

Speech by Koo Tsai Kee, Minister of State for
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Dear Mr Speaker

We meet at a historic moment. President Nathan laid out the challenges facing Singapore. A grave moment, a very grave moment, he cautioned.

Economically, Singapore has never witnessed a near collapse of world trade, travel and finance. Never in Singapore's short history have we been confronted with such an economic crisis. Prime Minister Lee warned at the May Day Rally speech that there is no V-shaped recovery this year for Singapore.

But this crisis, however grave, however daunting, will pass. The recovery may take a long time, or it may be next year, or the year after. The recovery may be a big U, or a huge W. But in time, this crisis will be another case study in another MBA programme. The question for us is not when or if this crisis will pass, but how it will pass. Will the recovery consume us, divide us and cut into our social foundations, or will it invigorate us and make us stronger, wiser and more united. The world will move on with or without us. We have to find our own way out of this quagmire.

For too long, we have been told that solutions to economic and social problems lie with the private sector, not with government. Bureaucracy became a dirty word. Felix Rohatyn, the distinguished banker who helped save New York City from bankruptcy in the 1970s and who later served as US ambassador to France in the 1990s said “Americans by and large look at the government as the enemy”. They don’t trust governments and have no faith in the bureaucracy.

But no sooner had the financial tsunami struck, that the same people who put down bureaucracy began to clamour for more government assistance. Even

unthinkable concepts like nationalizing banks became a reality. These are unusual circumstances and old rules don't apply, they say. Of course they do.

When the US was faced with a crisis last year, Americans turned up in unprecedented numbers and gave President Obama and the Democrats an endorsement which left no one in doubt what they wanted – a strong government. The Democrats today has control of the House of Representative, the Senate and the White House .

What happened to checks and balances ? Well, that

can wait until the crisis is over. The gravest moment in American history since the Depression demands unusual solutions. The people wanted strong leadership.

If America, an economic air-craft carrier, demands strong government, then Singapore, an economic missile gun boat, needs an even stronger government.

When a nation is confronted with a defining moment like this one, we need to go back to basics and look to solutions from a strong government.

More than 2500 years ago, Confucius saw a simple answer to a complex problem of governance and government. Confucius (551BC to 479BC) lived in a period of chaos known as the Spring and Autumn period towards the end of the Zhou dynasty. He witnessed at close hand poverty and hunger, war and corruption and harsh rule by power elites. Warring states were fighting each other for dominance. It was during this period that he understood what people needed most.

When asked by one of his students (Zi Han) what are the ingredients that make a nation strong and rich so that her people can be happy and contented, Confucius

replied him in three phrases : ??, ??, ? ??? .

He said first the government must provide the people with food. In our modern context, this means the government must create an environment to find jobs for the people.

Second, Confucius said you need a credible military deterrence to protect your people and their assets otherwise all will be lost.

And finally, he said, you need to trust and work with a good government in order to achieve social harmony and cohesion.

When the disciple asked Confucius if he had to choose two out of the three, what would he give up. Confucius paused and said given no choice he would let defence go. The country would have to risk being attacked and people would have to live in fear and insecurity. It would be a miserable existence. Confucius was often misunderstood to have relegated defence to a lower priority. On the contrary, as I will explain later, Confucius thought defence was very important.

Not satisfied, the discipline asked Confucius what if

had to choose only one of the remaining two, Confucius replied without hesitation that he would let food go. The discipline was flummoxed. He understood that without defence, their lives were imperiled, but without food the people would face immediate death.

Death, Confucius explained, was not frightening because all mortals eventually die. What was more frightening than death was the chaos and anarchy that came if a good government failed because people do not have faith in it. He said, “????????, ?????”. If the people have no faith in a good government, the country would suffer chaos, shame,

humiliation, poverty and indignity.

In answering the last question, Confucius made it clear that if a country was in chaos, anarchy and at war with each other, what was there to defend? The enemy would simply walk into the country.

