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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT,
AT THE "RESIDENTS' GET-TOGETHER PARTY" FOR THE RESIDENTS
OF HONG LIM COMPLEX ON FRIDAY, 29 APRIL '83 AT 7.30 PM

As I look around me tonight, I am sure there are many here who live in HDB housing estates and who are proud of the flats they own. We are fortunate in Singapore to have started our massive public housing programme some two decades ago so that today, you and I can look back with pride over what we have accomplished. Our standards of living have gone up. We no longer have to stay in small cubicles in dilapidated shophouses or plank and zinc houses, sharing common kitchens, toilets and bathrooms with several other families. We have our own home with our own kitchen, toilet and bathroom. Our children living with us in HDB estates may never even have seen a nightsoil bucket which we, the older generation, can still remember. We have clean modern sanitation in all HDB estates. Even our refuse disposal system reaches right into our kitchen. We only need to throw refuse into the refuse chute and close the lid. The rest would be taken care of by the authorities.

Of course, our public housing projects could never have succeeded if the population had not improved their economic status and level of income to be able to afford the purchase of these flats. It costs more to stay in HDB estates than it does in run down plank and zinc houses. Planning and organisation by the Government must be matched by determination by the population to improve their economic status through hard work and training for higher skills. Only then can our public housing schemes succeed, with residents proud of the flats they can then afford to own.

Together, therefore, we have achieved much over the last two decades. We have planned for better public housing, and the population on their part have, through hard work and training, elevated their income levels to be able to afford better quality housing. We have not completed our public housing programme yet, for there are still many who still live without proper sanitation in shophouse cubicles or plank and zinc houses, awaiting resettlement into HDB estates. But it is time for us to review some of the more important aspects of high-rise living in our high-density estates. Some patterns of social behaviour may no longer be relevant, while others may have to be cultivated further. Our former bad practice of burning garden waste in the backyard, to drive away mosquitoes, for example, is no longer relevant and in its place, we have to cultivate the good habit of keeping our flats free of stagnant water.

As you came out from your flats to this function, I am sure you must have noted many other areas where you wish new patterns of social behaviour could be cultivated. There is the bin compartment at the bottom of the refuse chute that was strewn with rubbish. Foul smelling water was flowing into the open drains. We are polluting our reservoirs and providing a breeding place for flies and rodents. You wish each resident would drain their kitchen waste before disposing of them in proper plastic bags down the refuse chute. "It is so unnecessary to dirty the area we are living in when a proper rubbish collection system is available", and you are right in saying so. A new pattern of social behaviour must be cultivated that would enhance our standard of public health in our HDB estates.

You could have walked past the bin centre and felt aghast to see the bins, laden with refuse, kept in the open when a covered enclosed bin centre, with proper gates, has been provided. It is the carelessness of the

estate maintenance workmen. They need to understand that we are expecting higher norms in work discipline and better standards of environmental maintenance. They also need to contribute to our efforts to evolve a new pattern of social behaviour in HDB estates.

The same thing could be said of the man walking down the HDB corridor in front of you who spat as he walked, or of the neighbour whose TV or hi-fi set could be heard round the block, or the housewife on the upper floor who hung her dripping floor mop outside her window. These events, that could formerly have gone past with little notice when we lived in sparsely populated areas where neighbours are far apart, have now become of immediate concern due to the proximity of our neighbours, who live not only alongside us, but also on the floors above and below. A new living environment requires that we cultivate a new pattern of acceptable social behaviour.

Again, you would remember the happy occasion of a wedding dinner on the void deck and in the excitement of the evening, the party had forgotten to instruct the cook not to wash the dishes into the drain but to use the proper wash area provided. On the more solemn occasion of a funeral, our condolences to the bereaved family invariably include overlooking the fact that the undertakers had erected a temporary toilet over the drain. We forgetfully carry past patterns of social behaviour into a new environment only to reflect later that we need not have done it the same old way and dirtied the environment or caused inconvenience to others. We can always do it a better way.

When we first began our public housing programme, we were very conscious of the fact that we would be creating a new living environment. A new living environment requires that we cultivate a new pattern of

acceptable social behaviour. I said "cultivate" and not "evolve". To "evolve" would mean we leave the matter to develop in its own way. This is dangerous. We have seen what high-rise ghettos are like in other countries. It is a frightening scenario. To "cultivate" means we actively mould social behaviour, setting the norms and standards, and taking the lead by showing the example. We must actively cultivate a new pattern of acceptable social behaviour in our HDB estates. Both the government and the community leaders must take the lead in this through public education, the mass media and personal example. Our children need to be taught. Just as our housing programme is successful because of the joint effort of both the government as well as the population, we can succeed in cultivating a new pattern of acceptable social behaviour in our HDB estates. We have the advantage of a rich oriental tradition, which we have preserved intact, on which to build a new pattern of social behaviour.

May I close by saying that we, leaders of the community, are committed to the objective of creating a gracious life-style in our HDB estates with each knowing the norms of good social behaviour in a compact society.

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