

Release No. : 06/SEP
02-1/87/09/02

**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW AT THE
OPENING CEREMONY OF CLEAN RIVERS COMMEMORATION '87
HELD AT THE MARINA MANDARIN HOTEL ON 2 SEP 87**

At far back as I can remember whenever I passed by the Singapore River, I smelt the stench of hydrogen sulphide. In my cycling school days of the 1930s, I got the full blast of this mysterious odour. I thought it was the nature of the mud at the sides and bottom of the river, since the stench was stronger at low tide when the banks were exposed. I did not know it was man-made pollution.

In January this year, I strolled along the promenade near Parliament House to watch the Chinese New Year Singapore River Hong Bao Show. No odour assaulted my senses. The many fish and other aquatic forms of life that have returned are indicators of the river's health.

Ten different government departments concerted their efforts over ten years to achieve this. It was not just removing the muck from the rivers. The sources of pollution had to be removed permanently. First, the vision of what was possible with modern engineering was crucial. Second, we had to have the courage to implement unpopular measures, and the tenacity to pursue permanent

solutions. Third, we had to change life-long habits, uproot outdated industries, and stop activities that had gone on for decades on the river.

When the Ministry of the Environment drew up an inventory, they found that our drains, canals, and rivers were being used as convenient open sewers by: 21,000 unsewered premises, 27,000 squatter families, 610 pig farms rearing some 76,000 pigs, 480 duck farms rearing some 125,000 ducks, 5,000 street hawkers, 580 vegetable and fruit wholesalers, 3,600 industrial cases, 60 boatyards and 800 lighters, 430 backyard motor repair shops.

To resettle the people, the HDB stepped up its building and resettlement programme. Sewerage was installed. Every house was checked to ensure that no sullage water was emptied into open drains. New workshops were constructed to resettle the motor repair shops. Food centres and markets were built to resite the street hawkers and vegetable wholesalers. New mooring facilities were built in Pasir Panjang for the bumboats.

The most difficult part was to persuade these people to move to their new locations. They had been there for decades and saw no harm in throwing waste into the drains and canals. Starting afresh in new upgraded premises with modern facilities looked like an uncertain future. The street hawkers in

Chinatown did not think that their waste polluted the river. The owners of the lighters, once the symbols of prosperity on the rivers, were apprehensive about moving to Pasir Panjang. The boatyards, conveniently located in Kallang, feared loss of business if they moved to Tuas and Jurong. The charcoal dealers who gave the name to Kampong Arang were unconvinced that their customers would follow them to Serangoon River. Except for six boatyards at Tanjong Rhu, they have all moved and done well in their new premises.

When there was a chemical fire in Basel, Switzerland, last year, the whole Rhine river downstream suffered. The damage will take ten years to repair because it will take ten years to re-establish the marine ecology. All pollutants within a catchment will be washed down and end up in the river with the rain.

Therefore, control of pollution has to start right at the source, in commercial premises, in the housing and industrial estates. We have to educate everyone to see the connection between his acts and the resulting pollution of the river. The process of public education is long, time-consuming and arduous. We have to check on every industrial and commercial activity and be vigilant in spotting the sources of pollution, whether they are the result of not doing something they should have done, or deliberate acts to short cut waste disposal. Stiff penalties for the inconsiderate, and stiffer ones for the deliberate offenders are necessary.

The clean-up was a comprehensive and total exercise over ten years. If any part of the programme had stalled, we would not have made it, because the process was an interrelated whole.

Now for the first time, since the founding of Singapore, these rivers are clean again. New recreational amenities on and by the Marina and the rivers offer a new way of life for the people. It is something Singaporeans can be proud of.

To the officials, who planned the operations with thoroughness and care, and to those who implemented them with tenacity and fairness, I say “well done.”

It is my pleasure now to present the gold medals in connection with the

Clean Rivers Commemoration 1987.

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