowing both the Malay language, which preserves their link with their past, and learning the English language which, they hope, is the key to the new society. If you take Singapore and Malaya as a whole, the leadership which is

able to bridge the different language groups is the one most likely to be acceptable. If you want to be effective, if you want to lead the people, then you must be able to communicate with them. And for the foreseeable future, since power will reside predominantly in the hands of the Malays, it must mean that the English educated still have in economic and social fields a position of importance. The challenge you and I have to meet is how quickly can we use this period of transition to adjust and adapt ourselves, to equip ourselves, to meet our responsibilities in the future, where all the leadership of all language streams are able to command two or three languages including the national language.

Q.2 Do you think that the social revolution that is now taking place in Africa, especially in South Africa, can be confined to

constitutional means or use of force will be necessary to achieve the aims?

A. Well, if I were a South African I don't think there is the slightest doubt as to my answer to that one. The man denies you the right of any change by persuasion and has got tanks in the streets and the thing you have got to do is to find out the quickest way to

dispose of his tanks. The proposition of constitution by consent is only possible where you have the rule to the game allowing the change by consent. Where the change cannot be by consent the alternative and the only conceivable way is by force.

Q.2A What about certain parts of Africa and Asia where no proper constitutional means are available by general elections and so on?

A. I said as a proposition in abstract. If you do not have a revolution by consent as Harold Laski says you will have a revolution by violence. And if you create a situation, as they created in Africa where a given order of society is to be sustained by sheer force despite the will of the majority, then the alternative is violence and then you have to pay the price. And I have no doubt that eventually it will be paid and the objective will have to be achieved in the way objectives had been achieved since primitive men inhabited the face of the earth, namely, he who is stronger and he who throws the other fellow down in the dust is the man whose will prevails. But that is an extremely primitive state of affairs and in the situation which I hope exists in Singapore and in Malaya, it is

unnecessary, in a more enlightened age and in a more enlightened society to have to settle our differences of opinion only by force.

Q.3 It is most unlikely that we will have a revolution whereby the leadership comes from the group which has the numerical superiority. If that is the case how do you go about pacifying these groups which have a numerical superiority? In this case, the Chinese-educated in a Pan-Malayan context?

A. I would first of all object to the proposition as you have put it as pacifying anybody because I think it is the wrong approach. I would not consciously set out to pacify or accommodate any group of people. But I think it is necessary for us to recognise that the position being what it is that we should make it possible for them to participate in the system and adjust themselves into a given situation.

Let me put it in another way. The proposition which I think the active highly disciplined and intelligent Chinese-educated intelligensia faces is how to blend themselves into a Malayan background. Let me put it from the negative point of view. The

Malay-educated Malay accepts the English-educated as a Malayan. That is a fact. I am not arguing the rights and wrongs of it. But he is not prepared to accept a man whose language he does not understand and with whom he cannot communicate as a Malayan. And I think our first and primary duty is to break down that barrier and to make them less isolated vis-a-vis the rest of Malaya. That is basic and fundamental. Given the opportunities not just at governmental level, but in the University, in the schools, in the Polytechnic, I think it is remarkable the rapidity with which this group of intelligent people can adjust themselves to a given situation. The number of multi-lingual Chinese-educated students there are today as against five or ten years ago, is truly phenomenal and that in itself would tend to blur the lines. A man with whom you can converse is a man you are more likely to say, "Well, I think he is alright. I understand what he is talking about." That is what we want to get everybody in Malaya to do first.

If we talk the same language, we understand what we are talking to each other, we understand what we are thinking to each other.

Well, that is being actively pursued both in the educational level and governmental level, and I think, they themselves, the Chinese-

educated as a group understand, that they have got to bridge the worlds. And given another five and at the most, ten years, I think the line should be blurred and you should be able to create a society in which you can stand up and talk, I hope, in Malay or in English and can be understood by everybody.

Q.4 Does the Singapore Government encourage students to take an active part in politics?

A. Very fair question. Somebody asked me why don't we start a youth section. You know the Federation of Malaya UMNO has a youth section whose leader is Inche Sardon bin Haji Jubir, and his age is 42. I am 38. The organising secretary of my party is 32 and if I start a youth section I am likely to wind up with 15-year olds. It is difficult to start a youth section and to say "Well, should youth take or not take part in politics, when in fact youth is leading the political field. Let me answer the question which I think you have underlined in your proposition. Should students take part in politics? And I say should students interest themselves in politics? The answer is yes, provided you have passed the primary school age, provided you are able to think for yourselves, provided you are

able to distinguish between what is right and wrong, good and bad for your society. Definitely at the University or Polytechnic level. But should you take part in active politics and party politics? I say definitely no. If I say as a proposition that it is right for students to take part in party politics, then I will set out effectively using the government machinery to ensure that the thinking of the student movement is on my side. It's obvious, isn't it. And I would say, pledged as we are to a considerable degree of democratic free choice, what you want to ensure is the ability to make independent judgment, to decide what you think is right or wrong for your country without being involved in partisanship, in a given political situation. What I mean is whether you ultimately become supporters of the status quo, or red hot revolutionaries with every intention of burning the place down and creating a new society, you should at least bring your minds to bear on the matter, but I do not believe that you should actively intervene as students in the political situation.

Q.5 The Government of Singapore and the Federation of
Malaya are trying to break down racial prejudices Even if they are

successful, do you think they will be able to create a Malayan culture?

A. I think there are two different propositions. Breaking down of racial prejudices may or may not lead to the creation of Malayan culture. These are two different propositions. I would say both of them are desirable objectives. You have got to break down your racial prejudices because if you don't do that, then I say you are in an extremely delicate situation all the time. Let me explain. This is what happened three months ago.

But those of you, who only read the English newspapers and who are not living in a Chinese kampong, neighbouring a Malay kampong say eight or nine miles away from town, would never have felt this fear gripping you. At the time of the ARTIS plot whilst we were making all these broadcasts in Malay and so on, there was real fear and panic, not felt among the English-educated because they didn't know about these things. Then as a backwash reaction to it sometime in February there was a great deal of counter-rumour and counter-panic of the Chinese against the Malays and the Malays were getting a little scared. And as long as you have got your

population divided and separated so distinctly by language, race, culture, religion, then you will always have the makings of trouble because so many things can be misunderstood, can be misconstrued and can give rise to fear. And fear, is the biggest stimulus to panic and the last thing you want in this situation is where you get your races panicky about each other's intention and then you get disaster. So while you dampen all these tendencies and all the incidents which lead to fear and panic, you must be sure that there is more understanding by integrating your community. You've got to do that. Either you believe in that or you believe in just carrying on as we are and leaving it to chance. And the chances are that if you leave it to chance, disaster will overtake us.

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