



## Speeches

### **SPEECH BY BG LEE HSIEN LOONG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AT THE LAUNCH OF NATIONAL EDUCATION ON SATURDAY 17 MAY 1997 AT TCS TV THEATRE AT 9.30 AM**

#### **NATIONAL EDUCATION**

##### Introduction

1. At the Teachers' Day Rally last September, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong outlined the challenges to our education system. A key imperative was National Education. Many Singaporeans, especially pupils and younger Singaporeans, knew little of our recent history. They did not know how we became an independent nation, how we triumphed against long odds, or how today's peaceful and prosperous Singapore came about.
2. This ignorance will hinder our effort to develop a shared sense of nationhood. We will not acquire the right instincts to bond together as one nation, or maintain the will to survive and prosper in an uncertain world. For Singapore to thrive beyond the founder generation, we must systematically transmit these instincts and attitudes to succeeding cohorts. Through National Education, we must make these instincts and attitudes part of the cultural DNA which makes us Singaporeans.
3. The Prime Minister set up a committee, chaired by Mr Lim Siong Guan, to study how to introduce National Education into our education system. The Committee has worked out a plan to do so. To take the next step forward, we need the full commitment of every teacher and principal. National Education is not just a book subject. It must appeal to both heart and mind. Unless you are personally convinced of its importance, committed to the cause and have the knowledge and passion to teach National Education competently and whole-heartedly, the plan will fail.

##### Lessons from Other Countries

4. Singaporeans are not unique in needing National Education. Other countries take National Education as a matter of course. Japan is a tightly-knit, cohesive and group-oriented society, with a long history and a strong sense of unique identity. Yet Japanese schools start early to teach pupils Japanese culture, values, history and geography, and even the politics and economics of Japan. As pupils get older, they also learn about the cultures and histories of other countries. In so doing, they understand even better what makes them uniquely Japanese.
5. Japanese schools go to great lengths to instill group instincts and a sense that every student is an equal member of the group. They have strict regulations on school uniforms, school bags and shoes. Students are grouped into teams called 'hans'. Members of each han play together and eat together. They take turns to perform specific responsibilities, whether it is the daily cleaning of school premises or serving lunch. Academically stronger students are expected to help their weaker friends. Those who do not are ostracised. Students organise the school sports day themselves. Competition is based mainly on team events; there are few or no individual events. All students participate, including those with disabilities.
6. Japanese schools do all this not because they believe that all students are the same in every respect or have identical abilities. But they want every student to be equally valued as a member of the group, recognised for his strengths, and for what he can contribute to the group. And so it goes for Japanese society.
7. In US schools, every child is taught the American heritage - George Washington, the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement. Students take part in community service. Learning to be a responsible citizen begins young. It is a deliberate inculcating of American political and social values and ideals, to ensure the next generation grows up with these ideas deeply ingrained. It is a process of indoctrination like any other, no less so because the children are brought up to cherish American values of individual liberty. And it is so successful that many Americans are completely convinced that American values are universal values of mankind.

8. If countries like Japan and the US, with long histories and deep roots, have found it essential to pass on national instincts systematically from generation to generation, all the more Singapore, a young country barely one generation old, must make a concerted effort to imbue the right values and instincts in the psyche of our young.

