

### **Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech on Aug 17, 2008 - Part 3**

To address that problem, we've got to keep our economy competitive, we've got to produce more, be more productive. Therefore earn more for ourselves, then we can raise our standard of living despite increases in oil and food prices.

The well-being of Singaporeans depends not just on bread and butter issues but also on our human and social environment, which means on how we behave, how we relate to one another as Singaporeans. How can we make Singapore a more gracious society? We've done many things over the years to improve ourselves. We've got all sorts of campaigns and initiatives - queue up, be courteous, no spitting, please flush toilets, most recently, service excellence – Go the Extra Mile for Singapore.

Sometimes people laugh at us. But actually these are things which we can work on and improve. And if we make people aware of their behaviour and conscious of the impact on others, we can educate them and gradually they can learn new habits and they will respond and our social norms will upgrade.

And we have made progress. For us living in Singapore seeing one another day by day, you don't notice. For people who come here once in a while and see us at long intervals it's like on one of these speeded up movies, they can see the difference. There was a letter in The Straits Times forum page recently which was very interesting and I was very moved reading it.

It was from a Sri Lankan lady who had visited Singapore 40 years ago when she came here on her way to America to be a post-graduate student. And she came back again recently, now much older and she needed a wheelchair at the airport. And she spent a few days in Singapore. And she was especially moved to write this letter which The Straits Times published, and let me read a little bit of it:

“From the moment I landed until I left, the city impressed me... Everywhere I met only kindness... I was in a shopping centre and asked a young girl the way to the MRT \[Mass Rapid Transit] station. She offered to show me the way, and taking my shopping bags, led me to the station...Shopkeepers gave me water to drink, people waiting for a bus walked with me to the correct bus stop, and people helped me cross the street. I have never experienced this sort of kindness anywhere else in the world.”

I think she must have been a very nice lady. But the people who behaved so well to her flew the flag for Singapore. We don't know who they are but we should thank them. We can do even better of course. We have a Singapore Kindness Movement and it conducts surveys of social behaviours that Singaporeans consider important and not important. And they showed me a list of the different things – quite interesting. Not important, considered not important doesn't mean really not important. But considered important at least shows me where some of the problems are.

So, some of the things we're good at is sitting properly at the cinema – don't put your feet on the chair in front of you. Very difficult for tall people like me. Say “thank you” after being served – that people remember.

But other things not so good. Say “please” – not so common. Clear tables and return food trays – need to improve. We're trying to inculcate this habit. I don't understand. Every national serviceman knows exactly what to do in his cookhouse. Maybe need more reservist training. But at Suntec City no reservists, no NSmen \[national servicemen]. So it's going to take time to change the mindset, because the mindset is, I go to the foodcourts to eat and not to clean tables.

So I got a letter recently from somebody, a lady, an e-mail, talking exactly about this, about how we should make Singapore a more happy place to live. And she mentioned this. She said: “Actually we should feel quite embarrassed to leave our dirty plates and dirty tables for the next diner. In my mum's house, after eating, we will clear our plates and clean the table... This is a good habit we should adopt outside the

home.”

Then she went on to add: “Oh yes, most importantly no fines, no fines. Dishing out fines hurt relationships and no good image for PAP (People’s Action Party) government.”

So I thanked her for her good wishes which I’ll try and find some way before thinking about fines. One of the ways we’ve thought about, which MediaCorp thought about, was to hold a contest on Morning Express Class 95 FM. And we have the DJs, famous people Glenn Ong & the Flying Dutchman who are here tonight. And they invited listeners to send in their videos of the best and the worst Singaporean habits. Tremendous response. So I asked Mediacorp to compile some highlights, good & ugly, to share with you.

This is staying on one side of the escalator going up, so people can pass you.

The cab stealer.

This one on a bus, public transport.

This one crossing the road, red man flashing, all over the shop.

“My grandfather’s road, mah!”

This one gets the gold medal.

