

REPLY BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW  
TO THE CHAMBERLAIN'S ADDRESS AT THE  
PRESENTATION OF THE HONORARY FREEDOM  
OF THE CITY, GUILDHALL, LONDON, 15 JUL 82

My Lord mayor, Your Excellencies, My Lords,

Aldermen, Sheriffs, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When one is showered with praise on such an occasion, there are three possible reactions: first, to bathe in the warm flowing words and allow them to soothe away all the arthritic aches and pains of self-doubts. Second, a blasé matter-of-fact acceptance of the routine, another ritual once again properly bestowed upon the recipient, adding to other honors received from universities, other cities, and governments. Third, a critical and quizzical pricking of the ears, a mild embarrassment as shortcomings are glossed over and virtues are burnished.

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I find myself unable to avoid the third reaction as my mind's eye looks at the real me, knowing that the tribute has been over generous. I feel like a conductor at a concert bowing to applause but unable to turn around and invite the accomplished musicians in his orchestra to rise and receive the ovation for the music they have produced. For running a government is not unlike running an

orchestra, and no prime minister ever achieves much without an able team of players.

To me, this morning's proceedings savour of the unreal. I was born early enough for London and the City to evoke sentiments which make this honour as precious as it was unexpected. When I was a schoolboy 50 years ago in Singapore, my teachers held this truth to be self-evident that London was the centre of the world. It was the centre of high finance and banking, as well as of the arts, the theatre, of literature, of music, of culture. It was the centre of gravity of the world, the venue of great occasions where the fate of the world was decided, as indeed it was in September 1939 when a British government decided to honour an obligation to the Polish nation, a year after it had glossed over an undertaking to the Czech nation. Thus, was World War II triggered off, and the world irrevocably changed.

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I first came to London in early October 1946. I arrived by ship at Liverpool and took a train to Euston Station. It was an inauspicious arrival. There was no one to meet me at Liverpool docks, because no one knew that I was coming. I had contrived a passage on a troopship, the Cunard liner, Britannic, which was taking victorious British troops home from Singapore for demobilisation. I had written to London and got myself admitted to the Middle

Temple. On the strength of that, I persuaded a kind-hearted officer in charge of military transport to make an exception and allow me to join the troops.

Fortunately, there were a few other students on board. They were from Hong Kong and arrangements had been made for them. When they were met by some officials from the welfare section of the Colonial Office, I hitched a ride.

From Euston, I was taken to a Victoria League hostel down in Earls Court. I remember a huge cavernous basement dormitory with double-decker bunks, one on top of the other. There, I first met strange fellow students, all British subjects like me, but from faraway places like Africa, the Caribbean and other colonies. Their strangeness added to my disorientation. I was determined to get away to more privacy as soon as I could. Some three days later I persuaded a secretary in the YMCA at Great Russell Street, near the Tottenham Court Road tube station, to take pity on a young Chinaman who appeared lost and bewildered. He gave me a room for three days, the maximum limit, he explained, allowed to visitors to London. Every three days, I turned up with my hard-luck story of the last three days and got my stay extended. At the end of the twelfth day, I had found a room at Fitzjohn's Avenue, Swiss Cottage, then a quiet suburb.

But I was not prepared with necessary survival skills, like cooking in a bedsitter. Such a book was yet to be published. I can assure you that without

these basic skills, life was inconvenient, uncomfortable and expensive. Eating in was drudgery. Eating out a dreary experience. Food was on coupons. So were clothes. When my laundry came back, I calculated, to my dismay, that for six washings, I could buy a new shirt, provided I had the coupons. And a shirt got grimy at the collar and cuffs in half a day.

For a future honorary Freedom of the City, this was a most unhappy introduction to life in London. If, 36 years ago, any gypsy fortune teller had told me that I would come back to London in July 1982, to visit the Queen in Buckingham Palace, and to drive in state to Guildhall, to inspect a guard of honour, to be received by the Lord Mayor and his Court of Common Council and this distinguished gathering, I would have concluded not that she as a charlatan, but that she was mad. I do not know, my Lord Mayor, by what mysterious processes your predecessor in 1980 and his Court of Common Council arrived at a resolution to confer upon me this signal honour. I am filled with wonderment at my good fortune, and I recount my unpromising introduction to this City in order to give heart to those Commonwealth students who, despite higher fees, still come to London in search of an education.

