PRIME MINISTER’S TRIBUTE TO THE LATE MR HON SUI SEN
IN PARLIAMENT ON 20 DECEMBER 1983

It is with a heavy heart that I pay this tribute in memory of Hon Sui Sen. From August 1970 to October 1983, he was the Finance Minister. He steered our economy through two oil crises. But for a mild hiccup of the low 4% growth in 1974 he secured an average of 8½ % real growth for this period. In his unassuming way, he never claimed any credit for it. In truth he had worked for the 11 years previous to 1970 to help lay the foundation for this success. As Permanent Secretary (Economic Development) in Finance Ministry from 1959, Chairman EDB 1961-68, Chairman and President DBS 1968-1970, he helped Goh Keng Swee to work out the strategy for our economy transformation. At a micro-level, he was Chairman of nine companies the Government held equity in -

National Iron & Steel Mills Ltd
Jurong Shipyard Ltd
Sembawang Shipyard (Pte) Ltd
Keppel Shipyard (Pte) Ltd
Neptune Orient Lines Ltd
Jurong Shipbuilders Ltd
Singapore Electronic & Engineering Ltd
The Insurance Corporation of Singapore Ltd

Singapore Petroleum Company

He was also a Director of INTRACO.

In 1970 I was confronted with the awesome prospect of moving Goh Keng Swee from the Ministry of Finance to Defence. Ministry of Defence needed him to move from the first stage of basic military training to the second stage of weapons systems and brigade structures. I was in a quandary. An inadequate Finance Minister would be a disaster. There would be no money to pay for any defence build-up. Goh Keng Swee proposed Hon Sui Sen. He had retired from the permanent secretaryship in 1966 and was enjoying his work in DBS. I drew upon my friendship with him. It dated back to 1942 in Japanese occupied Singapore. For about a year he had stayed with me in Norfolk Road sharing a room. Then inflation made his fixed salary as a civil servant meaningless. He went back to join his wife in Penang. I visited him in Penang in 1944 and stayed for several days with him in his family home at Logan Road.

In 1945, after the British returned, he came back to Singapore with his wife and young daughter. He stayed with me in Oxley Road for several months before he moved into Government quarters. In the early 50s, after I returned
from England, we started to learn Mandarin together at his quarters in Cantonment Road, sharing a teacher. We have been good friends for so many years. He could not refuse me; he could not say no to public duty. But he was a reluctant politician - a technocrat before the word was defined to mean a well-qualified Minister who did not come up through the political rough and tumble. I remember his look of incredulity, his astonishment, in the counting room at the Singapore Polytechnic in Prince Edward Road in the 1972 General Elections. His unknown opponent secured 26.8% of the votes. I comforted him. It was no insult to him. It was in the nature of the system and of the pressures of life in a society where those who did not get what they wanted vented their frustrations through an anti-vote.

In 1976 he wanted to stand down. In 1980 he again wanted to retire. On each occasion I persuaded him to soldier on and to prepare his successor. In 1979 he allowed Goh Chok Tong to prepare and to present the budget. It was no easy task. He was in charge. He was responsible and knew that I expected him to ensure that no major error was committed. He made minimal changes to the draft budget speech and sent it on to me. In fact, I made more textual changes, than he did, though we left the tax measures unchanged. The next two times, in 1980 and again in 1981, with Goh Chok Tong, there were little textual changes.
In 1982 and 1983 he allowed Tony Tan a free hand with no amendments. I also left the text unchanged.

Hon Sui Sen was a big man. It will not be easy to find another Finance Minister to repeat this delicate exercise in on-the-job training with the budget. It was only possible because it was Hon Sui Sen, and he and I understood each other well. In early 1975 he had urged me to talent scout for his successor. Over lunch he recounted a conversation he had with the then Chairman of Shell (Singapore) J J Gerzon. At his level and age, Gerzon said that his most important task was to identify, test, and train his successor. I pressed Sui Sen to do likewise. He did. He helped me talent scout both Goh Chok Tong and Tony Tan among others.