So there you are. I think the film-making is outstanding, the conduct can be improved.

I think the best way to focus our efforts is when there is a major event and we’re put to the test. And we’ve done well before – the International Olympic Council meeting in 2005, the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and World Bank meetings in 2006, and we put on a really good show, not just to impress people but because that’s the way we want to be.

And now we’ve to prepare for other major events: F1 next month, Apec \[Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation\] next year, Youth Olympic Games in 2010. Let’s use these opportunities to improve our social graces.

This is how other countries have done it. The Olympic Games Sydney 2000, it set a very high benchmark. The show was very good. But what really impressed visitors was the genuine warmth and the sincerity of the Australians. There were 47,000 volunteers. They cheered, they drove buses, they manned checkpoints, they greeted visitors, they were friendly, effective, polite. They said: “G’day mate”. And after a while you know what that means and you feel welcome, created a whole atmosphere of friendliness and hospitality.

China is now hosting the Olympic Games. They’ve made a huge effort to welcome the athletes and the visitors. And you watched the opening ceremony, that’s spectacular. But what you may not have noticed, that they had launched large-scale civility campaigns to educate people. And they designated special days of the month for special movements.

So the 11th of the month is queueing up day - ‘pai dui re’ – because 11 (one one). The 22nd of every month is give your way to others, give your seat to others day - ‘rang wei re’ – because 22 looks like two chairs side by side.

For the games they mobilised 100,000 volunteers, mostly young men and women, university students, others. And tremendous pride in their country and every willingness to go the extra mile impressing the visitors, that here is a people who are proud of their country and who want to make visitors feel welcome.

So we too should mobilise ourselves for the YOG (Youth Olympic Games). It's the first time ever the games are being held. So let's make a special effort to make sure that it is an outstanding YOG [Youth Olympic Games].

We mobilised very successfully to support the bid when Teo Ser Luck went around – he's not here, he's in Beijing tonight – and Singaporeans from all walks of life spontaneously organised themselves to participate: schools, youth groups, companies, taxi drivers. And I think this grassroots participation impressed the IOC (International Olympic Committee), and so we won the bid. So let us rally together again, show what Singapore is about and welcome the world with our spirit and our warmth.

But we mustn't just stop at the YOG. We've got to work consistently at this patiently over many years, strive for higher standards and a permanent improvement in our behaviour. Not for other people, for ourselves so that we can be proud of ourselves and to make Singapore a better place for all of us.

I've just got an update on the game. Singapore zero, China two. The game is still progressing.

We're creating a better Singapore for future generations to enjoy. So my next topic is babies. This is a very long story. So I've prepared a special slide which captures the story.

This is a slide which shows our total fertility rate (TFR), which means the average number of children born per woman over her lifetime. And this shows the TFR from 1960 all the way to right now 2007, last year, coming down like this.

And this single slide tells us about our history, about our economy, about our culture, and about our policies. Let me show you. The history is this graph, from six children per woman in 1960 coming down to the mid 70s to 2.1, which is the replacement level, because you need about two children per woman to replace herself and her husband, and then continuing to go down till it's about 1.3 today.

It's the same story which we see in Korea, in Taiwan, in China. All over Asia, as the economy developed, as we educated our people, as women got jobs and they were liberated, they stopped, just having one baby after another at home, and the numbers came down. That's our history.

But if you zoom in into the last 30 years, you will see more interesting detail, starting with the way our economy is, because actually people have control over when they want their kids.

So when the economy goes down and times are uncertain and people worry about where they're going to get their next meal, they put off having children. So you look at the graph coming down, but the times when it comes down sharply like here in the mid 1980s, it's usually because the economy is not doing well. There was a recession in 1985, which was quite a problem.

In the late 90s it's gone down again. That was the Asian crisis. And then if you look down here, comes down again – 9/11 and Sars (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). So, each time there's a crisis, people put off having babies. Crisis passes, numbers bounce back up, but never quite go back to where it used to be.

