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Singapore Government

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PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT
ON MONDAY, 9 JANUARY 1989

Goals and Challenges

1. My Government's goal is to create a better life for all Singaporeans. Every working Singaporean should have a skilled, well-paid job; every family should live in an affordable, comfortable home; and every child should be educated to the limits of his or her potential. Singaporeans should not only have their material needs met, but should also enjoy meaningful, fulfilling lives.

2. We can only reach these goals if we also meet the challenges ahead. We need to guard against external threats to our security. We need to maintain political stability at home. We need to overcome the constraints which limited land area, water supplies and population place on our economic growth.

3. All these Goals and Challenges are spelt out in the Agenda for Action, which Parliament has adopted¹. They will continue to form the basis for nation building and Government policy.

¹ On 25 Feb 88.

Programme

4. My Government's programme for the next five years² contains specific targets to achieve this vision. The programme will build on what we have already accomplished.

5. Now that there are enough school places for every child, we shall improve the education system further. We will upgrade our primary schools, convert more secondary schools to single-session schools, and pay greater attention to social studies, moral education and extra-curricular programmes.

6. More students are now doing well in schools, and qualifying for university. We shall expand university intakes, upgrade NTI into a full university, and study the feasibility of building a new tertiary institution to complement NUS and NTI. We shall also allow Singaporeans to use part of their CPF savings for tertiary education.

7. With basic necessities taken care of, Singaporeans can now look to cultural and artistic pursuits. Then we may not only be knowledgeable and useful citizens, but also cultivated and well-balanced human beings.

² See the Addenda to this address.

A National Ideology

8. Singapore is wide open to external influences. Millions of foreign visitors pass through each year. Books, magazines, tapes, and television programmes pour into Singapore every day. Most are from the developed countries of the West. The overwhelming bulk is in English. Because of universal English education, a new generation of Singaporeans absorbs their contents immediately, without translation or filtering.

9. This openness has made us a cosmopolitan people, and put us in close touch with new ideas and technologies from abroad. But it has also exposed us to alien lifestyles and values. Under this pressure, in less than a generation, attitudes and outlooks of Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, have shifted. Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life.

10. Not all foreign ideas and values are harmful. We cannot shut out the outside world, and turn inwards on ourselves. As Singapore develops, we must adapt our customs and traditions to suit new circumstances.

11. However, the speed and extent of the changes to Singapore society is worrying. We cannot tell what dangers lie ahead, as we rapidly grow more Westernised.

12. What sort of society will we become in another generation? What sort of people do we want our children to become? Do we really want to abandon our own cultures and national identity? Can we build a nation of Singaporeans, in South East Asia, on the basis of values and concepts native to other peoples, living in other environments? How we answer these questions will determine our future.

13. If we are not to lose our bearings, we should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being a Singaporean. These core values include placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony.

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14. We need to enshrine these fundamental ideas in a National Ideology. Such a formal statement will bond us together as Singaporeans, with our own distinct identity and destiny. We need to inculcate this National Ideology in all Singaporeans, especially the young. We will do so through moral education and by promoting the use of the mother tongue, by strengthening the teaching of values in

schools, and through the mass media, especially the newspapers and television.

Political Stability

15. Political stability is the basis of our economic success. We must maintain it into the next century, with a new electorate and a new political leadership.

16. Building Consensus. A clear national consensus on major issues has made Singapore a more stable society. The Government will continue to work towards a broad consensus. It will strive to bring together as many like minded people as possible to work cohesively together for the country, whether or not their views coincide with the Government's on every issue. It will encourage those who support this consensus to identify themselves openly with the Government. Unless such persons speak up in support of policies which benefit all Singaporeans, the Government will find it difficult to carry these policies with the public.

17. Encouraging Participation. Many Singaporeans took part in the National Agenda discussions. They helped to define the policies of the Government and the priorities of the whole nation. Following these discussions, the Government appointed six Advisory Councils: on Culture and the Arts, Sports and Recreation, Family and Community Life, the Disabled, the Aged, and Youth. These Advisory Councils

have made valuable and imaginative recommendations which the Government will follow up.

18. The Government will systematically create more opportunities for Singaporeans to participate actively in shaping their own future. It will appoint more Advisory Councils on specific subjects, so that knowledgeable citizens can produce new ideas to improve our lives. Parliamentary Committees will hold public hearings on major proposals, to collect views from the people, for example on the National Ideology. Town Councils will be formed, so that each town can run its own affairs as it judges fit, and do so more flexibly than any nation-wide bureaucracy.

19. Accommodating Dissent. Singaporeans have shown that while they value good government, they also increasingly want alternative views to be expressed and dissenting voices to be heard. The Government will listen to alternative views and dissenting voices, and accommodate them where they are constructive. But national security and social cohesiveness must never be undermined.

20. The first step towards this accommodation was the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament scheme. With NCMPs, there will always be several opposition MPs in Parliament, whatever the outcome of the general elections. Such non-government MPs can question Government policies and argue for alternative courses of action. Provided they do so

constructively, they can help the Government to reshape national policies, and help the public to understand issues more clearly. The Government will review the NCMP scheme and increase the number of non-Government MPs to achieve this.

