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**SPEECH BY MR LEE KUAN YEW, SENIOR MINISTER**

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**Do Australians know enough about Asia?**

There is bipartisan agreement in Australia that its future is linked to that of Asia and bipartisan support for increasing Australia's economic links with East Asia.

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To develop these links on a broad scale, Australians need to know much more about Asia and Asians, as much as they know of Britain and the British , and America and the Americans. To develop long term relationships in business, you need to know people well enough to be able to get on with them socially and to win and generate trust.

Among the problems Australians face, are the stereotypes of Asians from the past which still linger on in popular consciousness.

At a recent gathering, an Australian industrialist with wide international interests listed Australia's disadvantages and advantages in building stronger links with East Asia. Amongst the disadvantages, he placed in first position the legacy of the white Australian policy. He listed as another disadvantage the media which he described as : at best they are ill-mannered, normally they are under-educated, lacking in integrity, they invent stories, if necessary to 'get their name in lights".

A Malaysian friend of mine who has settled in Australia for more than 10 years and is now an Australian national has summed up for me the popular Asian stereotypes that Australians harbour: "a third world hell hole of sweat shops, sex tourism and repressive regimes". In other words, the Australian media's reports on Asians have tended to be condescending, critical or censorious, basically because Australians reporters do not accept Asians as their equals.

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If Australians are to develop sound relations with Asians, they must be educated afresh, not on myths and stereotypes, but on realities, especially the strengths and shortcomings of East Asians as they march rapidly into the 21st century.

There have been a spate of articles in American publications both at popular and at academic levels on the industrialisation and high growth in East Asia, and its implications for the balance of power in the world. The popular Australian press have not covered these subjects as much, although your academics are well informed. However, the general institution needs to know the basic changes in Asia otherwise the Australian government cannot gain support for changes in policy on defence, economic direction and immigration.

The popular Australian press and media have tended to trivialise Asia in its coverage. It concentrates on stories of sex tourism or alleged "political repression" or natural and other calamities. Only a few like the Financial Review, the Australian, Melbourne Age, Sydney Morning Herald and Australian Television International, provide intelligent coverage of Asia. The tabloids are for the sensational and the bizarre.

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Worse still, some of the Asians Australians [they have] met in Australia tend to reinforce their negative perceptions: like Chinese restaurant waiters or cooks, dissident Chinese students and Indochinese refugees living off welfare. The young students from Southeast Asia in Australian universities are not mature enough to correct these views. Nor can the Asian professionals because they have been away from their former homes too long to be up to date.

Hence the great drama of the 20th century, the transformation of East Asia, a region of nearly two billion people, from agricultural backwardness into industrial and ever more high-tech societies goes largely unreported. These countries are producing millions of engineers and scientists. The Research and Development (R&D) in Japan and China have enabled them to place satellites into space and to probe the mysteries of genetic engineering. These developments go unnoticed in Australia, with consequences for Australians.

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Let me analyse the reasons for East Asia's dynamism. The Australian media can test their validity by investigative reporting and in the process, help to inform and educate Australians on the realities of Asia.

**Technology made human resource the decisive factor.**

Advances in technology have made for a totally different world. Daniel Bell[1], the American sociologist, speaking at a forum in Japan, said : "The old concerns with politics were basically with regard to security which was geographical and access to resources and economic independence. In World War II, rubber, tin, and copper were considered strategic materials; cartels controlled them, and one's supply could be cut off. Today, who would worry about a rubber, tin, or copper cartel ? Oil is the last resource which has international influence. ……You (referring to the Japanese) no longer have to invade Manchuria because who needs coal ? Japan went to war 4 times between 1890 and 1940, and since then it has been at peace and done 10 times better. Again, the old idea of security through the control of natural resources is less important. There are many foci and the one that is becoming most important is having an adequate technological base which frees you of dependency."

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[1] "Look Japan, January 1992".