#### Objectives Of National Education

9. National Education aims to develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in our future. We cannot offer our next generation any fixed formula for success, or even any set goals in life. They will face new circumstances and problems. They will need to think through and work out their own solutions. But we must equip them with the basic attitudes, values and instincts which make them Singaporeans. This is the common culture that will give them a shared perception of life, and draw them closer together as one people when confronted with serious problems. This will give them a well-founded faith in the country's future. This is the DNA to be passed from one generation to the next.
10. There are four elements to achieving this objective.
11. First, we must foster in our young a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans. This will strengthen their emotional attachment to the nation, and their sense of rootedness. We are proud of our country. We are proud of what we have achieved together - our economic progress, our clean and green environment, our open and clean system of government, our way of life. We are proud that each of us, in his or her own way, contributes to Singapore's success.
12. But success must not lead to hubris. We must never be over-bearing or arrogant, or look down on people from other countries. We do not have all the answers for ourselves, much less for other countries. But neither have we any reason to be ashamed to say, I am a Singaporean. In fact, quite the contrary.
13. Second, our young must know the Singapore Story - how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation. National Education is not an abstract sermon on general principles of nationhood. It is to do with a special story, our story. It is the story of Singapore, how we came to be one nation. We did not start off with this goal, or even as one people. Nobody imagined this would be the outcome.
14. As a British colony, from 1942 to 1945 for  $\frac{3}{4}$  years of the Japanese Occupation we suffered a traumatic experience of cruelty, brutality, hunger, and deprivation. We lived through the post-war years of Communist-inspired unrest and upheaval. We then joined with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia. Despite pressure and intimidation we stood firm in Malaysia against the communalists. The issue was a fundamental one: equal basic rights and opportunities for all Malaysian citizens under the Malaysian Constitution, and no special rights for anyone in the State of Singapore on the basis of race, language and religion, as was agreed in the State Constitution of Singapore. As a result we suddenly found ourselves out on our own as an independent country, with few means to make a living or defend ourselves. Yet we developed our economy, built up the SAF, educated and housed our people, got them to work together, and gradually became one nation. Year by year we transformed Singapore into what it is today.
15. Knowing this history is part of being a Singaporean. It is the back-drop which makes sense of our present. It shows what external dangers to watch out for, and where our domestic fault lines lie. It explains what we stand for and believe in, and why we think and act the way we do. It gives us confidence that even when the odds look daunting, with determination and effort we will prevail.
16. Thirdly, our young must understand Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries. Singapore is not as other countries. We will always be small, we will always worry about our water supply, we will always have to work harder and do better than other countries. That is the hand which geography and history have dealt us. Overall it is not a bad hand, nor have we played it badly. We have compensated for these constraints by being more resolute and resourceful, more efficient and productive, and quicker and nimbler than other countries which are better endowed and have larger margins for error. And we have been so successful that sometimes we forget that the underlying realities endure, and have not gone away. Singaporeans need to understand these realities, to work together and support the policies that are necessary to deal with them.
17. Knowing our constraints should make us more determined to overcome them. It is no cause for despair. We overcame more severe difficulties in our first years of nationhood, with far fewer resources, and in more dire circumstances. We are much better placed to tackle them now.
18. Finally, we must instill in our young the core values of our way of life, and the will to prevail, that ensure our continued success and well being. Our core values include the system of meritocracy which guarantees fair

and full opportunities for all, multi-racial and multi-religious harmony, and honest and competent government working for the long-term interests of all Singaporeans. We often take these for granted, because things have been this way in Singapore for a long time. But not new citizens, who often come with fresh direct experience of very different societies. Pupils must learn to treasure and uphold these social and political values. If we ever lose them, Singapore will quickly become a very different place.

#### Strategies

19. We need to develop national instincts among pupils at all levels. National Education will begin in schools and continue in post-secondary and tertiary institutions. After ten to fifteen years of education, all students should know the facts about Singapore and feel attached to Singapore, their best home. Those likely to go on to play leadership roles later should at least have had some preliminary preparation for their responsibilities. We will achieve this through both the formal and informal curricula.

#### Formal Curriculum

20. We will introduce National Education content across the formal curriculum. We can do more of this in some subjects than others. The main subjects will be Social Studies and Civics and Moral Education (CME) at the primary level; History, Geography and CME at secondary level; and the General Paper and CME at the Junior Colleges. In addition, Literature and the languages can also be used.

