SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT THE DINNER IN HONOUR OF THE RT. HON. SIR HAROLD WILSON AND LADY WILSON, AT THE ISTANA, ON TUESDAY, 10 JANUARY 1978

It is seldom that politicians get the opportunity or the occasion personally to express their appreciation for a good turn done to them. And when they do, their expressions of gratitude are often suspect. Cynical observers inevitably impute ulterior motives.

Hence I treasure the occasion this evening, an occasion to recount, albeit briefly, how I come to be placed in the debt of Sir Harold Wilson. When Harold Wilson won the elections on 16 October 1964, Singapore was a state in Malaysia. I was in Temasek, Kuala Lumpur, listening to the BBC World Service. It was a narrow majority. But it was enough.

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It changed the course of events in Malaysia and Singapore. Less than ten months later, in August 1965, Singapore was peremptorily separated from Malaysia. It was not the best way for me to reciprocate his quiet support for rational and conciliatory policies within the newly formed Federation, which was

then under attack by the late President Sukarno of Indonesia. And it was costing the British Government some £200 million a year to fend off confrontation.

I have sometimes wondered what would have happened if Harold Wilson and the Labour Party had lost. I believe that, almost certainly, there would not be an independent Singapore. My Cabinet colleagues and I would still have grown older, but probably most of us would have become tougher, if not bloodier-minded. Perhaps some of us might not have the temperament or the psyche to have survived the rougher and more rigorous regimen that would have been required of us. So, perhaps it was as well that it turned out as it did. Put simply, if obliquely, I was saved from martyrdom by Harold Wilson.

Singapore was fortunate a second time in January 1968. The British Government's decision to withdraw from East of Suez could have been ruinous. Confidence would have evaporated, and the economy, with nearly 20% of GDP then dependent on the British military spending, could have been shattered.

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That Singapore is not another broken-back country is due in no small measure to the considerate manner and measured pace of the military withdrawal. All military base installations were handed over in working order, and as quickly as they could be converted to civilian use. This was not always the case when a

metropolitan power departed from other parts of Asia or Africa. There was also an aid package of £50 million, one quarter grant, three quarters soft loans. It is not a vast sum in the Singapore of 1978. But in 1968, it was enough to make for a boost in morale – a key factor in making a successful leap from a colonial military and trading beachhead, towards self-reliant and secure nationhood.

It is a hazardous task to evaluate the importance of recent events. Those historians who leave instant judgements to those in charge of the media best protect the reputation of their discipline. I am not a historian. I am a practitioner, and I believe I am not far wrong to state that, but for the understanding and support I received from Harold Wilson and his government, the history of Singapore would have been different. And I was fortunate to have enjoyed his friendship from the days when he was not yet the Leader of the Opposition.

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I can take this opportunity of recording my debt to him under circumstances which make it unnecessary to rebut any ulterior motives. He has retired from office. I do not seek, nor can he dispense, any favours.

However, let me confess that my wife and I hope to continue to be beneficiaries of Mary Wilson's generous and bountiful good nature. She has

always made us feel most welcome. Graciousness from the wives of those I have to deal with is a blessing, especially to my wife. And it is a blessing that is not guaranteed by the warmth of my personal relationship with their husbands.

It is my pleasure and my privilege to be able to welcome both Harold and Mary Wilson to Singapore, and to ask you to drink to their health and happiness.

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