Lester Thurow, Professor at the MIT summarised it thus :

(1) Traditionally there have been four ways to be rich as an individual, successful as a company and generate a high standard of living as a country:

(a) Have more natural resources;

(b) Have more capital;

(c) Have better technology;

(d) Have a more skilled work force.

(2) Technology has substantially altered this traditional formula. In the 19th and 20th centuries comparative advantage was set by mother nature and history - natural resources endowments and factor ( capital / labour ) proportions. In the 21st century comparative advantage will be man-made using brain power. What are believed to be the key industries of the 21st century - microelectronics, biotechnology, the new material science industries, telecommunication, civilian aviation, robots plus machine tools, computers plus software - are all brain power industries.

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Because of the traditional high value they place on scholarship, these developments give East Asians an advantage.

This was also the drawn conclusion of Professor Derek Leebaert of Georgetown University's Graduate School of Business[2]. He said that 'talented people are a more important resource than any man-made device or corporate strategy". " In the 21st century, technological competition will be competition for talent, and this is an area which the US is perhaps unsurpassed." Leebaert believes that the US's ability to absorb the "best and the brightest" from around the world into its universities, research labs and workplaces is a tremendous advantage.

**What is behind East Asia's dynamism?**

After backwardness in the last 200 years, East Asians have at last organised themselves for the catch up. Their strength lies in their motivation and industriousness. Folk memories of their ancient past drive them to great efforts to get up with Japan, and the other industrialised countries. In the past, China, Korea and even Vietnam had matched and equalled Japan. With early success in their industrialisation, there is a revival for confidence, a surge of energy and drive. Their ambition is to excel.

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[2]Nikkei Weekly, January 11, 1992.

Universal education in the cities of these countries has resulted in high educational levels. A survey[3], which was organised by the New Jersey-based Educational Testing Service, tested 13-year olds in mathematics : The scores China 80 per cent, Korea 73 per cent, Taiwan 73 per cent, Switzerland 71 per cent, the former Soviet Union 70 per cent, Hungary 68 per cent, France 64 per cent, Italy 64 per cent, Israel 63 per cent and Canada 62 per cent. The Testing Service did not include Japan because they already knew that Japanese scores high in mathematics. East Asians are also more numerate than others. This is an advantage in the age of the computer.

Professor Harold Stevenson of Michigan University[4] said that the top three per cent of American students in mathematics were on the average level for China, Taiwan and Japan. In 1990s ethnic Asians were 32 per cent of the student population at U.C. Berkeley, 14 per cent Stanford, and four per cent UCLA. Caltech, the most difficult science and engineering university to get into, one quarter of the students were ethnic Asians.

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[3] London Sunday Times, 9 Feb 92

[4]Humanities magazine Nov / Dec 1992

The Westinghouse Award, the most prestigious science competition for American high schools has a large number of Asians winners every year. In 1993, 16 out of 40 finalists had Asian names. In Silicon Valley, Asian Americans were four per cent in 1970, 13 per cent in 1990. Of 70,000 engineers in the Valley in 1990, 15,000 are ethnic Chinese, 5,500 are Indians. In 1993, 260,000 Asians were 60 per cent of total foreign students in America. 30 per cent were from China, Japan and Taiwan. Many will be absorbed into American society as Professor Leebaert noted with satisfaction.

**Asia: Myth and reality**

There is a danger of an over-simple approach when looking to Asia's dynamism for a solution to Australia's economic problems. Asia is no Ali Baba cave of riches. East Asia is resource-poor. These countries are becoming richer by depending on their peoples' hard work, thrift, high savings, low consumption and high investments. They are intense people by culture. They are especially geared for scholarship and high performances. It is to make up for their poor resources that they have developed into intense cultures with habits of thrift and hard work. I have a theory which explains why countries like Australia and Canada are different. They are both vast resource-rich continents with small populations that will not be able to consume their cornucopia of national

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resources, not even in a thousand years. This immense wealth has created the resource- rich syndrome, the opposite of the resource- poor syndrome of East Asia. The resource-rich syndrome results in a relaxed not intense society. It has low drive or little motivation for high performances, because of the high social security and welfare these governments can afford and through which they spread the wealth equally around with little or no effort from the people. Hence Canadians and Australians have high consumption, low savings, low competitiveness, high current account deficit and high debt.