But we can see something else very interesting in this graph. Look at the peaks rather than the low points. Take this one – 1976. Why is that? You take this one, another peak – 1988. Then you look at the next one – 2000. Dragon years. But each dragon smaller than the next dragon. So 2012, I worry for the little dragons.

You can also see our policies in this chart, family policies. In the 1960s the policy was "Two is Enough". Fabulously successful. In fact, oversuccessful. We had a poster. You remember this. "Girl or boy, two is enough". Two little girls. We achieved the target. We overfulfilled our plan. Went down.

In the late 80s we had to change our message: “Three if you can afford it”. So this was after the dip here, we got alarmed, we changed. Say, three kids. And it worked, there was some effect. Quite successful, went up, the dragon helped. But it stayed up for quite long. And then unfortunately it came down again.

And then we decided we needed some more policies. So we had baby bonus in 2001, and child development co-savings scheme – that’s the proper name but actually we call them baby bonus. And that unfortunately didn’t work because we were hit by 9/11 and Sars.

And come here, 2004, this is my little contribution, my first rally – marriage and procreation package. You see we’ve given up having a lot of pictures. Just one little infant. And if you study the graph very carefully you can see that in fact there was some improvement. Just a little bit. But you really can’t see it very well. We need a magnifying glass. So if we zoom in with a magnifying glass.

2004 – 1.26; 2007 – 1.29. So improvement. But the target is 2.1. So 1.5 is here, 2.1 is here. We have a problem. So the question is, what more should we do?

I think first we should encourage people to get married. And second, we should encourage couples to have children. The first step is to get the right partner and get married. I am not an expert in this. So I consulted the experts, those with the experience, and I talked to some of the matchmakers. We have SDU (Social Development Unit), we have SDS (Social Development Service). We have quite a number of private dating agencies now which have come along. So I talked to several of them.

And we had a very lively lunch exchange. I learnt a lot from them. And it’s fabulous material for a TV studio discussion, which one day they will do. They told me so many interesting stories. They put it graphically in real people’s lives the practical problems and how it works and what the difficulties are. So let me just summarise the main learning points because tonight is a lecture, not entertainment.

First of all and encouraging, many singles want to get married. They’re not happy to be single, they want to get married. They are serious, they are not just out to have a good time. But they face difficulties. What are these difficulties? Some have never dated. They didn’t date in school, they started work. Once they settle into a routine, they are older, no chance, no social circle at all, no opportunities to meet new people.

So one matchmaker told me that one conversation he had, he talked to this lady: “What do you do after work? First of all, what do you do?”

She says: “I work.”

“After work, what do you do?”

“I go to the gym.”

“Weekends?”

“I stay at home with my parents.”

“Do you go out?”

“Yes, I bring out my nephews and nieces.”

So he says: “Oh dear, everybody will think that these are her children and will not chat her up.” “So have you met any new friends last week?”

Dead silence.

“How about last month?”

Again dead silence.

So they have a problem – how do you break out of this? Some people date but they start too late. And the dating agencies tell me that the women in their 30s have a big problem. They join up, they sign up, and there are men in their 30s too who sign up.

But the men in their 30s want to look for women in their 20s. Why? They make a very practical calculation: “You see, I’m 30something. Supposing I marry a woman who’s 30something, takes me a year to get to know her, we get married, we want to enjoy ourselves for a couple of years before we think about having babies. Then we think about having babies. You add it up, I’ll be 40something, my wife will be 40something. How?”

So therefore the 30-something-year-old looks for the 20-something-year-old girl. And the 30-something-year-old girl has a big problem. And I feel for her because I had a dialogue with some women, the Women’s Wing organised it for me. And one such lady stood up.