The failure of a good government brings serious consequences to the people. The Chinese have a saying ?????. If you want to have pride and dignity, and your voice counted, strong words alone will not bring you an audience. The country must be rich and strong. If the country is rich, the people will be

strong. If the country is poor, the people will be weak.

Last week, a Hollywood actor made an intemperate remark about sending for a mail order bride from the Philippines on a late night TV show. It was meant to be a joke, but it was a very sick one. Sadly, the host joined in and asked that he should have one too.

The Philippines government was indignant. The Philippines community demanded an apology.

Indeed, such a racist and insensitive remark should never have been articulated. A Philippine senator

complained that time and time again, people humiliate Filipinos by referring them as to mail order brides and each time the government must protest and not let the matter rest. Strong words indeed. But words alone are not enough.

But why do the rest of the world repeat these derogatory remarks. Writing in the Sunday Times (May 24th) Ex-Pat files, Jervina Lao lamented that the Philippines is “a country where hardly anything works without having to grease palms, where unemployment is high, where kidnapping is a cottage industry and where the economy depends on the government sending out its people to other countries

as entertainers, maids and seamen, among others”.

Young Singaporeans today speak with a confident voice. Anybody can speak loudly. But will you be heard ? When I was an overseas undergraduate in the early 1970s, Singapore was a poor and weak country. My friends and I spoke often but we were rarely heard.

Instead, many Australians called us “Ching Chong Chinamen”. Luckily my surname was not Ching or Chong or a Wong. I protested. I was not from China but they didn’t care. Where was Singapore they asked me, a province in China ?Have you heard of

the derogatory Australian jokes, “Two Wongs (wrongs) do not make a White (right)”, or the one about the “Wong (wrong) number, or you are “Mr Wong (wrong)”?

I went on a scholarship given by the Australian Government to the Singapore Government. For that I am very grateful. My stay in Australia gave me many good memories of the beautiful country and its kind people. But I came back convinced that if Singapore was poor, there was no dignity. You don't count. I was convinced that we needed a strong and good government. A good government is necessary but not sufficient. The government must also be strong. And

this good government must bond with the people.

Today, no body will look down on Singaporeans because Singapore is rich and strong. Or for that matter even China, because China literally powered much of Australia's 15 year economic growth.

But what can derail us ? This economic crisis cannot set us back permanently. It is a passing thunderstorm.

But if we fall prey to religious and racial bigotry, then it will be a growing cancer in our society. I see an increasing number of Singaporeans identifying themselves with their race and religion. That in itself is nothing wrong if seen in the right perspective. But

I see small groups becoming self-righteous and becoming intolerant of diversity.

This intolerance may be our down-fall. Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious country which has succeeded not just because we are more intelligent or more hardworking than our neighbours. We have succeeded because of our system - our system of tolerance, meritocracy, embrace of diversity and inclusiveness. Most countries with this mix of population and diversity of religions fail. Another good example is Sri Lanka. For now we are successful. But we are still a young country. In the history of nations, we are still a long way from

proving that our success in peaceful co-existence can withstand the test of time.

I remember the old Yugoslavia under the strong government of President Tito. Yugoslavia was not a utopia. It had many faults. But it was a relatively peaceful country with reasonably good economic fundamentals. Yugoslavia was kind of a role model among the Third World countries. Yugoslavia showed the world how different people from different tribes, ethnicity and religions live happily together. But we know what happened today. Yugoslavia is past tense. It is history. And the ethnic cleansing that followed was a human tragedy. It destroyed the

people, it destroyed the state.

Singapore is a city state much smaller than many global cities. The global cities that have succeeded are those which are most progressive and dynamic. They embrace diversity and tolerance in huge doses.

Two such cities immediately come to my mind - New York City and London. In London or NYC, nobody needs to feel like he or she is an alien or a weirdo. There is a sanctuary for everybody. There is space for everybody to wander, explore, and be himself or herself. This is the kind of tolerant,

diverse and cosmopolitan global city we should be.

While we focus our energies on solving this economic crisis, we should never lose sight of the long term challenge of building a tolerant, diverse and inclusive social infrastructure where everybody has a private space within the bigger common space.

