

SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, SENIOR MINISTER, AT SINGAPORE SCOUT ASSOCIATION'S 100TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY DINNER , 27 FEBRUARY 2010, 8:20 PM AT SUNTEC INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE

Introduction

1. First, let me congratulate the Singapore Scout Association on the 100th anniversary of scouting in Singapore. This is a worthy milestone to celebrate, especially as Singapore is such a young nation.

2. Scouting was first introduced to Singapore in 1908, but only officially inaugurated two years later. Under the guidance of Scoutmaster Frank Cooper Sands who was also known as the "Father of Malayan Scouting", the scout movement grew rapidly. From only 20 scouts 100 years ago, it has 11,000 members today, 9,000 of whom are students.

Value of uniformed groups

3. Still, in my view, this is not a large number, given our current eligible student population of over 400,000. But we should not judge the impact of the scout movement by numbers but rather by the values it imparts and the leaders it has thrown up. An eminent example was the late Dr Ee Peng Liang, a former president of the Singapore Scout Association. He headed the Community Chest for many years and was known as Mr Compassion. It is also not surprising that many former scouts have held or are holding senior positions in the government and private sector. Tommy Koh and Tan Cheng Bock, both of whom are here tonight, come to mind. And it cannot just be a coincidence when both former Prime Ministers, and the present one, were all scouts.

4. From my own experience, I can say that the scout movement helps to lay the foundation for active, adventurous boys to grow into strong, dependable men. The discipline and kindness of a scout; the pledge to do one's best to help others and to make friends and establish harmonious relations – these are the laws of the scouts. Scouting therefore builds character and nurtures the young to be independent and resilient.

5. The Taiwanese have a term – the "strawberries generation" (草莓族) - which describes youths who are brought up in a highly protected environment and are fragile like strawberries.

6. Fortunately, we have National Service. Otherwise, we too, may have a "strawberries" generation. Why? Because nowadays, traditional, rugged outdoor games have given way to computer games. Children socialise not by playing marbles and gasing in the sun but by huddling in front of the TV playing Nintendo Wii. They socialise on Facebook rather than talk face-to-face.

7. Of course times have changed; and so must our children's social

and recreational habits. But it would be ideal if we can combine our children's new soft skills with ruggedness, as the SAF does with their soldiers. We need Singaporeans who are rugged, possess people and leadership skills and are committed to serve their fellowmen and country. For what use are smart people without sound character? As Theodore Roosevelt once said, "To educate a person's mind and not his character is to educate a menace." That is why I am supportive of uniformed groups like the scouts. They play a useful role in developing a young person's character.

8. I thoroughly enjoyed my scouting days. I dare say that being a scout gave me an early opportunity to acquire leadership skills. I joined as a tenderfoot, soon became a patrol leader and later the troop leader of the Second Raffles Troop. I was guided by seniors like Christopher Ng Toon Seng who is here with us tonight. In fact, it was he who through Tan Cheng Bock got me here tonight.

9. As a scout, I was tested in adversity when I took my hiking test for my First Class badge. The District Scout Master set me a route which cut through a part of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. My hiking companion and I started in the morning at Bukit Timah Road, somewhere before the old Ford Factory. At about 2.00 pm, we realised that we were lost in the forest. Without a reference point, we could not use the compass to plot our way out. So we used the sun as a guide, heading west, confident that we would emerge somewhere along Bukit Timah Road. Instead, we found ourselves deep in a secondary forest of belukar rising to my height. We had to literally push our way through the belukar with our staffs. Night came and we were still stuck in the jungle. There was not a sight or sound of civilisation. We could not cook for fear of lighting up the belukar. To make matters worse, it rained that night. And we knew that nobody knew that we were lost. There would be no search parties to rescue us. I thought of my mother.

10. Next morning, we continued to struggle through the thick belukar, still believing that we must hit Bukit Timah Road, sooner or later. Then, after some hours, we heard a cock crow. It was a surprise because it was in the afternoon. Next minute, we stumbled out of the belukar and startled a woman sweeping her compound. It was Bukit Timah Road alright but where we emerged was not very far from where we started our hike. We had been lost for more than 24 hours. I failed my test.

11. But far from being discouraged, within a month, I retook my hiking test. The same District Scout Master gave me a route in the Jurong/Tuas area, far away from any belukar. But Jurong then was largely undeveloped. It was an ulu place, with prawn ponds and swamps. This time, I asked Tan Cheng Bock, a fellow scout in Second Troop, to be my companion. We completed our 2 day-hike without incident and I earned my badge. The hiking test taught me not to give up when faced with difficulties.

Being prepared, staying relevant

12. Scouting also taught me to be prepared, a valuable attribute for my job later in government. As the Minister for Defence, the Scout motto “Be prepared” was most relevant. But of course, the SAF uses a different terminology - “Operationally Ready”. To be an effective deterrent force, the SAF must be ever ready to deal with known and unknown threats. MHA’s Home Team too has to be constantly vigilant against criminal, terrorist and other security threats. In fact, “Being Prepared” is a mindset that permeates throughout the Singapore Government. That is why when the financial crisis struck, we had the reserves and resources to take bold measures, and were able to successfully avoid widespread unemployment. Our banking system was sound, and did not need the massive bank bailouts required in other countries. Now, as the Minister for Finance has detailed in his Budget Statement, we are preparing for the next phase of our economic development, shifting gear gradually to productivity-based growth.

13. In similar vein, the scout movement must also look ahead and adapt to the changing social landscape to appeal to a new generation of youth. It has to capture their hearts as it had captured ours decades earlier. I am told that there is a gradual waning of interest in uniformed groups in our schools because of students’ aversion to what they see as a regimented CCA which requires toughing it out outdoors in the sun. Or perhaps it is their parents who are averse to having their children out in the sun!

14. Whichever it is, I believe they can be persuaded if the scout movement updates its activities to keep up with the times. Scouting has a mystical quality that embraces freedom, initiative, comradeship and character building. These elements have enduring appeal to young people. As do the joy of singing together around a camp fire at night, the smart uniforms, the badges of honour and achievement, and the strong bond of friendship that lasts a lifetime. Indeed, there is a strong sense of belonging within the scouting family that stems from the donning of the uniform, sharing of a common identity, and participation in outdoor activities centring on a set of shared values.

Conclusion

15. To conclude, the Scouts’ values such as loyalty, responsibility and of being prepared are timeless in nature. They have guided the scouts in the past century in Singapore. And they continue to resonate amongst many of us, including young people, today.

16. A movement rarely fails because of its values. It fails usually because it is slow to adapt to a future very different from the past. Therefore, tonight, as old scouts meet to celebrate our past and present achievements, let us reflect on how we can help make scouting attractive to a new wired generation of Singaporeans.

17. With this, I congratulate the Singapore Scout Association once again on your 100th anniversary. As a former scout, I do feel nostalgic to be part

of this memorable get-together. I wish our Scout Movement every success.

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