She had great courage. And she stood up and she spoke and she explained her problem, that she regretted. She started off putting her career first. She worked, she built up her career. After she got her career sorted out, in her 30s, she started thinking about looking for a partner. She joined, signed up dating agencies. Tried, no joy. And she was sharing her experience with us and with the room. She still hopes to find someone but it will be quite hard. So that’s a real problem.

The good news is that more people are prepared to seek help from the dating agencies. And the women are more willing to look for help than the men. The men are macho, sensitive about their ego, they don’t want to be seen going for help. The women are more prepared to go. So most dating agencies have more women than men – 60:40. That’s an encouragement to the men to sign up.

But unfortunately sometimes their social graces are not up to scratch. So the dating agency arranged, told me another story, they arranged for a guy to meet a date and the setting was a romantic dinner in a nice restaurant. And the guy turned up in slippers! So he counselled the guy. The guy says: “That is me! I work in slippers. I walk in slippers. I come in slippers.”

So they talked to him, finally persuaded him to buy a pair of shoes, keep the shoes in his car, so before getting down at the date, he puts on his shoes, he goes for the date.

And it worked. So they went a little further. Next thing he knew, the man gave him a call. He said: “What’s happening?”

He said: “I’m outside my girlfriend’s house.”

So he said: “Are you stalking her? Why are you there?”

He said: “No, no, no. She has invited me to meet her parents.”

“That’s good.” So he asked him: “Did you bring a present?”

So he said: “No.” So he was directed, ran around, bought a present, came back, knocked on the door, went in. Eventually it worked, got married. And then the lady said to him: “Quite interesting. Very unlike you to

bring a present.”

So I thought to myself, wow, I was lucky. When I was invited to meet my girlfriend’s parents, I didn’t bring a present either. But fortunately we got married.

But you also need to have realistic expectations. You have to make an effort for the relationship to work. You mustn't be carried away by what you see, romantic images from the movies, boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, instantly married, lives happily ever after, maybe have twin babies.

But we’re real people, ordinary people in real life. We may not have instant sparks the first time. But you take your time, discover the person for who he or she is, nurture the relationship, and then maybe love may blossom. That’s how many Indian couples do it. They are matchmade. They don’t know each other very well before they marry but they develop the relationship. And it works.

So when I told this story to the women’s group, there were two Indian women sitting in the front row, nodding vigorously. And I talked to them afterwards. They turned out to be immigrants, both have lived here quite some time, both had been matchmade to their husbands, both happily married. And they said: “Yes, this is the way. This is one good way to do it.”

So I think that we have to take a practical approach to this. We’ll do more to help singles get married, to the extent that we can. We have the SDU, we have the SDS – social development unit and social development section in the PA (People’s Association). They're working on this. They're doing a very good job. Now they're catering to different markets - graduates, non-graduates. SDU - graduates; SDS - non-graduates. I think we shouldn't be so rigid. I think we should merge the two, have one more critical mass, more activities, and hopefully more pairing up and more weddings - and more children.

A lot of people want the SDU, SDS because government, so they know it's real, they know it's serious, they know that this is not some escort agency. It's respectable. But there are also young people who don't want the government to know that they're dating and would like to use private agencies but want quality assurance, because just in case the private agency is not respectable, they don't want to be trapped.

So we're going to try to give them the best of both worlds. SDU will go into a new business to certify private agencies that meet quality standards. We have Case Trust. We will have SDU Trust. Put a logo down there.

But young people themselves should take the first step, don't leave it till too late. Make time, go out, meet new friends, join a dating agency, doesn't matter whether it's SDU or whether it's a private one. You may find someone you're attracted to. Then you can marry the person you love. And then you can love the person you marry.

Once couples are married, we'd like them to have children. We used to think this would follow naturally. But it's no longer always the case because couples are having fewer children, having them later, some preferring not to have any children at all. Why?

We looked at other countries. We see it happening all over East Asia, I told you just now earlier. Confucian societies with similar cultural values, undergoing very rapid transformations, social and economic change. So there are powerful social and cultural forces at work which are pushing us in the wrong direction. But it's not just happening in the East, Asian societies. It's happening in Western societies too.