#### Subjects at Primary level

21. In primary schools, we will start teaching Social Studies earlier -beginning from Primary 1 instead of Primary 4. Social Studies will complement Civics and Moral Education. CME will emphasise teaching of values and correct individual behaviour, while Social Studies will give pupils an understanding of Singapore society.
22. Pupils must start early to learn about the society around them, to feel a sense of belonging to family, school and community, to befriend and accept pupils of all races, and to develop a simple, unabashed pride in Singapore. They recite the pledge, sing Majallah Singapura, and recognise our flag. Later they will learn the meaning of the crescent and five stars. But long before that, when they see the helicopter flying past with the state flag on National Day, they should sense that it is a very special occasion.

#### Subjects at Secondary level

23. At secondary level, students currently learn the history of our independence period only in Secondary 1. The 'O' level History syllabus stops in 1963, which perversely omits the vital period leading to our independence. We will extend the 'O' level History syllabus for Singapore to 1971. The period of Merger, Separation and the early years of independence will also be taught in Secondary 2 instead of Secondary 1, so that the students will be a little more mature, and appreciate better what was at stake.
24. At the upper secondary level, we will develop a new Social Studies subject. It will cover issues central to Singapore's survival and success - our principles of governance, the strategies that have brought Singapore here, the role of key institutions like the SAF, HDB, CPF, EDB and NTUC, and our future challenges. It will use examples from other countries to explain what works and what fails, and derive lessons for Singapore.

#### Subjects at the JC level

25. In the junior colleges, students should start to learn what leadership involves, and to develop a commitment to serve society. Through the General Paper and Civics lessons, they must acquire the sense that they can shape their own future and, more important, that it is their responsibility to shape Singapore's future. They must be able to think independently and rationally, and reach informed conclusions about national issues.
26. MOE will take 3-4 years to implement the new syllabi. As the school curriculum is already heavy, we will make the changes without increasing the curriculum load. We want the new syllabi to give teachers more time, not less, to engage in creative ways to bring issues to life for their students.

#### Informal Curriculum

27. National Education is much more than learning facts. Knowing facts in itself will not develop the group spirit and emotional instincts of nation-hood among pupils. This will depend on the informal curriculum. Attitudes and values picked up through team ECAs and group activities, and the rituals of school life, will sink in deeper than anything learnt in the classroom.
28. Each year, schools will also commemorate a few key events that mark defining moments of our history. These will include:
  - ☒ Total Defence Day on the 15th of February, the anniversary of the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, as a reminder of every citizen's responsibility to defend Singapore.
  - ☒ Racial Harmony Day on the 21st of July, marking the day in 1964 when racial riots broke out, to remind pupils of the importance and fragility of racial harmony.
  - ☒ International Friendship Day to stress the importance of good relations with our neighbours, and to remind pupils that such good relations cannot be taken for granted. The actual date will vary from year to year, to mark such occasions like the end of the Second World War in the Pacific, the day Singapore joined the United Nations, or the end of Confrontation and the establishment of diplomatic relations with Indonesia.
  - ☒ And finally, National Day on the 9th of August.
29. Schools will arrange regular visits to national institutions and economic facilities, such as Parliament, SAFTI, water treatment works, the port, or the stock exchange. These visits will help to build pride and confidence among our students, and show them how Singapore has overcome our constraints through sheer will and ingenuity.
30. Community service will strengthen social cohesion and civic responsibility among our young. At the lower primary level, we will encourage pupils to do community service within their own school - taking care of the school grounds, keeping common areas clean. For the upper primary and secondary levels, a school may adopt an orphanage or old folks' home, or take on long-term community projects like keeping a park or a residents' corner clean.

