

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MR LEE KUAN YEW AT THE LAUNCHING OF
THE NATIONAL COURTESY CAMPAIGN
AT SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL
ON FRIDAY, 1 JUN 79, AT 8.30 P.M.**

Last year the Tourist Promotion Board launched a courtesy campaign to make Singaporeans more polite to tourists. I followed the campaign with interest and amusement: interest because most people were responsive to the campaign; amusement because no one protested that it was absurd to teach Singaporeans to be polite only to tourists. This National Courtesy Campaign is at my prodding.

We must teach children and adults to be courteous to each other. We want to be courteous because life will be better for all. Courtesy is part of all cultivated societies. It is a desirable attribute in itself. To be courteous to free spending tourists and to be rude to fellow Singaporeans is to demean ourselves. Then we become a despicable people, moved only by the thought of profit.

There are two aspects to courtesy: first the forms, second the sincerity. The forms are important in themselves. They help to regulate social contacts and lessen awkwardness or friction. They consist of words and gestures. Words in Singapore can be in four different languages and many different dialects. There are different words for greeting, enquiring, responding, and taking leave of each

other. But in every one of the languages or dialects the true language of courtesy is sincerity.

Sincerity is more important than the forms. Behind the words and gestures, there must be sincere consideration for the other person's right to self-respect, self esteem and well-being. Polite people put others at ease because they treat others with respect as fellow citizens or fellow human beings. But even if it is difficult to be sincerely polite , nevertheless it is better and necessary to keep up polite forms rather than be rude.

Courtesy begets courtesy. Discourtesy provokes discourtesy. When many Singaporeans were hungry and unemployed, we could be excused for rudeness. Perhaps rough manners were the result of a rough and hard life.

Courtesy is another word for good manners, and good manners usually result from good breeding. We cannot expect people who are struggling for bare survival to be courteous to each other. If you visit a refugee camp, in Thailand or Malaysia, you will find that whatever courtesy the refugees had practised in Cambodia or Vietnam has vanished under the pressures to get enough space, food and attention, in order to survive. From time to time I have to read reports of the callous and brutal behaviour of captains of refugee boats towards their

passengers. These grim reports show that when people are struggling for stark survival, then the animal instinct dominates all others, and humanity, compassion, and all others are casualties.

Every society that achieves more than bare subsistence , however, acquires a minimum cultural gloss for their inter-personal relationships. Those societies that have achieved sustained prosperity, often evolve elaborate forms of social civility especially at the capital, the centre of their civilisation. The word “courtesy” is derived from the word “court”, originating from the manners of the royal court, refined and exquisite.

Singapore has gone through the riotous and anxious phase in the 1950s. We overcame our difficulties. We became a rugged society in the 1960's. Then with unemployment and uncertainties overcome, we created a pleasant physical environment, a clean and green society in the 1970's. The aim for the 1980's is to create a pleasant social environment with Singaporeans considerate to each other and thoughtful to each other's needs.

We must teach our children better manners both at home and in school. Through children, the schools can bring good manners back to their homes and influence their older brothers and sisters who have grown up in the 1960s when

life was harsher in Singapore. We can succeed. The pre-conditions are present. We are better fed, dressed and housed. Living in new high rise new towns, working in high rise offices and factories, travelling in crowded buses and lifts, our lives would be unbearable if we are all selfish and inconsiderate. Greater courtesy will help us to be psychologically better adjusted, with less pent up frustrations. We shall succeed because Singaporeans have a great capacity to change in response to new challenges. Our better material life challenges us to a better quality of human relationships. If we set our minds on it we can be a better mannered society by the 1980s.

It will not be achieved in one year. But each year, there will be progress. Each year Singapore becomes a pleasanter place to live in. All societies go up or down in their own self-esteem. We must do this for our own self-esteem. That tourists who visit Singapore will also find Singaporeans agreeable, is surely

incidental.

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