

**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND
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What Will You Defend?

1. The theme for this year's Total Defence Campaign was "What Will You Defend?". This question must have struck a chord with Singaporeans, because the on-line Total Defence video competition website was flooded with entries by Singaporeans who wanted to express themselves on this theme. One of the most highly-rated video clips was this entry by Sukifah Jumari. She is a special education teacher and a mother of a young two-year-old boy. Her entry is titled "Poetic Defence". Please watch. If this entry is any indication, we must be doing something right with our early childhood education programmes!

2. While Sukifah's entry was quite tongue-in-cheek, there was another – a more deeply reflective – entry that caught my attention. It was the third most popular video clip with close to 22,000 votes cast for it. The entry was submitted by a young lady by the name of Kalaivani who is a tuition teacher. In the video, Kalaivani shares her reasons for choosing to defend the former school premises of her *alma mater*, Upper Serangoon Secondary. Her entry is titled "My Old School". Please watch.

3. As you can see from the video, Kalaivani's old school is an unremarkable building. It looks no different from any other government school built at that time. Today, only its empty shell remains. Nevertheless, we know that for her, the old school building is not a decrepit, spent husk to be torn down and discarded. For her, it is a

repository of precious memories. It was within those classrooms and premises that she acquired invaluable lessons, experiences and friendships that have shaped her into who she is today. Kalaivani's emotional attachment to her school building is a reflection of our greater sense of belonging, our shared experiences, a collection of the bonds that exist between ourselves and the community that we grew up in.

The challenges

4. In today's world, new network technologies and global flows of talent and resources challenge our personal bonds to history and community. Our sense of identity and "rootedness" struggles to compete with the convenience and flexibility offered by the physical and social mobility of our times. It is no wonder that some commentators have described contemporary society as a "velcro society". This label captures both the ease with which new connections are made and the absence of scars when they come undone.

5. On my way to work, I see many young Singaporeans emerging from the buses they take to school. You tap your e-z link card, the bus takes you where you want to go, you tap your e-z link card again, alight and that is it – tap on, tap off. If your bus service were to be discontinued, you might get annoyed because of the inconvenience. If it were replaced by another service, you would just hop onto the new service. Or if the old service remained but a new one appeared, which offered a faster ride with fewer stops, you would change buses without a further thought. But I doubt that many of you would shed a tear because you have become emotionally attached to the bus service, or the bus

captain, or the other passengers who might catch the same service. It does not matter as long as you arrive at your intended destination. Tap on, tap off.

6. Anonymous, transactional bus rides are a part of our everyday lives. However, something valuable would be lost in the process if the daily routine of “tap on, tap off” turned out to be metaphors for the way we live and negotiate our relationship with the past, present and future – no emotional attachment for friends or neighbours, home or country.

The ties that bind

7. The challenge we face is how to plug ourselves into the global village, to tap on the opportunities the world has to offer, but still feel rooted at heart. A good part of this feeling of belonging comes from the deep friendships and loyalties that you will forge in RI, and the fond memories that come with them – like Kalaivani had for her school, Upper Serangoon Secondary. But there is a deeper message that Kalaivani is trying to make with her video “My Old School” – having to fight hard to achieve or defend something important in life further defines our “rootedness”.

8. When the first immigrants arrived in colonial Singapore, many had nothing more than the clothes they wore. They did not have a clear idea of what awaited them. Many came to work in order to earn money to send home, or to earn enough to go home to buy some land or retire. Many wanted their remains to be sent home for burial in their old

ancestral villages if they could afford it. The stark choice of making their future here was presented to them after the Second World War.

9. For the Chinese here, did they want to return to life in a China that was wracked by the turmoil of civil war in China and its aftermath? Many decided to stay, and after that they had to make this home. India, Pakistan and Ceylon became independent and people from South Asia here had to choose what citizenship they wanted to hold and where they would call home. Indonesia too declared independence from the Dutch.

