

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE BANQUET  
GIVEN BY THE SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE TO MARK THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF  
THE FOUNDING OF SINGAPORE - 6TH FEBRUARY, 1969

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Mr. Chairman, High Commissioner, Ladies & Gentlemen,

It gives me singular pleasure to be your principal guest this evening. It is not often one has the good fortune to celebrate a 150th anniversary. But for the wisdom and foresight of the Englishman with whose name the history of modern Singapore will always be associated, your Chamber, you and I, all of us would not be here today. This banquet of Chinese cuisine, amidst such gracious and sumptuous surroundings, could well have been in one of the major metropolitan centres of the world. It is a concourse in a setting that does Raffles proud.

I am flattered, if a little apprehensive, by your generous comparison of the qualities of Sir Stamford Raffles with the attributes I am supposed to have. If 50 years from now, your successor would say of me some of the things you have just said, it would be of immense satisfaction to me, even if I should be in some

other world. For no judgment can be as fair and as final, or as cruel and conclusive, as that of history.

Only posterity can pass judgment objectively on the wisdom or otherwise of their forbears. Only with the advantage of hindsight can people accurately analyse and assess the rights or wrongs of important decisions. Often these decisions had to be taken hurriedly and under intense pressure. But once taken, they could not be easily undone. And one particularly momentous decision changed the destiny of several millions, not all in Singapore.

Decolonisation is usually supposed to mean the orderly dismantling of an empire. Conversely, viewed from the position of the subject peoples, it should mean a restoration to freedom and nationhood. But several hundred years of empire have created civilised communities where none previously existed.

## National Archives of Singapore

When Stamford Raffles came here 150 years ago, there was no organised human society in Singapore, unless a fishing village can be called a society. There are now over two million people with the second highest standard of living in Asia.

We thought the rational and orderly way forward was to build a nation out of the conglomeration of British colonies and dependencies in Southeast Asia. So Singapore joined Malaya in Malaysia. But for a number of compulsive reasons, Singapore was asked to leave, suddenly and abruptly.

Historians record that five years after 1819, the disposition of Southeast Asia was settled in Europe, in a treaty on 17th March 1824 between the British and the Dutch. That treaty gave the outer islands to the Dutch. Penang, Peninsular Malaya (including Malacca) and Singapore became British.

150 years is a short span in the history of a people. But even so, how vastly different the world is today. Europe can no longer decide the fate of Asia. Even America is shy of being embroiled over again in guerilla insurrections on the Asian mainland. How much more different the world will be 20 years from now, after Vietnam, after Britain's military withdrawal East of Suez, after Japan's self-defence forces have started to pay more courtesy visits, after China's recovery from the excesses of her Cultural Revolution and her inexorable climb up the technological and military ladder.

150 years ago, there was no Suez Canal, and Raffles took four months to get from Bencoolen to London. Now, it takes 18 hours from Singapore to London by air, even before the super-sonics.

But whilst technological and political changes have gone on at a geometrically increasing speed, it is a sobering thought that geography has remained unchanged, except where there has been the dredging of canals, the erosion of the coastline by tides or reclamation of fore-shores by tractors. Almost as unchanging are the nature and character of ethnic-cultural-religious groups. You spoke highly of Munshi Abdullah or Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, his full and proper name. He was a shrewd teacher, an astute observer. Not only was he a chronicler who faithfully recorded the facts worth noting. He also commented on what might or should have been. In 1832, 137 years ago, whilst travelling to the north of Peninsular Malaya, he wrote in his book PELAYARAN ABDULLAH of many things which, if I had carefully read and digested earlier in my political life, would have save me much disappointment.

In your commemoration programme you have thought it worth mention that on that memorable day in 1819, some 30 Chinese were present to witness the ceremony. How proud they would have been to know that their descendants would be amongst the Malays, Indians, Eurasians and others who by their hard

work, thrift, resourcefulness and enterprise built modern Singapore. And what satisfaction it would have given them to know that their progeny would be amongst those who came into their own inheritance. And considering the contribution they made in converting a fishing village into a humming centre for commerce, communication and industry, it was only just that it should be so.