The Newly Industrialising Economies (NIEs), Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and also China, and Vietnam are resource-poor and are the opposite. They have had to gear themselves culturally for a very hard driving way of life.

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There are as great differences between Asians as there are between Europeans. The three broad categories are (1) East Asians and (2) Indians, now called South Asians, and (3) Southeast Asians. The Chinese civilisation predominated in East Asia. The Hindu civilisation predominated in India. The two major civilisations met in Southeast Asia, hence the name Indochina. Few Australians understand these differences.

I am told that the Eskimo language has twenty different words to describe snow in its different variations and gradations. To tap Asia's dynamism Australians have to appreciate that Asians are not just non-whites. That is the least important of their common characteristics. They have to be familiar with different natural traits and cultural biases. This knowledge can be generated at the popular level, but it must be clear and specific on those countries where businessmen have interests; and they must be completely mastered by academics and officials in foreign trade and foreign affairs ministries and most of all the media.

The day books explaining Asia to Australians are selling well, that day Australians have begun to take East Asia seriously. This will help Australia take its place amongst this group of dynamic countries, and be part of the dynamism that will shift the centre of gravity of the world from the Atlantic to the Pacific by the year 2030.

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The growing number of Asians in Australia will help in this process. The process will be slower if they are employed as specialists, technocrats or backroom boys, but faster of they are part of the political, social, cultural, educational, media and corporate establishment. Recently, a Queensland senator visited Singapore on an economic mission for his state. He got wide

media coverage, especially in our Chinese Language media because his surname is O'Chee, Chee from his Chinese father and O' his Irish mother. There will be some more O'Chees in Australia. However, it is not necessary for Australia's integration into Asia to be so literal. All that is needed is to have more ethnic Asians in the Australian establishment. When Australia, New Zealand and Canada become more like America where many ethnic Asians have already played a full part in American society, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Community will naturally come about.

Let me sound a note of caution. The process will not be as smooth as the experience with more recent immigrants in America cities like Los Angeles have shown. Anti-Asian feelings go up and down, often with the economy. But sensible and sincere policies to uphold and to practise the principles of equal citizenship will allow Asians to rose on their merits and so play a key role in making Australia a natural part of Asia.

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Finally a word to put my comments in perspective. Australia is not the central focus of Asians, because Australia has not played a major role in their economic transformation as Japan, America and Europe have. Asians read of Australians in their newspapers now and again. They have no deep understanding of Australian issues. For example, they are puzzled when they

read of the debate over the Queen as the Head of Australia. Asians do not understand how this issue is relevant.

Many educated Asians are also amused at the confusion in Australia as to what it takes for Australia to become a part of Asia. They do not believe that Australians can become Asians either by changing race, or language, or culture. What Australians can do to become a part of multi-racial Asia is to understand Asians, to be at ease with Asians, and to be able to interact with Asians freely as equals. In truth, the majority of Asians are not aware that Australia wants to be a part of Asia. But Asians are concerned with America, because America's economic and military weight makes a great difference to their economies and to their security and to their future. So the views I am expressing here are those of one Singaporean, or rather of Singaporeans of the generation that came of age in World War 2. My generation has had close ties with Australians. Thousands of Australian troops helped to defend Singapore and were captured in World War 2.

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Later, Australian troops helped Malaysia and Singapore during Konfrontasi when President Sukarno confronted us in the 1960s. We feel that it would be a better Asia if Australians became part of East Asia, a dynamic region that will slowly swing the centre of gravity of the world from the Atlantic into the Pacific.