

Singapore Government

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**OPENING ADDRESS BY DR SEET AI MEE, MINISTER OF STATE
(COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT) AND (EDUCATION),
AT THE OPENING OF THE PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIES' WEEK 1989
AT CRYSTAL BALLROOM, HYATT REGENCY HOTEL
ON SUNDAY, 23 APRIL 1989 AT 9.15 AM**

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning to celebrate with you the launching of the Professional Secretaries' Week.

To celebrate the Week, you have chosen the theme "Visions for a Changing Role" to emphasize the continuing advancement of the secretarial profession. This is indeed an appropriate topic.

The role of the secretary has undergone tremendous changes over the years. In the past, the secretaries' role was mainly to provide clerical support to their managers, or bosses, as they are more popularly termed.

The work of a secretary was restricted to simple support services and task-oriented activities such as dictation, typing, filing, reception and making and monitoring the appointments of bosses.

There was hardly any opportunity for higher managerial type of duties and responsibilities. Even if there were such opportunities, the secretary would not have had the time to carry them out.

One interesting observation about the secretarial profession is the conspicuous absence of men in the profession. Call up any manager on the telephone and

invariably, you would find that nine out of ten times, the secretary answering the call would be a lady. You just have to look around this room to confirm this observation.

I sometimes wonder why this is the case. Could it be because women are better at the secretarial type of duties than men? Or could it be that male managers, being still a majority in most societies, prefer ladies, especially pretty ones, to be their secretaries, for more pleasant company in the office?

I am not in the habit of stereotyping sex to roles but this phenomenon of some professions which society, in general, perceives as being women's eg nursing, secretarial work, medical laboratory technicians, teaching among others, is one which has to be addressed.

These sex polarisations are neither good for the professions nor for our society. Even as I bring this up, I believe that change is in the air. Today, men are now moving into dressmaking, hairdressing and other once considered women's domain and they are taking part in home-making, child caring and child upbringing. The day may come when more men will move into nursing, teaching and being secretaries. I look forward to this in the future as I see this as a healthy move.

I am especially concerned with the area of teaching. We need more men teachers to provide role models and guidance for boys in their childhood and teen years. I have never in the past, and certainly don't now, seen teaching as a profession for mainly women.

I am sure the secretaries present here today will agree with me that we also need more males in your profession to add colour, variety and perhaps some spice.

The traditional roles and image of the secretary are undergoing tremendous transformations today in the face of changing economic times and technological advancement. Computerisation, office automation and information technology are some of the new challenges which are having a major impact on the secretary's work.

These changes have not only enabled the secretaries to be more efficient in their routine work, they have also freed the secretary from routine, repetitive chores for the more discretionary type of work, which were normally done by the manager.

Today's secretaries use very little of the traditional skills associated with the profession. They are no longer just a task-oriented helper with a narrow set of skills. Increasingly, they are expected to take on a wider range of responsibilities such as accounting, office management, systems management, personnel work and even public relations. These developments have made their jobs more complex, challenging and interesting.

We have a vision for the Singapore in 1999 and if we project our imagination and ask ourselves what will the secretarial profession be like ten years from today, I am sure each of you here will have your own visions of and aspirations for the profession and they will be different. However, one thing is certain.

In Singapore, successful secretaries of the future, I believe, will be an integral and indispensable part of the management team. They will be an efficient user of information technology which will enable them to take part in the decision making process in their office; besides supporting their bosses in the normal routine work. They will be highly skilled and professional in their duties.

As our society progresses, and, as new ideas and innovations are introduced, secretaries will be required to take on greater responsibilities, learn new skills and acquire more knowledge. The next decade, will be a challenging one for you and I sense an excitement in many of you.

These challenges will provide much opportunities for manpower development. To meet these challenges, you, as secretaries, must prepare yourselves today. You must upgrade yourselves continually through mastering the new skills and techniques that are introduced in your office.

These skills include time management, communication skills, basic management skills and information technology-based skills like spreadsheet, database management and word processing. I understand that many commercial training schools and institutions have started to provide training in these areas.

Employers must also play a direct role in this process. They should identify and provide opportunities and incentives for their secretaries to be trained in the areas I have just mentioned. They should also monitor the career development of their secretaries so that they can attain their highest potential.

Your Association, too has a role to play. I am happy to read that the Association has in the past few years placed tremendous emphasis in promoting professionalism amongst secretaries, and, on continuing education. The Association should also continue to work closely with the various secretarial training schools and computer and information technology institutions to upgrade their course content to include training in the newer skills necessary for greater effectiveness and efficiency.

Through professionalism, continuing education and career development, I am confident that the secretarial profession will attain new heights.

It is now my pleasure and honour to declare open, the Professional Secretaries' Week 1989.

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