In Australia the government is working hard to encourage couples to have more kids. They've had a baby bonus. They've had tax incentives. They're introducing them now. They have quite a good slogan: "one for Dad, one for Mum, one for Australia". Europe has this problem: many countries facing a dearth of babies.

But there's something interesting in their experience. If you look at southern Europe - Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain - the countries with the more macho culture, the women are less liberated, they're more likely to stay at home, less chance to work, fewer babies. But in northern Europe - Netherlands, Scandinavia - where the gender roles are more equal, the women are more likely to work, and yet more babies. That's very interesting. Gender roles and this working is something which modern women put a lot of emphasis on.

So what's happening in Singapore? I discussed this when I met the women, married, single, young, not so young. And they agreed that gender roles and helping mothers to work are important. And they gave me many ideas on what we could do to facilitate this. So let me share some with you.

First of all, you have to share responsibilities for child raising. Traditionally the husbands go to work, wear the pants, the wives stay at home, have the babies, take care of the babies. And it's true that women are better and have a better touch with children.

But the situation today is different. And the men can make the effort. If husbands leave everything to the wives, or the women are forced to choose between working or having babies, they are going to go on baby strike. So the husband has to share duties at home.

I was discussing this with some MPs, including a lady MP, and I said: "You know nowadays I see men carrying babies in the markets when they go out." So she said: "You think carrying babies is enough? We got to wake up at night, feed the baby, change the nappies."

I used to change nappies in the days before Pampers. You see actually you got to fold the cloth, you got to put it on, you got to put the safety pin. I haven't pricked any baby yet.

If I can do it, that means anybody can do it. And I think that you have to change these attitudes. We can't change these mindsets by making speeches, but I think we can shift the ethos, the spirit, maybe in schools when it comes to domestic science, we must teach the boys also some of these skills. Try to influence them to have the right expectations and share the responsibility.

But in terms of things we can do, in terms of incentives, I think there are a couple of small things. We introduced child-care leave a few years ago which can be claimed by either parent. It's now only two days a year. I think we can push this to six days a year. I see that women are cheering. The men ought to cheer too.

We will introduce one new thing - one-week unpaid infant care leave per year, either parent, until the child turns two years old. So first two years if some things, you need your infant to go for inoculation or some emergency, well, you can take some time. This is the first thing I learnt from the ladies.

The second thing is that we must have a good work-life balance. You must have flexible work arrangements so that it's easier for women to have both, to work and to have children. And you must have family-friendly employers who will make this happen. So that they make the practical arrangements and their attitude, when you go they don't make a sour face and they don't make you feel a little black mark recorded in your annual confidential report. It makes a big difference.

And with a bit of effort and imagination, you can do a lot. You can provide nursing rooms so that mothers who are lactating can express the milk and store the bottles. You can allow telecommuting and be flexible about it, so long as the work is done. In fact, one company I know of actually allowed one employee to go all the way to Australia with her husband and telecommute from Australia and continued to be paid and do the work. And then she came back and she resumed her job.

You can find ways around having them physically present. So one catering company which has a lot of outdoor catering over weekends, outside catering, supplied their staff with walkie-talkies and with Blackberries so that they don't have to be physically there. They can be with their family, they can go out,

but they can keep an eye on the catering arrangements, make sure things don't go wrong. I think such employers we should recognise and thank publicly. And MOM (Ministry of Manpower) and MCYS (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) will make a special effort to do that.

The Government will help to share some of this burden of the employers. For example, with maternity leave, which used to be eight weeks. We extended it by four weeks. Now it's 12. And the extra four weeks the government was paying. And I think it's been very much welcome by people. So now about three-quarters of women actually take 12 weeks maternity leave.