For reasons you will understand, the celebrations of our 150th year will reach a climax in August. Anniversaries must not mean a harking back to some idyllic, romanticised past, though even such an exercise in nostalgia is not without its therapeutic value. For us this anniversary is a significant and formal moment, for a brief pause, to study and scrutinise the record of the last 150 years, learn the lessons therefrom, and with confidence renewed surge forward to improve upon the past.

The past is a good indicia of innate ability. It is also a good teacher of future relationships. It underlines the close links we have always had with West Malaysia. Half my Cabinet colleagues still have their families in West Malaysia. The ties are close and, in several respects, inseparable. In the future, as it has been in the past, there will be an enduring community of interests despite differences of styles, methods and ways of life.

The past also records the mutual advantage found in joint adventure. British administration and enterprise plus local sweat, drive, skills, and ingenuity, they have created what we now have. We look forward to British industry and technology continuing to make a valuable contribution to our growth and progress in the next 150 years.

Are we being sentimental over this continuing association? But it is worth noting that even sentiment has its worth in foreign exchange and helps to balance payments. For in the balance sheets of companies, when mergers take place, substantial sums are set against what is known as goodwill. And goodwill is but an old-fashioned word to denote the economic value of well established ties, ties which enduring sentiment and continuing habit support and reinforce in newer forms of association.

What of the future? Our future is what we make of it, and we will use to best advantage the factors in our favour. First, the strategic. As long as the balance of geo-political forces in South, Southeast and East Asia remain as they are, then Singapore's strategic value will continue undiminished. Second, our contribution to world trading, shipping, and servicing will continue to grow and expand whilst we add an even bigger industrial sector to our economic base. Third and most important, the ability and industry of our young people, willing

and eager to learn, prepared to work hard and pay their way in the world, finding pride and pleasure in constructive endeavour. But, in any case, they are also disciplined and determined to defend what their ingenuity and effort have created.

Mr. Chairman, you have expressed the hope that the students of the University present with us tonight, will on the bicentenary of Singapore's founding, remember this occasion. I wondered whether you have perhaps overlooked the vitality and vigour of many others present this evening. With the rapid advance in medicine and in surgical techniques, perhaps not just for transplants but also replants, it is not beyond belief that there will be many besides our young students who, in the year 2019, will recall this memorable occasion.

Those of us who will be present then can look back on 200 years and say how right it was that we worked and sweated on the assumption that no one owed us a living, that we strove so hard and nurtured so rugged and robust, so resilient and resourceful a generation. Without this physical and spiritual ruggedness, all the fruits, the results of our labour even in concrete and steel, could end literally in ruins -- ruins for the delectation of tourists in the year 2019, as they rummage in the rubble and dustbins of Singapore's past. And they would

wonder how under such adverse climatic conditions a thrusting and striving society build such a thriving city with all the grace of cultivated living. And they would be perplexed and saddened by the unexpected and unexplainable destruction, when a dogged defence could have saved it.

But we are not going to let that happen. Your children, and grandchildren, and mine, will be here to welcome all visitors to Singapore and offer them more excitement in present and future achievement than by goggling at past glory in ruins.

When visitors come in the 21st century they will find Singapore an open and hospitable city to all those who come as friends or visitors, a Singapore strong and confident and thus at ease in offering the traveller a warm, comfortable and memorable welcome. Singapore has been and will remain more than a place on the map. She will give cause for satisfaction to all those who chart man's progress and who will find corroboration in Singapore's performance that this climb up the face of the cliff to a higher levels of civilization, to a better life in a more gracious world, depends on man's constant and ceaseless striving for new and higher goals, depends on man's restless, organised, and unending search for perfection.