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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS, AT THE TELOK AYER CONSTITUENCY'S 18TH NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION AT THE HONG LIM GREEN COMMUNITY CENTRE ON 12 AUGUST 1983 AT 8.00 PM

It is time once again for us to celebrate our National Day. We have done this so many times before, and each passing year has brought with it new issues and problems alongside the many achievements that we have had. Economic uncertainties and political instability in many parts of the world will always be before us. They are more pressing today than ever before. It is in a period of uncertainty however, that we are faced with the basic questions of nationhood. What do we wish to achieve as a nation? What kind of country do we want to build for our children, and our children's children? It is an important question, for the kind of country that we build for our future generations must be the kind of country for which they are prepared to defend.

Over the last 10 years or so, we have placed due importance on our living environment alongside the achievements we had had in land development, including public housing, and our economic advancement. A clean environment is important. It is a measure of the quality of our life, an asset which the future generations will find worth defending. It is important for a citizen returning to Singapore after a business or holiday trip to feel relieved that he has returned home to a place where the air is clean, the water is safe to drink, and where tropical diseases are relatively unknown. It is important

that he should step from his plane into an airport terminal which is kept spotlessly clean and drive through a green city free of decaying refuse and litter. We are building our heritage.

We live in the tropics, and tropical diseases are known to have debilitated, if not devastated, entire populations in other countries. Diseases, such as malaria for example, can sap the vitality of a people, placing them at a disadvantage in a competitive world. Tropical diseases can come through the food you eat, the water you drink and through vectors such as flies, mosquitoes and rodents. When we began our massive housing and industrial development, and urban renewal, we decided also that we should strive for a safe living environment with wholesome, hygienic food, clean water and air, and the eradication of vector-breeding grounds as much as possible. We did this by building in the necessary public health infrastructure such as sewerage, drainage and refuse disposal services at tremendous cost, and mounting a sustained programme of disease surveillance and vector control. We helped our factories to contain their air pollution problems. We resited our street hawkers into proper food centres where food can be prepared hygienically.

On this National Day, I am proud to say that in November 1982, Singapore was declared malaria free by the World Health Organisation. Our tap water is safe to drink and our streams are cleaner than ever before. Marine life is returning to them. Standards of food hygiene have gone up. Uncollected refuse decaying at road sides and harbouring flies and rodents are virtually unheard of. Refuse is so effectively collected and made so convenient for householders that someone went beyond the limits of social discipline and threw a carpet into his refuse chute. Some 83 per cent of the population enjoy modern

sanitation where domestic wastewater is carried immediately through underground pipes to central treatment works for safe disposal. There is little chance for flies to breed on nightsoil and spread disease. The air we breathe is clean, something we have taken for granted in spite of having factories near our housing estates.

I can say we have succeeded in creating a safe and clean living environment as we set out to do some 10 years ago. It has become our heritage, the character of our nation. It is an asset worth keeping and working for, and so we will.

But I have reflected on the factors that are necessary to maintain a clean environment and I must say that there are disturbing signs that all is not well. The infrastructure that we have built is only one factor, the habit of the man himself is the other. Take a man coming down from a bus with his spent ticket in his hand for example. There are three things he can do. He can look over his shoulder and, seeing no officer of the law around, he can drop the ticket on the road and feel no sense of shame; or if an officer of the law is watching, he could go to the nearest litter bin to drop his ticket. He needs the presence of the law. We have failed. A clean environment built on such a premise may not last when cleansing labour is in short supply and costs are high.

The second thing the man can do is, without looking out for the officer of the law, he proceeds to the litter bin to drop his ticket. I would say we have achieved a measure of success and the future of a clean environment is more probable. However, do not forget that it costs the community money to empty the litter bin daily.

The third thing the man can do is, without watching out for the officer of the law, he looks around for a litter bin, and not finding one, he keeps the ticket in his pocket to bring it home for disposal in his own refuse bin. I would say we have succeeded. Our future generations will inherit a clean environment. Our heritage, the character of our nation, will last.

The same principle holds in all other areas of our environment, be it the prevention of mosquito breeding in the flower vase of the home, or the prevention of water pollution through proper use of our sewerage system, or the emission of black smoke from our cars.

Where are we today? I dare say, many of us are like the second man, a few like the third, but unfortunately, it only takes a few like the first man to foul up our living environment. Perhaps we can say with better education, the next generation will see less of the first type of man. I am not too sure. I have noticed, in many schools, the premises of the schools are very clean. The students know the penalty for littering the school. However, if you look immediately outside the fence of the school, the litter in the drain and pavements will tell you what to expect of the future. The message is not going through to our younger generation, and I am troubled for the future of our environment.

I am concerned by what I see in the public parks after the weekend. I am concerned for the future when I hear of toxic waste being dumped in our water catchments. I can only say that for today I am confident our good engineering and our strong cleansing force have the capacity to maintain a clean environment. My confidence for a clean environment for the future, however, must lie in the building of a society where social discipline becomes a family virtue. It has to begin in the family.

The father who throws his cigarette out of his car will find his son dropping the bus ticket on the road.

We in Singapore have succeeded in many areas, and the environment is no exception. We can only pass our heritage of a clean environment to the next generation if we teach our children, by word and example, the methods and virtues of social discipline. This would have to be our task in the years to come. This, I am confident we can do.

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