In his 13½ years the per capita GDP of Singapore more than doubled from $2462 in 1970 to $5752 in 1982 at 1968 dollars; Singapore’s official reserves went up over six times from $3.1 billion in 1970 to $18.9 billion in 1983. Personal income tax rates have been reduced and reliefs for CPF greatly increased. My relationship with him was close and easy. We both shared a common basic philosophy, that hard work deserves to be rewarded, that the free market should determine the value of products and services, that savings should be encouraged over consumption, and that savings should go into investments
which yield the most secure long-term dividends. That is not to say that he was
averse to well-calculated risks in new industrial or commercial ventures. The
wide ranging portfolio in Temasek Holdings, testify to his eclectic and catholic
approach. From a capital worth of $197.1 million in 1970 Government equity in
wholly-owned, and joint-venture companies are $2.03 billion in 1983.

He brought a powerful intellect to bear on our economic and financial
problems. His academic training was in the hard sciences. Born in Balik Pulau,
Penang, he was educated at St Xavier’s Institution. He was the top student for
the Senior Cambridge Certificate Examination in all Malaya in 1932. He went to
Raffles College in 1935. In 1938 he got a Class 1 diploma in Science, doing
Chemistry, Mathematics and majoring in Physics. He was appointed to the
Straits Settlement Civil Service for which there were only two recruits each year.
His first duty was as Police Court Magistrate. Then he became a Deputy
Collector of Land Revenue, before the Japanese occupied Malaya and Singapore.
He was to specialise in Land Office work until he rose to become Commissioner
of Lands in 1957. He had no academic grounding in economics. His theoretical
training in economics was late in life when he was sent on attachment to the
World Bank in 1960 for several months. What he had was high helicopter
quality as the Shell appraisal system would term it: a strong power of analysis,
and the imagination and sense of reality to match.
For his excellent work in the Ministry of Finance and the EDB he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in 1962. For his outstanding contributions in starting up so many economic ventures he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 1967.

His Land Office experience was of inestimable value to me when the British were about to withdraw from their bases in 1968. He knew the value and uses that the land could be put to. He was familiar with the different titles under which the British War Office occupied various parcels of land in Singapore - some to which they had proper title, having paid for it in private purchases, and others, the majority, which had been made available for defence use by the Government of the Colony of the Straits Settlements, and later Colony of Singapore. He urged me to obtain the transfer and surrender of all lands, whatever the title, together with all buildings and fixtures. The British were in an apologetic frame of mind and generous in wanting to help Singapore survive the shock of withdrawal. They handed over all the real estate they held with all buildings and fixtures. This was the essential capital for a rapid development of dockyards, factories and new housing estates. We turned adversity to advantage. Hon Sui Sen set up the Bases Economic Conversion Department, and, as its first Commissioner, started converting and commercialising the Sembawang Naval
Base, Seletar Airfield, REME works in Ayer Rajah Road, and barracks in Blakang Mati, now Sentosa. Much of this success was under his direction.

That Singapore made 13% growth at real prices from 1966 to 1973 is no mean achievement. That for the 10 years, 1973-83, in spite of two oil crises, Singapore could make an average of 8% growth, is a near miracle. The average growth rate of the developing countries for this period was 4.2% according to the World Bank. He was a prime mover in most of the big decisions that generated this growth.

He was a deeply religious man. Honourable Members will remember him as an unassuming, modest man who never bore any malice to anyone. He was an even-tempered man. Members will remember that he never lost his cool in this House. His good friend from Raffles College days is Tan Teck Chwee, now Chairman PSC. He summed up nearly 50 years of friendship thus:

“He was a very devout Roman Catholic who lived his life on the high moral principles of his Church.

“Though he was studying science, he read widely the liberal arts.
“He was thoughtful in his actions but a man of few words.

“I feel that he was a stoic as in the nearly half a century I knew him, he had never expressed any frustration or disappointment with anything in life. He would apply himself unassumingly and assiduously to any work he was assigned.

“His tolerance of the foibles and weaknesses of his fellow men and his loyalty to all who worked with him or under him almost verge on a fault.”

I agree with this assessment, including the last point, that he sometimes allowed loyalty to subordinates to go to great lengths.

Sim Kee Boon, Head of the Civil Service, described his characteristics as:

“His loyalty to his staff was almost legendary - both as Chairman of the EDB and later as Minister in charge of personnel.

