SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW
AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE
1982 COURTESY CAMPAIGN AT
THE CONFERENCE HALL ON 29 JUNE 1982

Since I opened the Courtesy campaign on 1 June 1979, I have attempted to get some feedback every year. On the whole, the results are positive, although there have been no miraculous transformations.

The latest are three surveys: two by Times Organization in July 1981 and May 1982, another by Nanyang Siang Pau in November 1981. They showed that in public sector, the Social Welfare Department, Department of Trade, post offices, libraries, and most statutory boards were rated better for courtesy. The Immigration Department, Registry of Vehicles, some statutory boards, like HDB and URA, got poor ratings. The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Culture offered me this explanation, that they did not have adequate waiting areas, there was lack of privacy for interviews, and poor oral and communication skills. I believe the explanation is much simpler: that it requires super-human qualities for a disappointed applicant at the Immigration Department or HDB to stay polite when he refuses to take "no" for an answer. Similarly the counter clerk who has to say "no" again and again finds it increasingly difficult to remain polite in the face of stubborn refusals to take "no" for an answer.

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In the service sector, hotels, restaurants, and banks have improved their services. Managements have instituted in-house courtesy training programs. Amongst hawkers, the survey is unclear: Nanyang reports considerable improvement; Time Organization gave hawkers borderline rating. Ministry of Culture believes there has been some improvement in the last three years.

In transportation, both Times Organization and Nanyang last year indicated that bus crews and motorists were discourteous, but the latest Times Organization survey in May this year sees some improvement. Car Parks Division of HDB and URA continue to receive brickbats. Taxi drivers, fortunately, continue to show improvement. The Nanyang survey explained that Singaporeans do not show courtesy on the buses, at bus stops, and other public areas, like parks and recreational centres, because Singaporeans are courteous to those they know, but indifferent to strangers. This could be a trait universally found amongst all people.

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This year's campaign has been sponsored by the employers - Federation of Chambers of Commerce and the National Employers Federation. It is most appropriate. Last year, it was sponsored by the unions - the NTUC. Courtesy generates good human relations. Productivity depends on good human relations. If management can improve relations in the office or the factory, from one of rudeness and crudeness, to one of courtesy and consideration for each other. QC circles will work better and there will be more team spirit. A manager or supervisor who is polite to his subordinates, because he has a genuine respect for and a sincere interest in his fellow workers, is likely to evoke warm cooperation from his subordinates. A working environment which is courteous, encourages considerate and cooperative behavior. This in turn facilitates the creation of QC circles, team work and increased productivity.

The basis points in my previous speeches in the past three years are still valid. Genuine consideration for each other, is the social glue that holds a society together and enables cooperative endeavour. The more densely packed a people are, the more crucial it is for people to have this consideration for one another. In a dense populated island city like Singapore, we must meet strangers every day. And since courtesy and consideration comes more easily between friends and acquaintances, we have to make it a habit to extend courtesy to strangers.

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It is interesting to note that the Japanese who have some of the world's most densely populated cities in Tokyo and Osaka are amongst the most polite of people. They also have the highest productivity. Furthermore, it is not by chance that the Germans have the second highest productivity. They are formal and polite people.

We can learn from the progress or retrogression of other peoples in the world. The first lesson is that no society is assured of its position at the top of the league of most polite and the most productive. People change. They grow older. The next generation is never the same. They may be as good, or better; or they may degenerate and be worse. We Singaporeans have to make a conscious choice - whether to make the effort to go up the ladder, or to slide downwards. It is not easy to get people conscious of their personal and joint interests in considerate conduct which is positively linked to higher productivity.

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Management cannot punish worker because he is not polite, or does not come up with proposals to improve quality control or to reduce defects. They can only encourage and reward those who are considerate to others and who come up with proposals that make for improvement. And management must do it in a way that does not sour up those who did not get the rewards. This problem arose with second tier award in the NWC over the last two years. We must not be afraid to

try out innovations which are difficult to implement. At the same time we must not be slow in acknowledging that an innovation has not worked as well as we hoped, and abandon the innovation.

Singaporeans have set out to achieve important targets: higher literacy in one common language so that we can communicate with each other quickly and clearly. Higher percentages of our students will make it to skilled grades, to become Polytechnic and university graduates. It will be the 1990s before the full impact of this uplift in educational standards is felt on the employment market. To change social behavior, from selfishness and rudeness, into courtesy and cooperation, to create the attitudes for friendly cooperation at the workplace between people who are acquaintances or stranger, will take 10 to 20 years. We must put in constant conscious effort, or backsliding will set in.

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Were Singapore a traditional and settled society with age-old customs and habits as in the towns and villages of China or India, I would not attempt a campaign to change behavior by exhortation, argument, and persuasion. Age-long habits in a set and settled environment are difficult to change. Fortunately, Singapore is a young community. About one-third of the population are first-generation immigrants who have come to Singapore to seek a better life in a new land. A young community is highly motivated. Immigrants or their children are

keener and emotionally more ready to try out new ideas for better results. This is the main reason for the progress we have made. We have been able to change Singapore with its dirty, smelly streets, with drains choked up with rubbish, and rivers stinking with garbage, into a clean and green city. This has been possible because of our receptivity to new ideas, of being open to reason and logic.

The easier changes have been achieved: anti-vandalism, anti-littering by better policing, better public cleansing and better maintenance. The more difficult targets are higher education, better work attitudes, more considerate and cooperative conduct. They can be achieved. Managers and supervisors will make it easier for their workers to respond in friendly cooperation by treating them with courtesy and respect.

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Once a year, this effort requires an extra push. It is a reminder to keep it up, to push it everyday of the year in between campaigns. This is the message I want to get across.

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