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**SPEECH BY BG (NS) GEORGE YEO,
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION & THE ARTS AND
MINISTER FOR HEALTH, AT THE HWA CHONG JUNIOR COLLEGE
20TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION CEREMONY
ON SATURDAY, 6 AUGUST 1994 AT 4.00 PM**

Our society is changing very rapidly. Some say, too rapidly. This is not a phenomenon of Singapore alone. It is a continental phenomenon affecting all of East and Southeast Asia. The same process of rapid social change is taking place in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Hongkong, Taiwan and South Korea. It is also spreading to China and Vietnam.

The underlying forces of change are not within our control. They are the result of the technological revolution which is removing barriers between nation-states and reducing the power of central governments to direct social development in big countries.

We cannot resist change. Myanmar and North Korea tried to and failed miserably. Instead we should work with the forces of change and keep some control over where we are heading.

Our economy is internationalising in an unprecedented way. In the past, it was mostly Multi-national Companies (MNC) capital coming in. Now our own capital is moving out, seeking opportunities in Southeast Asia, China, India and elsewhere. Singaporeans are now traipsing all over the world to work, study and play like the Venetians of old. Every year, one in two Singaporeans travel overseas. Every year, six to seven million foreigners visit Singapore. Our imports and exports added together is three to four times our Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We have become one of the world's great cities, not in terms of physical or population size, but in the role we play in the

international economy as an air and sea junction, and as a switching node for trade, finance and information. We have become a centre for brain services in the region.

Instantaneous access to all sources of information is key to our success. To link up with the information superhighways of the world, we are building our information highway in Singapore. We will start work this year to lay our cable network. Within a few years, every household will be connected. Already, optical fibre trunks pass by some 60 per cent of buildings in Singapore. Cable TV will only be one service out of a range of multi-media services which will be made available. As envisaged in the IT2000 plan, many of the services will be interactive.

We are also promoting the use of InterNet. InterNet is a global network connecting 20 million people. It is growing at an amazing rate, currently one million additional users a month. Besides providing electronic mail services, the network gives access to information on almost any subject imaginable. Today, 27,000 local users in the research, development and academic communities access InterNet through TechNet. Members of the public can access the same service through SingNet which was launched by Singapore Telecom on 1 July 1994. The response to SingNet has been very good with a take-up rate of about 600 subscribers in the month of July alone. By the end of this year, InterNet will be available to Teleview subscribers as well.

Hwa Chong Junior College (HCJC) was among the first schools in Singapore to promote InterNet. All junior colleges now enjoy access to it. They will be joined by another 20 secondary schools by year end. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has announced that it will progressively introduce InterNet to all secondary schools. Thus, the number of InterNet users in Singapore will increase manifold within a few years.

With the information revolution, our way of life will change, not only for the better but also for the worse. If we

do not react fast enough, we will lose control over our internal environment in Singapore. That will be a disaster.

Let me explain using InterNet as an example. In the Asian Wall Street Journal of 4 June 1994, the use of InterNet by pedophiles to encourage each other and to ensnare children was described in an article called "Free Speech in Cyberspace". TIME magazine on 25 July 1994 said that "for those interested in pornography, there is plenty of it on the InterNet. It comes in all forms" It is technically impossible to censor all undesirable material in InterNet. Indeed, the Net was deliberately designed by Rand Corporation some years ago to withstand nuclear attack. It has no central brain which can be targetted. It is a decentralised network which interprets censorship as damage and routes around it. There are reports that during the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was able to retain command and control over his forces by transmitting orders and receiving reports through InterNet. It was a great irony. His C³ was either destroyed or jammed but InterNet was indestructible as its creators intended. Thus, while SingNet will try to censor the obvious parts in InterNet that are objectionable, we must be under no illusion that censorship in cyberspace can ever be complete. The battle is steeply uphill.

In this information age, the problem is how to maintain our sense of self as Singaporeans in the face of external influences which cannot be kept out. If we lose our distinctiveness as Singaporeans, we will lose our position in the world. Indeed, we will lose our value to the world. Other cities, with larger populations and control over natural resources, will overtake us. We have to stay special and unique. To achieve this, we need a kind of semi-permeable membrane to preserve our own bubble in Singapore. It cannot be an impermeable skin because we need constant interaction with the world outside. It cannot be completely porous either because the internal and external environments will quickly equalise. It has to be semi-permeable like the wall of a cell so that an osmotic pressure difference can be maintained.

