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SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 1ST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
READING AND LITERACY AT THE MARINA MANDARIN HOTEL ON
SATURDAY 16 JULY 1988 AT 8.45 AM

I am very pleased to be present at this 1st Conference on Reading and Literacy organised by the Society for Reading and Literacy. The aims of the Society are to encourage and propagate the habit of reading. This is a worthwhile goal which must be encouraged.

Why is reading important? Reflect for a moment on how we get most of the knowledge we have. By word of mouth from parents, siblings and colleagues. This is certainly a major way. It is perhaps the only way for those who are illiterate and cannot read. While it is important, it also has its limits. Much will depend on who the people are from whom verbal transmission is received. Great religious teachers have influenced whole societies by their spoken word alone. But usually verbal transmission is painfully slow and narrow. TV which is an audio-visual medium has changed the verbal tradition somewhat in its ability to reach millions simultaneously. It is certainly a powerful medium capable of leaving lasting images in the minds of the viewers. Well-produced documentaries can even deal with abstract ideas and profound topics. But a weakness in the TV medium is that it does not permit the viewer to pause and reflect and review in the way that the written word can.

Reading forms the other major avenue in which we acquire knowledge and even wisdom. Where would we be today without access to the printed word? Probably still in the

middle ages when ignorance and superstition were rife because there were few books and illiteracy was widespread. Some societies and sections of societies who cannot gain access to the written word today are still caught in the ignorance trap. This is why reading is one of the factors which undergirds progress. Without it, it would be difficult to imagine how we can make further progress.

Our literacy rate today is around 85 per cent and with success in our educational system, the percentage will continue to rise. What would be more difficult to estimate is the percentage of those who are literate who are readers. Certainly everyone reads something at sometime or other - from the headlines of a newspaper to perhaps the instructions on a bottle of pills. The reading which the Society of Reading and Literacy is advocating is not that kind of incidental reading, but sustained and regular reading of books and magazines and whole sections of newspapers. What percentage of our literate population reads in the full sense of the word is anybody's guess. But there are certain indicators that point to a positive and encouraging trend.

Take the membership of the National Library and its branches. The total number of members including children and adults five years ago in 1933 was 647,000. By 1937, the number had risen by 35 per cent to 871,000.

Another indication is the growth in the number of bookshops - I mean shops selling books, not just stationery. I do not have the total number. But taking three well-known book-sellers as a sample; in 1933, they had altogether 13 outlets. Today, they have between them 40 outlets, a three-fold increase. This increase is obviously in response to the demand for books.

Another indicator of interest in reading is the number of books borrowed by school pupils from their school libraries. In our primary schools, a pupil on average borrows over 23 books in a year. At junior college level, the average is 33 books in a year. The next generation will definitely be more avid readers than the present one and will consequently be better informed and educated.

Although the indications are good, we are still far from being a nation of readers. One of the striking sights in a Tokyo MRT station is to see the number of people reading books and magazines. Whether in the trains or while waiting at the platform, most people are reading. In contrast, not many of our MRT passengers read. Perhaps our journeys are shorter. But on the other hand our trains are far less crowded than Tokyo's trains. If the Society of Reading and Literacy want a quick indicator of the reading habit, I recommend them to observe the reading activities of MRT passengers!

How can we promote the reading habit? Education is certainly playing a great part. School libraries, school reading programmes, etc., are being given prominence. In particular, the REAP programme which is an English Language teaching programme for Primary 1 to 3 children is based heavily on reading. Our public libraries are accessible to all and membership is free. What else can be done? Book-sellers can certainly help by lowering the cost of books. At present, they still charge \$5.50 for one pound when the sterling rate is only \$3.70. Likewise, they charge \$3.25 for US\$1 when the greenback is only \$2.00. The stimulus the book trade will receive by a lowering of the artificial exchange rate imposed by the book-sellers may make more commercial sense than to keep the rate artificially high. Many more people will then buy books, and those who are already buying will buy more.

Perhaps the best stimulus for promoting the reading habit is to constantly remind parents that of all study skills, reading has been proven to be the most important. Reading, any sustained reading, builds up vocabulary, language skills and general knowledge. All this adds up to success in studies. If parents value education as a premium, then the reading habit must be at the top of the list - higher than private tuition or intense drilling for exams, useful as these are.

The slogan that the Society for Reading and Literacy and other like-minded bodies should adopt is: Towards a Nation of Readers. There are real benefits for Singapore if we can achieve such a goal.

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