

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT THE NATIONAL DAY
CELEBRATIONS HELD AT THE INDIAN ASSOCIATION
ON 24TH AUGUST, 1968

Mr. President, Friends and Fellow-citizens,

Not many countries of the world have their people living a better and more peaceful life after taking over power from European colonial administration. Every time an empire comes to an end, instability, disturbance and turbulence follow. It is the business of finding a new equilibrium. Peoples who have been made to live together in peace with each other because of overriding force – whether it is the British Raj or French power or Dutch hegemony – different ethnic, linguistic, religious groups brought together under one law – all make their contribution to the colonial economy, and life goes on peacefully. Then power is transferred. You know the history of India and Pakistan. At the lowest estimate, 200,000 people were killed and some ten million displaced as they were uprooted from one side and moved to the other.

You know the troubles in Ceylon where language and religion became an issue. You know the history of the migrant community in Burma when they were asked to leave. You know the present troubles of Nigeria. And it all happened when the Roman Empire broke up.

What lessons do these examples have for us? First, that it would be unwise in the new situation for the majority to try to impose its will on the minority. To do this is sheer folly for it will lead to social disruption and economic dislocation. Second, that change which is inevitable, must come naturally and in good grace – that it comes more with the carrot than with the stick. The use of languages, social attitudes and loyalties cannot be ordained by law. But by the rewards you offer, you can channel the next generation along certain desirable directions.

Almost by unanimous consent, Singapore has accepted the tolerant accommodating society as the ideal norm. It is also an achievement-oriented society. We are a society conscious that we are young. That we do not have the in-built reflexes of an established society. The consciousness of this helps.

Without any decree being issued, but more through argument, reason and reward, there will be eventually no school in Singapore which is racially exclusive. Singaporeans get to know at a very early age whether in an integrated school or in an English-language school, that Singapore comprises more than just people of your kind. And by the time Singaporeans get to their teens, inducted into two years of National Service – drilled together – they will know that authority depends not upon language or race, but upon their merit and their ability to command the respect of their fellow citizens. Slowly we shall build into this community a sense of oneness and distinctiveness. We require time, and time is our most precious commodity.

We have less than 3½ years before the end of 1971. If we achieve accelerated growth better than what we achieved in the last three years, the chances are that we shall ride our economic and social problems.

National Archives of Singapore

After 1971, new security arrangements will obtain. Whatever happens we must have our own effective contribution to make. It is no use building this thriving, humming economy just to hand it over to somebody else. I don't believe in that. We are building this for our progeny.

Over the years, without again any decree, new forms of social organisation will emerge. Like the Singapore Cricket Club or the Tanglin Club, the names and facade may remain the same, but the content will have changed because political, economic and social conditions have altered. We shall have the Indian Association, the Hakka or Hokkien Huay Kuans. But they are adapting to changed conditions. The functions they performed before, sustaining in mutual aid and succour people from the same village or district in India or China, in a situation where government was minimal and in the hands of an alien authority, new functions have to be discharged in a situation where the government is dependent on popular will.

I was very happy to learn that you have 200 associate members, non-Indians. I do not think we ought to force the pace of change. But we ought to be conscious of the fact that if at the end of this century whoever is in charge finds as members of the Indian Association are more concerned about events in India than in Singapore, then we – you and I – would not have done our job. We know what that job is. It will be best achieved if we use the carrot and never the stick.

In the years to come those who succeed you, as those who succeed me in office, should find this a more and more a homogenous community. Nobody demands that we should all look like one another. Nobody demands that we should all be put in the melting pot and churned up into one uniform mass. But we ought to be thinking the same thoughts about our common interests in the progress and prosperity of Singapore.

I wish you, members of the Indian Association many rewarding years in nation-building.

National Archives of Singapore