#### The Challenge of Teaching National Education

31. I do not underestimate the difficulty you will have teaching National Education in schools. This is not just another school subject for pupils, or another duty for overworked teachers. We seek from pupils not just intellectual comprehension or accumulation of facts, but a personal commitment to Singapore, and an emotional bonding and identification with their fellow Singaporeans. To achieve this, you must yourselves feel passionately for the country, and understand instinctively our collective interests and what we stand for. Only then can you teach with conviction, instill pride and confidence in your students, and help them to acquire the right instincts.
32. The Singapore Story is based on historical facts. We are not talking about an idealised legendary account or a founding myth, but of an accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and what this history means for us today. It is objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint.
33. Not all the history books have been written, because hitherto many documents have been locked away in archives. But now 30 years after our independence the archives are starting to be opened, and the documents for this period are becoming available to historians. Progressively, a more complete picture will emerge.
34. But the Singapore Story is also a live story. It concerns not only events which are receding into the past, but developments which continue in the present. Both teachers and pupils must take an interest in current affairs. They should know what is happening in the world or in our region which can affect us; what economic, social and political developments are taking place in Singapore. They should know what the national debate is about, what is at issue. The most vivid lessons in National Education are to be found not in the books, but in what we live through and what we observe happening around us.
35. I am not proposing that students should form mini-political parties in schools, or demonstrate on the streets, as Chinese school students manipulated by Communist agitators did in the 1950s and 1960s. But students and their teachers must be alive to events around them, so that when they later become adults and exercise their duty as citizens to decide the future of the country, they will decide wisely.
36. From time to time, issues will arise which contain lessons for the future - for example when Michael Fay had to be caned for vandalism, or Flor Contemplacion was hanged for murder. Whenever this happens, we must make a special effort to get Singaporeans to understand what is going on, why we did what we did, and what

it all means for us. Each such episode will be another piece of the Singapore Story. This makes the Singapore Story harder to teach, but also more exciting and relevant.

37. In teaching the Singapore Story, you will have to deal with delicate issues, especially race and religion, and sometimes relations with our neighbours. We must treat such issues sensitively, but we cannot gloss over them. Amnesia is not an option. We cannot pretend that incidents involving race and religion never happened. They are part of our history.
38. This is not a unique problem for us. For example, in America descendants of Unionists and Confederates both study the American Civil War; descendants of slave owners and slaves both learn about slavery and the civil rights movement. America is the stronger country for acknowledging these divisions in its past and coming to terms with them.
39. In Singapore's case, different races, owing loyalties to different countries, lived in the same British colony. They were moulded into one Singaporean people by their experiences before and after independence.
40. Two race riots took place in 1964, which had been deliberately instigated to intimidate Singapore's Chinese population. Many Chinese and Malays were killed. Riots occurred again in 1969, after independence, a spillover from the May 13 riots in Malaysia. Race relations in Singapore took years to recover from the trauma of these events. Unless pupils know these facts, and learn what they mean, they will never understand why we emphasise racial harmony so strongly, and insist that the majority Chinese community should never make the minority communities feel oppressed. Such ignorance will pose a real risk of racial conflict happening again one day.
41. All Singaporeans, whether Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian, can identify with the ideal of a multi-racial, multi-religious society which Singapore's leaders fought for while in Malaysia, and which we have tried to realise as an independent country since 1965. It is because Singaporeans of all races, and especially their leaders, stayed united and refused to be intimidated that we separated from Malaysia. The issues which led to Separation were fundamental, and remain so today.
42. By teaching the history of how we became one people, we will draw our races closer together. But our aim is not to expunge the differences between the ethnic groups. Each community contributes its own unique characteristics and strengths to our society. If Chinese Singaporeans lose their Chinese cultural heritage, or Malay Singaporeans discard their traditional customs and Islamic values, we become a much weaker society. We must create unity in diversity.

#### Conclusion

43. This National Education programme is a major undertaking. Its effects are long term. We will not know for many years how well we have inculcated values, attitudes, and habits that emotionally bond our people to one another, as proud co-owners of their best home, Singapore.
44. As teachers and principals, you carry most of the responsibility for giving your pupils a total education, and for their National Education. The Ministry will back you up with the resources, guidance, and materials that you need. For example, MOE will produce a monthly series of videos for schools, to keep teachers updated on current affairs. The National Education Web Page we are launching will provide more information and be a channel for teachers to discuss ideas and share resources.
45. The moulding of the next generation is in your hands. You must imbue them with a strong sense of national identity and social responsibility. If we fail, all that we have painstakingly built up over decades can unravel and fall apart within a few years. But put our best effort into this vital task, and we will succeed.

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