Release No: 50/AUG

02-1/89/08/15

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW

AT THE TANJONG PAGAR CONSTITUENCY NATIONAL DAY

DINNER ON 15 AUGUST 1989 AT WESTIN STAMFORD

This occasion symbolises the transformation of Singapore. Twenty years ago if someone had told me that Tanjong Pagar would organise a constituency dinner at one of Singapore's swank hotels and the tallest in Asia, I would not have believed him. The Tanjong Pagar exhibition provides the excuse for such a posh setting. 1 want to congratulate and thank all those who have spent nearly two years preparing for the exhibition and the publication of the two commemorative books.

National Archives of Singapore

It adds to my sense of incredulity when I recall that I am standing over what was the playing field of Raffles Institution where I was schooled from 1936-1939. This is the measure of Singapore's transformation. We have come a long way, but we have as long a journey ahead.

The past has been a series of immense challenges over survival and deprivation. We have secured our survival although we can never banish danger. We have provided for our basic needs, homes, schools, hospitals and health services, jobs, whatever. But in no case is the standard ideal. In each case the next generation has to improve on what we have done.

Take homes. The early HDB estates are a far cry from Bishan and Pasir Ris. Therefore my younger colleagues have decided to help owners upgrade the older estates. It will take $500 to $1,000 million a year, over 15 years and will make Singapore a better place to live in.

Next our schools. Thirty years ago the problem was to get a place in school for every child. Therefore schools went into double sessions, and teachers were recruited in emergency exercises to double their numbers.

National Archives of Singapore

We can improve by learning from what other have achieved through independent schools.

More schools may go independent. However, we must eventually get all government schools to run like independent schools, with each principal choosing his staff and competing for students on the basis of their reputation and the quality of their students. When every school competes against other schools for students we will get better schools. The government will pay the basic cost for each student whichever school the students and their parents choose. If any school goes down in quality, parents and students will not go to that school. Then the principal will be changed, and the school re-organised.

Similarly, our hospitals will improve when they compete against each other. In the next few years, each hospital will be run as an independent unit, hiring, promoting and firing its own staff of doctors, surgeons, nurses, physiotherapists and so on. The patient can choose where he gets the best service. The well-run hospital with the best doctors and nurses will get more patients and can reward their staff better.

National Archives of Singapore

All these are difficult improvements to achieve. But they will improve the standard and quality of life for the maximum number of Singaporeans.