But if you've ever managed a baby, you'd know that actually 12 weeks is not very long. So I think what we should do is to increase it to 16 weeks. And these last four weeks I think we give some flexibility. Don't make it necessarily all at the beginning. It can be any time in the first year and the government pays for these four weeks also.

But I would say whatever the leave arrangements and what the government carries ultimately the woman or the man must make a personal choice. Do you work 110 per cent on your career or do you set aside time for other activities, for a balanced life? I think each person has to decide his or her own point of balance.

I remember my own experience. I'm a beneficiary of this. My mother was a lawyer. But every day she came home to have lunch with us. So every day we come home from school, three of us, my mother is there, we have lunch. Nowadays you would call it quality time. This was before people invented such big words. All it meant was she had time for us, we had time to talk to her.

And it was a tremendous help. She avoided going out at night for functions. She had to go for, accompany my father, but business functions, very seldom. What it meant is less takings as a lawyer, less work, less conveyancing, but she decided her children were more important to her. And she acted on that and I think she was happy with that. And we're definitely very grateful for that.

Today it's harder to do this. The office hours are longer, the pace is more intense. People call them "office hours". You must put quotes there because it starts in the morning but it doesn't finish after dinner. And at home you are working, on holidays you're working too on e-mail or Blackberry or whatever.

But despite this, I think you have to maintain a balanced, fulfilling life and you have to keep a pace which is sustainable not just for one, two years and you burn out, but for a lifetime and you are in balanced equilibrium, and at the end of your life or when you retire you say I'm satisfied, I had a good career, I've taken care of my family, I've brought up children, this is what life is about.

Work-life balance also applies to the children. I know a lot of parents complain about stress on their children, and especially complain because they say the education system causes the stress. We've trimmed the school syllabi - teach less, learn more.

But parents are still sending children, they want their children to do that extra little bit more. So enrichment classes, tuition classes, all sorts of programmes. And before exams, they feed their children chicken essence. So I see advertisements for chicken essence with kids in school uniforms prominently displayed outside schools.

I think some pressure is inevitable. It's part of Singapore's competitive spirit. Other East Asian societies are even more ruthlessly competitive. You look at the Koreans with their cram schools, or the Japanese, they have jukus I think they call them, Hong Kongers. I just read one article about the Koreans. They go there, they inspect your bag. No frivolous magazines, no handphones, no lipstick. You go in, no making friends with boys and girls. It's like a prison. And every day they have one hour of rest, every week they have two hours on the weekend, to get into the right university.

We're not like that. We have some stress but we should manage it, we should take it in our stride. It's natural for parents to worry about children and to encourage them to work hard and do better. But we also need to understand them, to know that every child has different attitudes, different talents, to give them space to grow up, to let them learn and mature in their own time. Press them to do better but also know them and let them develop the way their nature inclines them to develop in many directions. May not be academic, may be sports, may be arts, may be music. But let them go with their nature.

Third thing which I learnt from the women is about the financial cost of having kids. Actually I didn't need to learn this from women. I knew this. It's a significant expense to bring up children.

First the direct child-raising expenses - the milk powder, the pram, the paediatrician. All those things cost money. But on top of the direct cost you also have to think about the opportunity cost for working mothers particularly and for professional mothers especially.

What do I mean by opportunity cost? When the mother is working, she's earning money. When she's looking after the child and she has to work less or less intensively, she has to forgo some income there to look after the child. So her income has come down some. So that's called an opportunity cost. Less work, sacrifice their careers. And that is why often it's the professional women, the more successful ones who say that it's expensive to bring up children. So paradoxically the lower income women feel less opportunity cost, but the higher income women feel it so and say so.

Financial considerations cannot be the motive for having children. I think if you suggest to a couple that you know I give you a bit of discount, how about having more kids?, I think many will be very indignant at this, and rightly so. But it's right for us to help women to lighten the burden of having children. And that's why we had the baby bonus, that's why we had the tax incentives.....women to lighten the burden of having children and that's why we had the baby bonus, that's why we had the tax incentives.