

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT THE REUNION DINNER OF
ST. ANDREW'S OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION ON
7TH SEPTEMBER, 1968

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All new countries face the grave problem of identity. For they invariably embrace more than one race or tribe within their natural boundaries inherited from a colonial power. Recently someone asked in the newspaper, "What is a Singaporean? And if there is such a thing, then why ask what his race is?"

If you ask an Ibo today, "Are you a Nigerian?", I think it would be extremely difficult to get him to admit that he is. This problem arises whenever an era of relative stability comes to an end. When an empire comes to an end, with it ends all the universal concepts which an imperial system establishes between heterogeneous ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups. This was what happened with the Roman Empire. So it is with the British Empire. Once upon a time, if you were a citizen of Rome, even if you were not a Roman, then

you were part of the system. For Roman citizenship was a concept that extended beyond ethnic boundaries. But when an empire is ended, over 100,000 Kenyans of Indian origin, who had opted for British nationality, found that the undertaking could not be met.

We ask ourselves, what is a Singaporean? In the first place, we did not want to be Singaporeans. We wanted to be Malaysians. Then the idea was extended and we decided to become Malaysians. But 23 months of Malaysia – a traumatic experience, for all parties in Malaysia – ended rather abruptly with our being Singaporeans.

By legal definition the Singaporean is a citizen of Singapore. Under our citizenship legislation you will find various categories by which one becomes a citizen. A person born here in the pre-Malaysia days automatically became a Singapore citizen. Now he has to be born here with one parent at least a citizen. Why? Because we have so many non-citizens living and working here who may or may not belong, or want to belong. Then there are those who have resided here for more than ten years and can acquire citizenship. Then wives and children of such people, and so on.

But my colleagues and I know that whilst this may be the logical definition, the acid test of who is a Singaporean is whether the person is so committed to Singapore that he is prepared to stick out and fight for Singapore.

An emotive definition, a qualitative not quantitative test, of a Singaporean, is: a person who either by birth and upbringing or residence in Singapore feels committed to upholding this society as it is – multi-racial, tolerant, accommodating, forward-looking – and prepared to stake his life for this community.

Strange though it may seem, some of the people most willing to stake their lives for Singapore are those born and brought up outside Singapore and who have settled here. Probably it is because they know how unpleasant life can be in other societies neither tolerant nor accommodating. These are the people most prepared to fight for Singapore, for a multi-racial community that offers them a place under the sun.

What are the characteristics of a Singaporean? It is difficult to define this. For it would be dishonest to say that the person who put one dollar on a scrap of paper in 1957-58 has acquired all the attributes that we require of him. But we already have a hard-core of people who know exactly what kind of

attributes the Singaporean must have if he is to protect our collective interests.

Whether we leave that impress, and build in the responses of group survival into the next generation, will depend upon how successful our schools, like St., Andrew's, transmit and nurture these attributes.

Schools like St. Andrew's have made a contribution. So too now are schools as different from St. Andrew's as Chinese High School or Chung Cheng or Catholic High. These schools used to produce completely different types. If we are to succeed in gelling the various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups into a uniform distinctiveness, separate from the rest of Southeast Asia, then they must inculcate the same basic values and attitudes to life and proficiency in a common language.

With the end of empires, new political elites emerge. Ethnic, religious, linguistic pulls become divisive when the levelling influence of superior authority is removed. A jostle takes place for ascendancy between the different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. If you have the one-man-one-vote system, then the temptation to get votes on the basis of ethnic, linguistic or religious loyalties often becomes irresistible. And so the relentless process of economic decline sets in, because productive digits brought together to co-operate and

complement each other under one authority are dislodged and disrupted in a contest for political ascendancy between the diverse groups.

One of the reasons for our relative success is that we have not pretended that there are no differences in ethnic, linguistic or religious pulls and loyalties. But having admitted these distinctions, we go on to provide each with his place under the sun in an open competitive society, whilst ensuring that the collective group interests of all is not jeopardised by any sectional selfishness.

May I congratulate the mission schools, including the Anglican Mission, for having adjusted and adapted to the changing political situation. They will continue to have a benevolent influence on our society. It is a leavening influence, the opening in the minds of our young of more windows into other worlds – one of the factors for the thrusting vigorous forward-looking society we have.

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I am not a prophet. I do not know whether the process we have started will continue and progress uninterrupted into the end of the 20th century. There are many extraneous factors which may decide the ultimate result. But of one thing I have no doubt, that whatever the vicissitudes of fate and fortune, the

future favours those who are determined and firm enough to assert and secure their right to be here.

If by the year 2000, St. Andrew's School is still known by the same name, then the Singaporean has already been clearly defined. A fair percentage of Chinese ethnic descent, a good mixture of Indians, Ceylonese, Eurasians, Malays and others; each with a lifeline to his cultural and linguistic past and so some ballast in the traditional values of his own cultural heritage, but all seeking the widest common area of understanding in language, in values, in emotional attitudes, and most important in a common and undivided loyalty to the integrity of a society which affords them the maximum of personal freedom of choice compatible with the maximum of equal opportunities for economic advancement and fulfilment.

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