In the four decades since I first came to London, so much has changed. There are many new buildings. Unlike some cities in Europe, much of the charm

and human scale of the old London has been preserved. One of the challenges to modern architecture in ancient cities, like London, is to introduce the comforts and amenities of modernity without disfiguring the existing landscape by the dissonance of the contemporary with the ancient. And the Barbican, not far from here, which I remember as a bomb site, is part of the British genius in renewal without breaking with the past.

However, I also remember enough of the past to regret the passing of that age when power and influence made London throb and hum and count for much more in the affairs of the world. Four decades ago, London was a grimy, sooty, bomb-scarred city, with less food, less cars, less of the conveniences of the consumer society that have transformed many peoples' ways of life, including that of Londoners. Nevertheless, her people were gracious, friendly and polite, though less prosperous. After three months of London, I abandoned life in a bed-sitter in Swiss Cottage, for the university town of Cambridge where survival skills were not necessary, because the university, which catered for 10,000 gentlemen, and a few young ladies, assumed they did not have such menial skills and so ministered to their needs. But London had a mystique and magic about it. It was the centre of great events. And for four years, I would return to London for an occasional weekend and during vacations. Banner headlines of the many evening papers screamed of the great things that the House of Common debated

and decided: the Marshall Plan in 1947/48, the Berlin blockade in 1948, the decision to send a contingent to Korea in 1950. I remember that because of rising costs of re-arming, a one-shilling charge was put on national health prescriptions. This momentous betrayal of socialist principles led to the resignation of the then Minister for Health, Aneurin Bevan. That an earth-shattering event it then sounded.

On the whole, the influence made for a better world. After Suez in 1956, it became clearer that the centres of power had shifted to Washington and Moscow. But the bankers and merchants of the City of London have not lost their wizardry. The City grew into the largest international banking centre in the world. When the Americans had to unravel the freezing of the Iranian assets before the release of the hostages, it was the City bankers and lawyers who played principal roles as stake holders and formulators of ingenious solutions to most complicated problems.

When the United States froze Iranian assets, I thought that the future of the City was enhanced. When 2½ years later, the British Government froze Argentine assets, I wondered how the City's ingenious managers of large international funds were going to reassure their clients that lawful avoidance of these acts of state might still be possible. It is just a passing thought. However,

complex the difficulties, I have little doubt that it will take a lot to beat the able group of fund managers who still preserve London's position as a great financial centre.

I still listen regularly to the news from London on the BBC World Service. It is a habit. London now reports major events which arise, in most cases, from decisions taken in centres other than London. Britain chose to abandon her position as a great power when she recovered from Suez, and went swinging light-heartedly into the 1960's.

On 2 April this year, however, a totally unexpected development took place in the Falklands. For several weeks, the BBC World Service was filled with news of events which occurred because of decisions made in London. For the first two weeks, I could hardly believe what was reported. I wondered whether what was unfolding was something from Gilbert and Sullivan or from Wagner's *Gotterdammerung*. As it turned out, this was neither. It was a great feat of arms. Some doubted wisdom of this expedition. I believe the world is several shades safer from irrational regimes because the British Government and people showed the resolve and paid the price in lives and resources. And from this experience, there are some beneficial lessons, as unexpected as they are valuable.

The speed with which container vessels were converted into parking lots for jump jets, and luxury cruise liners into troopships, and later hospital-ships, reveal the enormous potential for increased productivity there is in Britain's workforce. If this same spirit of national unity, and willingness to sacrifice for the national interest, can be evoked for the cause of industrial renewal, Britain's economic position would be transformed. A restoration of national consensus and a people inspired by leaders who inject that urgency for higher productivity can alter the prospects for Britain. They are goals which have eluded successive Labour and Conservative governments for the last three decades. For 74 days, the British people demonstrated that these goals are well within their capabilities.

As your youngest Freeman, I can wish you no greater blessing than the discovery of a peacetime challenge that will galvanize the British people the way the Falklands issue did.

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