10. The lessons of the Second World War, when Singapore was quickly overrun by the Japanese because the British were more concerned with defending their homeland and interests back in Europe, destroyed the myth of the colonialists as the masters who would or could protect us. It reshaped the political boundaries and made all of us choose which country we would belong to. It created an awareness that if we chose to be here, we would have to shape our own future and make it work. It ignited in post-war Singapore a desire to be involved in the running of the country.

11. In the years that followed, with David Marshall – a former Rafflesian – pushing hard for self-government, Singapore moved steadily towards greater autonomy. On 5th June 1959, the first fully local Cabinet was elected with Mr Lee Kuan Yew, another former Rafflesian, as Prime Minister. Although this represented only a limited form of autonomy^[1] it was a profound change for Singapore and an important step towards

independence. By 1963 we were part of Malaysia, and two years later, we were out on our own, independent and fending for ourselves.

12. I was 5 years old in 1959, went to Primary 1 in 1961, and entered secondary school in 1967 – roughly your age, when all that was happening. I grew up at a time when the problems of unemployment and poverty stared us in the face. And workers were restless. In 1963, there were 47 work stoppages or strikes, with some 388,000 man days lost to such industrial action. We also had to confront the challenge of building a community, where people of all races, languages and religions are united by a common set of values and ideals. Schools in Singapore today use English as the medium of instruction and all students learn their mother tongue. But in 1967 things were quite different. 41% of students studied in schools where Chinese, Malay or Tamil were the main medium of instruction. 59% studied in the English medium – this percentage in English medium schools was already much higher than previously because of the accelerated school building programme during that period.

13. These were the years that the foundations of modern Singapore were laid – the shared values we live by such as meritocracy, justice and equality, regardless of race, language or religion. We had 87 Integrated Schools, where students learning in different languages of instruction studied in the same school. 25% of our students studied in such schools. We learnt that the values of our society and the integrity of our social fabric which we now take for granted, came about only after struggles, discord and the ensuing desire to work together and live together. And they are all the more valued because we

had to struggle to get to where we are. What we are not prepared to defend, we do not own.

Having more, but more attached?

14. This year, Singapore celebrates 50 years of self-government. Certainly compared to fifty years ago, Singapore and Singaporeans have more. First of all, there are more of us – 4.84 million inhabitants in Singapore (as at Jun 08), almost three times more compared to 1.64 million in 1960.

a. Home ownership: Based on the Census of Population 1970, the first population census after independence, the home ownership rate (HDB and private housing) among total households was 29%. By 2005, home ownership had risen to 91%.

b. Types of homes: The proportion of resident households living in 4-room or larger flats or private housing jumped from 19% in 1970 to 74% in 2005. (1970 Census; GHS 2005)

c. Today, you can hardly find any of these houses, but back in 1970, the proportion of resident households living in attap/zinc roofed houses in 1970 was a good one-third (33.6%). (1970 Census)

Our health standards have also improved tremendously:

a. Life expectancy: In 1960, people expected to live up to 62.9 years. In 2008, the life expectancy increased to 80.9 years (Yearbook of Stats, Spore, 1967 & 2009). I was born in 1954, and am 55 this year. So this figure has some salience for me. The expectation now is that I will live longer by 18 more years, or 29% longer, than was the expectation when I was born.

In terms of social progress, these are the figures:

a. University graduates: In 1965, a total of 999 students graduated from Singapore University and Nanyang University (Yearbook of Stats, Spore, 1967). In 2008, the number of graduates was 11,772 – from NUS, NTU and SMU (Yearbook of Stats, Spore, 2009). So those in your age group are more than 10 times more likely to get a university degree than those in my age group were. Much more than 10 times, if you count the numbers who go to universities overseas, or pursue other opportunities for degrees in Singapore.

15. We have more, but are we more attached to Singapore? What about the “heartware” – our sense of pride and belonging as a Singaporean? My gut feel is that the sense of pride and belonging, and wanting to do their best for Singapore is there. I have watched young Singaporeans, national servicemen, over many years. They take their training and their operational duties seriously. When they are deployed on missions overseas, or are training overseas on some of our most demanding and toughest exercises, their true qualities shine through, especially when we are alongside our foreign friends. Far away from home, they push hard to accomplish the mission, to show that their

battalion, their squadron or their ship can do it. They don't want to let their side down. They don't want to let Singapore down.

