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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT ONG TENG CHEONG AT THE
FAREWELL RECEPTION HOSTED BY PRIME MINISTER
GOH CHOK TONG IN HIS HONOUR ON MONDAY, 30 AUGUST 1999,
AT THE ISTANA AT 6.30 PM

Prime Minister

Senior Minister

Ministers

Friends and colleagues

The people of Singapore elected me into this office six years ago. At the end of my term, I had accounted to them what I had done to fulfil the mandate they had given me and the pledge that I had made during electioneering. The past six years was a test of the transparency and the working of the system. Indeed, as you have said, Prime Minister, it was an educational experience for all of us. I want to add that what is tested by fire, usually comes out purer and stronger.

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A key message at my press conference of 16 July 99 was that having a good government is more important than having a good President to check on a bad government. This is my fervent belief. The corollary is that people should vote wisely.

I have tried during my six years in office to do my best for the Presidency in the interest of the nation and to test the two-key system out for real. In this regard, I have had the support of many people. With just my PPS and two part-time officers from the Auditor-General's Office, I would not have been able to achieve much. While they tried to be as vigilant as the limitations of staffing allowed, it was not possible to know everything. I had to rely on honest officials in the protected entities to report any encroachments.

Year after year, I had taken in good faith the declarations of the Chairmen and CEOs of the Fifth Schedule statutory boards and government companies that their budgets would not or had not drawn upon the past reserves. I knew that by the government's careful selection, they are men of integrity. The Accountant-General has been one of my best-liked public officers. Forthright and honest, objective and independent, he did his best to perform his constitutional duty of keeping me informed. He is a good man.

The government's selection system of appointing men of integrity to key posts is probably the most rigorous anywhere. Most of these key appointments have to be approved by the President at his discretion, and on no occasion had I found reason to disapprove any of these appointments. It is a critical layer of checks that the government has imposed on itself.

I had no qualms in endorsing the government of today and the public service for their honesty and integrity. There were teething problems in working out the system but these will pass by and by. I believe that once the administrative guidelines to effect the Principles set out in the White Paper are finalised, we should be able to put this system on a firm footing.

Six years have passed very quickly. My working relationship with the government has been sound. I know how the government machinery ticks, having spent over two decades in government. The Cabinet Ministers had been my colleagues and we understood each other. There was mutual respect, and dealings were always proper and at arm's length. It speaks well of the integrity of the Cabinet and the government.

I hope I have not disappointed the people of Singapore who elected me to this office. I have enjoyed their concern and support for the past six years and I want to thank them.

Finally, I wish to thank Prime Minister Goh for his kind words and for hosting this reception in my honour.

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I thank you all for your presence.

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