

Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY MR LAU PING SUM, POLITICAL SECRETARY (HEALTH),
AT THE YIO CHU KANG CONSTITUENCY'S NATIONAL DAY DINNER
AT ANG MO KIO SECONDARY SCHOOL, STREET 22, AVENUE 3,
ON SUNDAY, 8 AUGUST 1982 AT 8 PM

It gives me great pleasure to be here this evening which is the eve of our 17th National Day. I would like to congratulate the National Day Dinner Working Committee which has worked very hard in organising this dinner. The excellent support given by the residents demonstrates the awareness of the significance of our independence, a prerequisite to a sense of national identity.

Singapore became independent 17 years ago under rather unusual circumstances. The historical and geo-political factors then were such that our independence was imposed on us. The socio-economic conditions were not at all conducive to the forging of a nation. The economy was unstable. Entrepot trade was the main economic activity and the Jurong Industrial Estate was still at its infancy with a small number of factories. There was unemployment, living conditions were poor and education standards low. The various races did not have a sense of common destiny and the memory of the racial riots of the Fifties and early Sixties was still fresh on their minds. We had little or no defence capability of our own. Thus both internal and external factors were, to say the least, unpromising.

Not surprisingly, foreign observers and domestic critics alike saw little in the future for Singapore. They thought that Singapore would be toppled by the slightest breeze. A few of the less stout-hearted, the professionals who were internationally mobile, left what they thought was a sinking boat and freely predicted the early disintegration of Singapore.

Fortunately, the ...2/-

Fortunately, the vast majority of the people of Singapore showed courage, determination and perseverance. Led by a government which believed in looking after the long term interests of the country, the people of Singapore responded splendidly. The greater the difficulty, the greater the courage and willingness to forego present pleasures for future benefits. Our parents and our senior citizens worked for a better tomorrow. True to our cultural heritage, emphasis was placed on good education and sound morals. Families were close-knit and elder brothers and sisters used to sacrifice their own future by supporting younger ones. Unlike scholars in other countries, nearly all of our scholars returned to contribute towards the development of Singapore.

The government believed in efficiency and discipline, without which little progress would have been possible. Corruption in any form has been dealt with summarily. Drug addiction which can destroy the entire social fabric was curbed by strict penalties including the death sentence for traffickers.

The garden city that we see today, characterised by high quality flats, spacious playgrounds, trees and shrubs at every turn, and law and order is held in high regard by other countries. The Jurong Industrial Estate has 1,500 factories employing 112,000 workers. Many use advanced technology. Another 2,000 factories are found in other estates. The strength of the Singapore dollar is testimony to our economic success. Political stability is well-known. And we have a number of well-run committees and grassroot organisations which provide a two-way channel of communication between the government and the people. In recounting our successes, I do not intend to indulge in self-praise. However, it is important to appreciate the fact that the Singapore story is not an inexplicable social phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of a far-sighted and disciplined leadership working hand-in-hand with a diligent, courageous and resourceful people. Certain basic factors can be seen: honesty, discipline, determination, optimum use of human resource and most important of all, placing group interest above individual interest.

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On looking back we find that there is a natural sense of pride in our achievements. More importantly, however, we must have a sense of responsibility. We must look ahead and anticipate the new problems and plan the strategies accordingly. The task before us is how to maintain and even improve upon the performances of our country because there is no guarantee that the prosperity can continue. "It's like rowing a boat against the current; if you don't go forward, you will go backward." The economic growth for the first half of 1982 was slower. The world is full of unrest and conflicts. High energy costs and inflation are the order of the day. Rapidly changing technologies are found in every sector of the economy.

How do we gear up for the next two decades in the face of protectionism, adverse economic conditions? How do we make our products more competitive? How do we ensure that the pervasive decline in morals of modern societies and the reluctance to put off present enjoyment for longer term gains do not replace the traditional values held by senior citizens?

We need to remind ourselves that nothing can be achieved without concerted effort. There is uncertainty in the world hit by recession, high interest rates and political upheavals. But one thing is certain and that is - it is up to us, the citizens of Singapore, and no one else, who will decide the kind of Singapore we will have. True, many of the factors are beyond our control. But it is the human factor, above all else that counts. Hardship fosters character but a life of comfort may erode the will to better oneself. The Singaporean worker or student is capable of learning technical knowledge as well as any one else. But it is absolutely essential to have such virtues as moral courage, strength of character, ability to work in a team, and commitment to Singapore. These are the vital attributes. We can succeed if all of us, as parents, or teachers or community leaders, set an example for the young to follow. We will succeed if and only if we apply ourselves to the task with the same spirit and dedication that our forefathers and senior citizens have applied themselves. In the process, we will shape the future of Singapore.

Finally, may I wish all present good health and happiness.

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