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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT,
AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRD SYMPOSIUM ON OUR ENVIRONMENT,
ORGANISED BY THE SCIENCE FACULTY, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF
SINGAPORE AT THE HILTON HOTEL ON MONDAY
26 MARCH 1984 AT 6.00 PM

This is the third in our series of symposia on our environment. The first symposium was held in 1976. Since then, significant socio-economic changes have taken place in almost every country. It was over 200 years ago that Adam Smith published his classic work "Wealth of Nations". It was based on the premise that the economy activity of man is dictated by his own self-interest so that each person, in pursuing his own interest will provide a complex and self-regulating control system for the economic development of his community, and such a development would be the optimum. This has been the basis on which the Western industrial nations were founded. Environmental problems however, were not fully recognised in Adam Smith's days, and the intricate relationship between the economic activity of man and its impact upon the environment that supports his very existence were not fully understood.

The scenario is different today. Environmental pollution has intruded into the lives of every man irrespective of whether he lives in the countryside, the city or in the industrial estates. In many societies, it has come as a rude awakening after centuries of apparent environmental balance. Today the forests of Europe are being devastated by acid rain. Toxic waste dumps present

acute environmental problems in many countries, contaminating surface and ground water sources. The mutagenicity of industrial chemicals affect not only those immediately exposed to such products, but the generations coming from those affected today. It has become a matter reaching beyond the self-interest of the present man. It concerns the future of mankind. For the first time, perhaps, man is responsible for maintaining the quality of his own race in its reproduction.

Adam Smith lived in an age where the response to man's economic behaviour is apparent to him and his society, both in its cause-effect relationship and the time lapse between cause and effect. Today, modern technology with its countless pollutants, often toxic and dangerously mutagenic, has blurred the cause-effect relationship and extended the time lapse across generations. Man, pursuing his immediate self-interest, may not survive let alone attain optimum development. He may not be able to see beyond his generation or his immediate society. Man's problem with the environment has become the man himself.

We live in a closed world system. The only external input the earth receives is the energy from the sun. Within this closed system, billions of ecological sub-systems strike a balance with one another. Man, with his technology and economic activities, is only one such sub-system. As nations move towards higher stages of development and industrialisation, they create upheavals amongst the ecological sub-systems, invariably affecting the man himself. The greatly accelerated pace of environmental change we are experiencing today forces us to be more vigilant for those changes that may cause irreparable harm to man and his environment. If we fail to do so, some factor that would normally contribute to our well-being may turn into a menace.

The greatest threat to environmental protection is therefore two-fold: our lack of collective responsibility and our ignorance. This Symposium brings together scientists of varied fields from many countries in an attempt to pool our knowledge of environmental subjects and draw attention to the need for collective responsibility. It is my pleasure to declare this Symposium open and to wish you a fruitful time.
