

# Singapore Government **PRESS RELEASE**

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SPEECH BY MR TEH CHEANG WAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT AND MP FOR GEYLANG WEST, AT THE NATIONAL  
DAY DINNER AT THE GEYLANG WEST COMMUNITY CENTRE, UPPER  
BOON KENG ROAD, ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 2, 1981, AT 8 P.M.

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I am happy to be here tonight celebrating with you our 16th National Day.

Singapore's continued political stability in the midst of turbulent times has won the whole-hearted support of our people for the PAP Government. And it is precisely with the consistent support from our people that Singapore has been able to achieve unprecedented levels of economic growth in the last 16 years. Concurrently, in the past 16 years, Singapore has experienced a tremendous upsurge in the quantum of construction activities in the Republic. New buildings abound everywhere, be they hotels, commercial complexes, public housing and condominiums, schools and junior colleges, etc. The entire road network and sewer system have also taken on new dimensions. The Singapore of today is indeed a far-cry from the country just 16 years back.

However, inspite of our proud achievement in the field of construction, it is very unfortunate that our one failure to develop a strong building industry stands out like a sore thumb. And this is the absence in Singapore of a professional group of builders commensurate in strength with the level of our construction activities. Whilst Singapore has been building projects comparable to those in the most advanced societies, sad to say, we have not had any contracting firm with the capacity to handle huge, complex projects. Almost all of our major projects like the development of our new Changi Airport Passenger Terminal, the East Coast reclamation, petroleum refineries, shipyard and port development and large office/commercial projects have been or are being undertaken by foreign contractors.

In this sphere, our building industry is relatively weak, especially compared to our Asian neighbours like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan where the building contractors are not only capable of executing all the projects in their own countries but are also able to undertake projects outside their countries. Even Hongkong whose conditions are most similar to Singapore, has indigenous contractors with sufficient expertise and

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resources to undertake a complex project like its MRT system.

In the sixties, construction jobs were relatively small. Singapore then had the adequate contracting capacity to undertake the jobs. In the seventies, building projects grew in size and complexity. Our contracting capability however failed to respond correspondingly. Foreign contractors with greater technical skills and sophistication had to be brought in. Construction workers too had to be brought in from Malaysia for, in the seventies, unemployment was no longer a menace and Singaporeans were no longer interested in working on construction sites where conditions are harsh and wages, comparatively low.

Our over-dependence on foreign contractors and total dependence on foreign workers are disturbing and unsatisfactory factors. In the next 10 to 15 years Singapore is expected to experience even greater unprecedented construction growth. It is therefore essential that Singapore strives in the next decade to develop its own local building industry to international standards.

To avoid the perpetuation of a total dependence on foreign contractors and foreign workers, a concerted effort must be made to strengthen the local building industry. Ways and means must be devised to upgrade local contracting capacity and to build up a corps of Singaporeans skilled in the building trades.

A fundamental problem of our construction industry is the low social status accorded to both contractors and construction workers. The perception by respectable businessmen and professionals of the contracting business as a high risk and uncertain free-wheeling operation, must be changed. Contractors themselves too must not regard their own profession as less than honourable. By so doing, more and more professionals will shy away from the trade with less and less good contractors remaining in the profession. Eventually the contracting profession can only go downhill with the misconception of the contracting profession becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Our local contractors should help themselves by taking more pride in their jobs. It is peculiar to Singapore that contractors who make good and who are the ones with the best potentials of undertaking vast and complex assignments, quickly dodge out of their profession to become developers or traders. This unhealthy attitude should be changed.

Government architects and engineers can readily testify that in their business transactions with foreign contractors, they are often struck by the ability of foreign contractors to conduct themselves as top business executives. This is in marked contrast to the local scene where only very few contractors are in this 'class'. Contractors thus must make a start in re-evaluating themselves and their important contribution to the economy of Singapore. Their role is not less important than the bankers' or industrialists'. Without their presence in Singapore, there will be no housing, schools or hospitals.

As a start, all government departments and statutory boards dealing with contractors, must learn to adopt a different approach in their contacts with contractors. They should stop watching contractors like hawks, ready to pounce on them for any little misgivings. Instead, our civil servants should regard their contractors as colleagues and work together with them as a team to solve worksite problems. With mutual cooperation instead of antagonism, concerted efforts instead of divided actions, their common goal will all the easier be readily achieved. In this way, much wasted energies of the current police-and-thief relationship can be avoided.

We hope for the eighties, Singapore will be able to build up a strong construction industry - one that is not only competent in handling local jobs but a fortified industry that is able to export its expertise overseas.

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