

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW IN MOVING THE
MOTION ON THE ELECTION OF MR WEE KIM WEE AS PRESIDENT OF
THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE ON 30 AUG 85 IN PARLIAMENT

My colleagues and I have taken more than five months to settle the choice of our next President. We thought it better to take our time.

Several names were proposed. The Cabinet took quiet soundings. Gradually a consensus emerged that Wee Kim Wee, proposed by my colleague S Rajaratnam, was the most suitable.

Rajaratnam knows him very well. They were both newspapermen and had known each other for over 30 years. And it was Rajaratnam who persuaded him in 1973 to give up his job as Editorial Manager in the Straits Times to become our High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. There, for seven years till 1980, he helped to establish our relations on a basis different from those that prevailed before separation.

I had met him in the 1950s in his capacity as reporter, and later as editor. He was a competent, objective and reliable journalist. He was also a man committed to Singapore. It was early in my political life. During the tumultuous 1950s and 60s, I observed that he watched, with barely concealed alarm, the agitation, the protests, the strikes, the demonstrations, and the violence that sporadically broke out. They were part of the revolution in the streets of Singapore. He was a Straits-born Chinese, English-educated, and thoroughly law-abiding. He watched the deliberate build-up of hate and violence with distaste and dismay. He must have thought the country was going down the drain. He often looked at me with incomprehension, wondering what I was doing, siding with or representing these wild men, and adding to the mayhem.

I did not realise how shrewd he was until he became our High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. When I read his perceptive despatches from Kuala Lumpur, I realised that he understood the difficult, delicate, and complex nature of our relationships. A measure of his engaging personality was that he had free access to all the important leaders in Kuala Lumpur. The Prime Minister, Ministers and officials, all spoke freely and frankly to him. His despatches analysing the situation always got to the heart of the matter.

When I asked him a few weeks ago to consider this appointment, he reminded me that he was not even a university graduate. I said that was irrelevant. We were not looking for a scholar. What Singapore needs in a President is a man of integrity and dignity. He is without affectations. His easy manner and his understanding of people will make a good Head of State.

When he agreed to be considered as President, I asked him to give me a resume of his career. As Prime Minister I read the curriculum vitae of the people I am about to meet. They are either mostly VIPs or important men whom I have to consider for high positions. So I have some experience in interpreting the curriculum vitae of people with great accomplishments. Some are brief and terse, others are detailed, listing out their degrees, titles, and high offices. Wee Kim Wee's resume was straightforward and simple. It was not meant to impress anyone. In summarising his career to the House, I can do no better than abstract the gist from his resume because this is how he sees himself:

“I was born (at the Free Middleton Hospital) in Singapore on 4th November 1915.

I was the fourth and youngest in the family - two brothers and one half-brother.

My father was Wee Choong Lay.

My mother was Chua Hay Luan alias Tak Poh.

My father worked as a clerk on a ship in charge of cargoes (then referred to as a “chin choo”). The ship plied between Singapore and Java. He was blind at a fairly early age (before 45) after an unsuccessful operation.

With this tragedy the family was forced through circumstances to move from Zion Road to 4.5 milestone Holland Road into a house offered by a wealthy owner for a token rental of \$3 a month.

The house had no electricity or piped water. The family resorted to poultry rearing and also depended on some of the fruit trees in the sprawling compound for its survival.

At 8 years old (in 1923) I was admitted into Pearl’s Hill School. From there I went to Outram School and thence to Raffles Institution.

In 1929 I passed my Std VII and was due to be promoted to a “Junior” class. My mother prevailed upon me to seek employment as the family was still eking a hand-to-mouth living at the SHB quarters at Kampong Bahru.

An uncle, Tan Kok Tiong, was then Chief Clerk of the Straits Times. On his recommendation I got a job in the Circulation Department. Five years later I was transferred to the Advertising Department. Three or four years later I got my first “break” as a reporter, covering sports after my regular office hours. I reported on soccer at the three stadiums (Anson Road, Farrer Road and Geylang) and all badminton, table-tennis and basketball matches at the three amusement parks (Happy World, New World and Great World).