“Despite tough pronouncements and fierce defence of tax or unpopular measures in Parliament, Hon Sui Sen always had a caring, soft other
side to his personality. This is revealed in the Treasury files whenever matters affecting people’s welfare are concerned.

“In the eyes of the Civil Servants he was an officer and a gentleman.”

Goh Chok Tong was in NOL from 1969 to 1977. From 1974-1979 he was Managing Director responsible to Hon Sui Sen as Minister for Finance. Slowly NOL turned from red to black balance sheets. Goh Chok Tong remembered him thus:

“NOL had not done well. It was losing money every year in its first five years. But never once did I hear a complaining word nor see a displeased face when I met him occasionally as part of NOL management team. Instead, he was ever ready to pump in more money into the company. He took a long view. He showed faith in people.

“This point was reaffirmed later when I had more occasions to attend his meetings with government-owned companies. Once he had picked a management team he would back it. He never discouraged. He always encouraged. He never blamed others for losses. He tried to offer suggestions to solve them. He thought big, never small.
“I have never seen Mr Hon angry or heard him raise his voice. Annoyed yes. The mere trace of annoyance in his voice or in his minute was enough to buck up his officials. The words were not harsh but to know you have let him down or caused him annoyance was enough to make you feel bad with yourself.”

This will be an insincere tribute if I did not add that there were occasions when I took a less kindly view of the mediocre and pedestrian who worked faithfully for him occupying key appointments. On such occasions, I moved by transferring the responsibility for the portfolio to a less forbearing task master. Such operations were never pleasant. Whilst he accepted my view that the able and talented must be emplaced in top positions in all key departments and agencies, he was prepared to settle for less than the best when they tried hard and he thought them adequate. His approach was more kindly and gradual. But even though the reshuffle pained him, he acknowledged my right to act differently.

I have lost a close personal friend of more than 40 years, and an exceptionally able Minister for Finance. I still find it difficult to talk of him in the past tense.
When I saw him on Tuesday afternoon (11 Oct), I thought he had several more years. So did he. We bantered. I said that the average life span of the Singaporean male was 69. He was only 67. He countered my argument by quoting his genetic inheritance. His father had died at 53. His mother at 63. Heart failure, he said, was a good way of going compared to many other illnesses. He added that he had no intention of going just yet. We then turned to more cheerful subjects.

On Friday (14 Oct), at 4.10 pm, whilst talking to E W Barker, I was sent a note that he had had chest pains and was back in intensive care. At 4.45 pm, I walked in to see him at the Coronary Care Unit in Singapore General Hospital as a Catholic priest walked out. Yet he was as calm and composed as he was on Tuesday. He was at peace with himself. He was prepared to face his maker. After 10 minutes of conversation I left to see someone else at the hospital.

I went back to see him again about an hour later, at 10 to 6.00 pm. A team of doctors was trying to bring up and control his blood pressure. His eyes lit up in recognition as he saw me. The doctors then engaged his attention. I left as he was answering checks by the doctors. At my office at 7.00 pm, I was told that he had died at 6.30 pm, some 40 minutes after I left.
What did those who knew him well think of him? Two of his friends, one a Dutchman, Dr A Winsemius, and another a Japanese, Mr N Hasegawa of Sumitomo, travelled all the way from Amsterdam and Tokyo within hours of hearing of his death to pay their respects to him and to console his family. They had only 2½ days between the death and the funeral. The normal duty of friendship and the demands of protocol did not require them to come such long distances. I met them at and after the funeral. They came because they had deep regard and affection for a warm-hearted, good and sincere friend.

The House will want me to send his wife and family its sympathies at their great loss. His was a happy marriage to Annie Voon. They were devoted to each other. They had four daughters, Joan, Elizabeth, Vivien and Brenda, all graduates, all married. There are 11 grandchildren. He had a close three-tier family, with one daughter and her family living with him. His home in Malcolm Road was, he jocularly told me, a creche-cum-child care centre. Over one lunch last October, he explained how easy it was to learn to change children’s nappies. He helped look after his grandchildren. I had recounted my clumsy inexperience with my own grandchildren. He was a good man whose whole life has been one of service for the welfare and well-being of his family and of his country, and least of all himself.
His sudden death was a grievous loss for Singapore.