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Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION,
AT THE UNION BALL 1988 ORGANISED BY THE NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL INSTITUTE STUDENTS' UNION AT MANDARIN HOTEL
(BALLROOM) ON MONDAY, 8 AUG 88, AT 7.30 PM

I am very pleased to be present at your Union Ball. This is a doubly auspicious day, being the eve of our National Day!

Your theme is intriguing. You plan to take us back in time in 20-year time leaps from 1980 to 1960, 1940 and 1920. I am looking forward to see how you will present the past in your programme later.

I also did a certain amount of casting my mind back when I prepared my speech for tonight. The most obvious thing one can say is that in the 60-year span chosen by you in your theme, the changes in Singapore have been tremendous. We are all too young. But there are many people alive today who have lived through this whole period who have seen all the changes.

1920 - great changes after World War I and the revolution in China affected Singapore. This was the time of mass immigration into Singapore especially from a China which was wrecked by civil war. Interestingly, this was the period when the British colonial authorities began to allow females to immigrate into Singapore. Up to then, only males were allowed. They came to provide labour. But as a result, the population was very lop-sided. Males out-numbered females by two to one. They had their great marriage debate in those days also - but in reverse! People had to go back to India and China to find a bride if they wanted to get married.

1940 - the year just before the Japanese came. I was born in 1940! The British Empire was soon to come to an end. Within a few years, Singapore was overrun by the Japanese. A whole generation learnt about the bitterness of war and hardship. This is the post-war generation that was determined to work hard and make any sacrifice necessary so that their children will do better than them. They are essentially the founders of modern Singapore.

1960 - the struggle for Independence. I remember the student riots, launched by the Communists. They capitalised on the Chinese language issue and exploited the students from the Chinese schools. This together with the general desire for independence from the British produced a very explosive mixture which blew up in the form of riots and strikes.

1965 - 23 years ago. We became Independent at last, but by being asked to leave Malaysia. Our future looked bleak. No hinterland on which we depended for our trade and even our water. There were racial problems which broke out into bloody street riots. There was growing unemployment. School leavers wondered where they could find jobs. We couldn't have had a worse start. But we pulled through - thanks to an honest and capable government and a population which was realistic and willing to work hard.

Now - we have made solid progress. We now have growth and with that good jobs. Confidence of investors in Singapore is high. Our future looks bright. We have new problems - a shortage of labour, a falling birth rate. These are nicer problems to have than the ugliness of unemployment and poverty. But they are not easy problems to solve.

What is the key to the future? How can we preserve what we have built-up and go on further in our development?

These are questions which affect the younger generation more than the older generation. You have more years ahead of you.

How can we ensure that there will be more opportunities in the future? More jobs and better jobs, more educational opportunities, more opportunities for self-improvement, more scope for work and leisure? These depend on several things - continued growth, continued confidence in Singapore, readiness of investors to invest here instead of elsewhere.

Whether all this will happen will depend on one thing - political stability. Without political stability, there is no reason for Singapore to make any progress, let alone survive.

This is why the Government is building in the safety checks and balances such as the guarantee of a multi-racial Parliament, the introduction of more self-management through town councils and now the post of an elected President.

This is why the Government is also seeking to forge greater consensus by widening the base for participation by our people. For example, the extensive Agenda for Action public discussions, the six Advisory Councils set up to receive ideas on a wide range of topics concerning our society, the setting up of town councils. There will be more opportunity than ever for Singaporeans to have a say in matters that will affect their lives.

The stronger these institutions become, the stronger will be our political stability.

As graduates of NTI eventually, you will have important roles to play in Singapore, especially in our economy. For the next 10-12 years of your life, by all means look after

your studies and your careers. You want to do well and establish yourselves. But after that, some of you, especially those inclined towards public affairs and politics, should consider going into politics. You are amongst our best and our ablest. If you don't go into politics, those who are less desirable will fill in the vacuum. They will run your lives. Hence, you should involve yourselves in town councils, in consultative committees and even join reputable political parties and help build a better Singapore for all.

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