In early 1936 at the age of 21 I was married to Koh Sok Hiong.

We have seven children - a son and six daughters. Three are in Singapore, one in Kuala Lumpur and three in Melbourne, Australia.

My wife, Koh Sok Hiong (68) was born in Singapore. She did her primary and secondary education in Chinese schools - Hua Chiao at Pasir Panjang and Nanyang Girls' High School. She picked up English Language by common usage. She has always been a housewife.

We have 12 grandchildren; four in Singapore, two in Kuala Lumpur and six in Melbourne, Australia.

In early 1941 after 11.5 years service with the Straits Times I resigned because the vacant post of Circulation Chief Clerk was not offered to me. I joined the United Press Association, an American news agency.

During the war, in spite of my long hours in the UPA, I served in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions).

My family survived the war.

With no job in sight and no money I had to set up a stall in front of the SHB Quarters at Kampong Bahru selling odds and ends including mosquito destroyers.

When the war ended I was again “penniless”. I did not have even a dollar of British currency. But, within a month of the liberation of Singapore the UPA correspondent, Charles McQuown-Wright, contacted me through the Straits Times. He advanced me S\$50 to start life afresh.

Through many years of hard work my position in the UPA improved steadily and in the early 50s I was Office Manager-cum-Chief Correspondent for Singapore, Malaya, Borneo and Brunei, reporting to an American Manager for Southeast Asia.

In 1959 when the PAP had romped into power, the top executives of the Straits Times decided to move to Kuala Lumpur - Simmons, Hoffman, Siew Yee, T S Khoo. I was approached to rejoin the Straits times as Deputy Editor (Singapore), literally the head of the editorial department in Singapore. It was, to say the least, a very difficult job.

In 1970 until the day I retired in 1973, I was Editorial Manager.

In 1973 Foreign Minister Rajaratnam asked me to go to Kuala Lumpur as High Commissioner. I served seven years in this post until August 31, 1980.

In September 1980 I took up my post in Tokyo as Ambassador to Japan and the Republic of Korea. I held the post for 3.5 years until 30 April 1984.

On 1 May 1984 I was appointed Chairman of SBC.

Besides working and making a living, the best years of my life (20-55) were spent mainly on and for badminton in Singapore and Malaysia.

At various times also I had served in charitable bodies including the blind, deaf and SATA. For several years I was Chairman of SATA succeeding the late G H Kiat.

I was an all-round sportsman but only did well in badminton. I played table-tennis, basketball, soccer, swimming, athletics and finally golf.

In 1973 I was awarded the Public Service Star and in 1979 the Meritorious Service Medal. In 1966 I was appointed a Justice of the Peace.”

He recounts his life without pretensions. He was ceaselessly striving, not for high and mighty pursuits, but simply to make a living, to help his family, to share some of the joys of life with his fellowmen. He did his share of public service as a Justice of the Peace, and charitable work for the blind, the deaf, and through SATA.

Now in his 69th year, he does not hanker after high office. He was happy and content with his life as he has lived it, and looked forward to what he was doing in SBC. When persuaded and convinced he agreed to accept office as a matter of responsibility.

I carry the uncomfortable knowledge that sometimes I have done a person harm by inviting him to take high office. It has meant upsetting the even tenor of other people's settled lives. Worse it has made their later adjustment to ordinary life, after leaving office, very difficult. He knew that this job would not be for life. The President after him is likely to be elected by the whole electorate. His term is for four years. But it may turn out to be less than four years, if the amendments to our Constitution for a President to be elected by the electorate are ready before then. I asked him, therefore, what he would do after the Presidency? How would he adjust to life? He replied: "I was 'His Excellency' for over 10 years in Kuala Lumpur and in Tokyo. I have had no trouble becoming a private citizen again. I do not expect any problems after I cease to be President." He has his head firmly placed between his shoulders. He has a sense of proportions and perspective.

He asked for and received my assurance that he need not change his social life. Indeed, for his sense of balance and continuing touch with reality, he has to keep up his circle of friends and usual social activities.

I commend him to this House.

National Archives of Singapore