21. The Elected President. An Elected President with reserve powers will add a further important check and balance to our political system. The Government has accumulated large reserves and savings, which it holds in trust for the people of Singapore. If these assets are not protected, an unscrupulous government may use them up quietly before anyone knows what has happened.

22. With an Elected President, the government of the day must first seek his agreement before spending any reserves which it did not itself earn. It must also obtain his agreement before making key appointments, for example judges of the Supreme Court or Chairman of the Public Service Commission.

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23. Such a safeguard will minimise the damage a dishonest, opportunistic or profligate Government can do, and create a two-key system to protect our national reserves and the integrity of our public service. The Government intends to discuss this proposal fully before implementing the scheme.

Lower Income Groups

24. Every Singaporean should benefit from the nation's progress. Every one of us who contributes to society has a right to enjoy the fruits of growth. As Singapore has prospered, life has improved for all of us, rich and poor alike.

25. Still, a few groups feel that relatively speaking, they have lagged behind the rest of society. While most Singaporeans have no difficulty keeping up with a changing world, some find it harder to adapt to a new environment.

26. We should not allow the less successful ones among us, who are unable to buy their own homes, or to provide adequately for their families, to feel left out. We should help this lower income group to upgrade their lives, especially those who are willing to make the effort to help themselves. The Government will do more to equip them with the skills to earn a better living, and to help them give their children a good family upbringing, a sound education, and a fair start in life.

A Multi-racial Society

27. Singapore is not a melting pot of different ethnic groups blending into one homogeneous population. It is a multi-racial nation, composed of distinct communities each

wishing to preserve its separate cultural identity. We will always have to be sensitive to ethnic factors in every field of national life - whether in politics, housing, education or defence.

28. GRCs. The Government created Group Representation Constituencies to prevent politics in Singapore from polarising along racial lines. The results of the last General Election show clearly that the change was both necessary and workable. The danger of minority communities being under-represented in Parliament is a real one. We must continue to evolve our political system to accommodate the special requirements of our society.

29. Housing. In housing, when the population moved out of the old Chinese villages and Malay kampongs, and resettled into HDB estates, the original racial groupings were broken up. Today the different communities live intermingled everywhere in Singapore. This improves relations among the races. It also ensures that every constituency contains a cross-section of Singaporeans, and every Member of Parliament understands the problems of a multi-racial society.

30. However, as families upgrade and resell their HDB flats, blocks and neighbourhoods with concentrations of a single race are again starting to appear. We must arrest this unhealthy trend towards segregation, and manage the

demographic composition of HDB estates so that every town and neighbourhood has a well integrated, balanced mix of races.

31. Unequal Rates of Progress. Different communities making up a single society do not naturally progress at the same rate. This poses problems for the whole society. In Singapore, although the Malay community has made considerable progress, it still feels that its progress is not as good as the other communities.

32. The Government will encourage and facilitate the progress of Malay Singaporeans into the mainstream of national life. The Government must help all low income families regardless of race. However, it will provide special education and training opportunities for Malays. But such a policy can only yield results if Malay Singaporeans commit themselves to the endeavour, and resolve to make the hard choices and overcome the basic problems themselves. No one else is able to do this for them.

33. By helping one community in this way, the Government is effectively discriminating in their favour and against the others. This is justifiable so long as it does not compromise the principle of meritocracy, and so long as the members of the community support these Government policies by openly identifying themselves with them.

A Multi-religious Society

34. Religious Tolerance and Moderation. Religious harmony is as important to us as racial harmony. Singapore is a secular state, and the supreme source of political authority is the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, in Singapore racial distinctions accentuate religious ones. Religious polarisation will cause sectarian strife. We can only enjoy harmonious and easy racial relationships if we practise religious tolerance and moderation.

35. Religion and Politics. Religious organisations have always done educational, social and charitable work. In doing so, they have contributed much to our society and nation. However, they must not stray beyond these bounds, for example by venturing into radical social action. Religion must be kept rigorously separate from politics.

36. Religious groups must not get themselves involved in the political process. Conversely, no group can be allowed to exploit religious issues or manipulate religious organisations, whether to excite disaffection or to win political support. It does not matter if the purpose of these actions is to achieve religious ideals or to promote secular objectives. In a multi-religious society, if one

group violates this taboo, others will follow suit, and the outcome will be militancy and conflict.

37. We will spell out these ground-rules clearly and unequivocally. All political and religious groups must understand these ground-rules, and abide by them scrupulously. If we violate them, even with the best intentions, our political stability will be imperilled.

A Nation of Excellence

38. Carrying out my Government's programme to improve the lives of Singaporeans, define a National Ideology, consolidate political stability, help the lower income groups, and strengthen multi-racial and multi-religious harmony are major undertakings involving all Singaporeans. After we carry them out, we will be another step closer to becoming a Nation of Excellence.

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