There are two aspects to maintaining the bubble. One is preventive; the other is immunological. Preventive actions include immigration controls, police action and censorship of materials which come in. Preventive actions have to be selective and intelligent. We cannot be comprehensive because there are too many movements in and out of Singapore. If we inspect every article which is brought in, our port and airport operations will grind to a halt. So too our response to the presence of 300,000 foreigners in Singapore. We do not have the resources to keep track of all of them. Neither do we want to. Most of them are law-abiding. They make a big contribution to our economic and cultural life. But, of course, we have to deal firmly with those who misbehave or overstay illegally when we do catch them.

Censorship, however, is becoming quite impossible to enforce at the individual level. Once digitised, an objectionable book, magazine or video can be sent through the telecommunications network. We can inspect magazines, books, tapes and discs but we cannot possibly screen every bit or byte that comes down the information highway. What we can do is to control at points of mass distribution. We can proscribe distributors and broadcasters of pornography who operate in Singapore. Local agents who collect payments for those operating from outside Singapore can also be apprehended. As technology advances, our censorship laws will be progressively amended to reflect this change of emphasis from control of individual consumers to control of mass distributors.

In addition to preventive measures, we need an immune system which fights infection within the bubble. While we can minimise contamination, we cannot expect our environment to ever be germ-free. The San Francisco Examiner on 6 April 1994 explained "why censoring cyberspace is futile". "If a hacker in Helsinki or Los Angeles connects to the InterNet and provides access to his digital porno files, anybody anywhere else in the world, with the right kind of InterNet connections, can download those steamy bits and bytes." The article went on to say that "this technological shock to our moral codes means that in the

future, we are going to have to teach our children well. The locus of control is going to have to be in their heads and hearts, not in the laws or machines that make information so imperviously available. Before we let our kids loose on the InterNet, they had better have a solid moral grounding and some common sense".

Central to our immune system is the value system we internalise. We must therefore pay particular attention to the way our values are preserved and transmitted. In any society, the main temples which preserve and transmit values are homes, schools, religious organisations, clan and cultural organisations, and national institutions like the SAF. If our values are strong, we will remain Singaporean, however our economy is internationalised and wherever our people travel. If our values are strong, we will be able to establish new bubbles even when we live overseas for long periods. This, indeed, was how Venetians like the Polos kept their sense of self even though many of them lived abroad for much of their lives. Hence the importance of rituals and traditions. Like the celebration of National Day and the Lunar New Year.

Seventy-seven per cent of Singaporeans are Chinese. The preservation and transmission of Chinese culture in HCJC are an important part of our immune system in Singapore. It is not without reason that Chinese culture, with its long history of 5,000 years, has survived unbroken despite war and revolution, flood and famine. Having a deep sense of our culture gives us tremendous internal strength.

Of course, Chinese culture in Singapore and Chinese culture in China, while sharing many common points, are not identical. We will always be different however we interact with Chinese from China because we are Southeast Asian and our society is multi-racial in its essential character. Indeed, our cultural diversity is our great asset. People from all over the world find Singapore a home away from home because there are elements in their societies which are in ours. This enhances our position

as a global city. We are able to maintain unity in diversity because our collective immune system combats extremism of all kinds. Thus while HCJC has some of the attributes of the old Chinese schools, it is multi-racial in a way which the old Chinese schools could never be, not just in the composition of its staff and student body, but in the school's basic philosophy.

We have come a long way since Independence, but we face new challenges. More than ever before, our immune system has to be strengthened. Preventive actions like censorship should be taken wherever and whenever possible but they will never be enough. We can never keep all the germs and viruses out. What matters most is our ability to fight infections, ie our internal value system in Singapore - the integrity of our families, the strength of our different cultures, the spirit of our schools, the vitality of our community organisations, and our concern for each other as Singaporeans and human beings. Then, whatever the technological challenge and wherever we may be, we will remain self-consciously Singaporean. It is a paradox that we can only internationalise successfully if we keep strongly to this sense of self.

In a short span of 20 years, HCJC has built up a strong spirit of community service and self-help. More than 16,000 students have graduated from the college. Many have moved on to hold important positions of responsibility in our society. I wish the leaders, benefactors, teachers, alumni and students of HCJC continuing success in the years ahead. In time, HCJC will play the same role in Singapore as Eton and Harrow in the UK or the Doon School in India, so that anyone who analyses the success of Singapore will find one of its key strengths in your school spirit.

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