16. I saw it again during the recently concluded Asian Youth Games. It was there among our athletes – the sense of pride in competing for Singapore. And it was there among the thousands of volunteers, many of them secondary school students like yourselves. They were all so charged up, eager to help, eager to befriend those who had come from all over Asia to take part in the Games here.

17. I felt it last Saturday, at the National Day Parade rehearsal – the National Education show attended by some 20,000 Primary School students, those just barely a few years younger than you. It poured, just as the MC called on everyone to stand up for the finale – to Stand Up for Singapore. Everyone did. There was no quavering, no wavering as the performers and the audience sang as one, pledged as one. Just as my friends and I did on the Padang when it poured at the National Day Parade in 1968 – when we were in Secondary Two like you are today.

Future pioneers

18. As young, energetic and talented individuals, the future is bright and the world is your oyster. We worked hard in school, and were happy to get any job that we could thereafter. Work hard now and you will probably be head hunted by the top MNCs looking for the best and brightest around the world. Fortunately, when that time comes, you may not need to leave the relationships and comforts of home behind, as Singapore is

on track to develop into a thriving global metropolis, attracting top talent from all over. While you compete to get into the top universities in the world, others from around the world compete to get into our universities. NUS was ranked 4th among universities in Asia in 2008 by the UK Times Higher Education-QS University Ranking, while NTU was ranked 14th.

19. Within the short span of 44 years of independence, Singapore has managed to attain international recognition, global success and a high standard of living. Last month, in June 2009, the Straits Times published a report citing an assessment by the Economist Intelligence Unit that ranked Singapore as the most liveable city in Southeast Asia. It looked at factors such as stability, healthcare, education, infrastructure, culture and the environment. The same survey found Singapore the fourth most liveable city in Asia after Osaka, Tokyo and Hong Kong. And 54th in the world out of 140 cities surveyed. (New York is ranked 56th, two notches below Singapore.)

20. The key issue at hand is to ensure that Singapore continues to achieve that balance of economic growth and prosperity that is capable of adapting and reinventing itself to be globally competitive, while maintaining a high quality of life in terms of social cohesion and harmony, a healthy and green environment, and a good and safe place to bring up children.

21. To be sure, challenges abound. As Singapore works towards growing a 6-million strong population, how will we welcome PRs and foreign-born citizens and still make

this a home for born-and-bred Singaporeans whose families have been here for several generations? How can we make this the top liveable city in Asia or even the world? How do we ensure that there is enough water for our daily use (with our 15 reservoirs in the pipeline)? How do we preserve our rich cultural heritage, and enhance the arts? How do we ensure high standards of service, exciting places for recreation, preservation of our natural biodiversity and ecological systems, renewal of our housing estates and shopping districts, amidst the plans to make Singapore an international hub for education, healthcare, finance and digital media? These are the challenges that Singapore faces. They are no less challenging or exciting than those that an earlier generation faced and overcame to build the Singapore of today.

Conclusion

22. I am very interested to hear your views and look forward to a lively discussion on how you see yourself in the Singapore of tomorrow, which will be very different from the one you are growing up in – just as Singapore in the present is so different, and yet so familiar to the Singapore of my childhood.

23. Fifty years ago, few could have dreamed of Singapore as it is today. But the determination to create something of worth out of nothing and defend it in the face of tremendous hardship was the hallmark of the pioneering spirit of early Singaporeans. Many pioneers who have played an important role in the progress of our nation in the past have passed through the portals of RI. With a school motto that conveys the desire to

be the hope for a better age, RI is well placed to produce more pioneers of the future, who will help build a whole new exciting future for Singapore.

24. I grew up in the Singapore which my father helped to build. Like others before me, I have done my little bit to help build the Singapore we now live in, that you now live in. What is the little bit that you will do to make Singapore a better home for your children to grow up in.

25. Thank you.

[1] Under these terms, the local government was only responsible for housing, health, education and transport. Trade, defence and foreign affairs remained under the purview of the colonial authorities, while internal security came under the Internal Security Council on which both Britain and Malaya were represented.