

SINGAPORE

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton,  
at Banquet given by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew

10 JUNE 1968

Mr. Prime Minister, Mrs. Lee, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:-

May I start, Sir, by thanking you for the honour which you do my country today, through me, by extending this State banquet to us. It is an honour the more appreciated because we feel, as later I shall take more time to explain, that you are an example to the area of the world in which you live and that you, and we together, may perhaps with the other countries in the region, if they follow this example, bring not only to you, not only to us, but to all of us in this region a stability you want, an opportunity for progress you want and we want, and by doing so contribute more than we can contribute in any other way to the peaceful progress of all of the nations so close and so neighbourly around here.

This is not the first time that I have been in Singapore. Indeed, it is not the second, third or fourth time. But on the first time I was here, things were not so peaceful here as they are now. Because on that occasion Singapore was under attack, was under threat of conquest, and indeed, was subjected to aggression. And those of you in this room who lived through that period of time, will know what this meant to individuals in Singapore. And will know what it meant to the opportunity given to individuals - or rather denied to individuals in Singapore - to be the arbiters of their own destiny, to be the deciders of their own fate.

One of the objectives which we must seek in the whole of this region - and by this region I mean not only Malays, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia or New Zealand - but other countries including Vietnam. . . . one of the objectives we must seek is to see that that kind of aggression does not succeed in denying to the citizens of any particular area the right to be arbiters of their own destiny. And that this is of as much importance to us in Australia as it is to you, let me illustrate, by saying this. . . . a little less than a week ago I was in Darwin, one of our northernmost Australian cities, and as I stood there, I was closer to Saigon, and I was closer to Singapore, than I was to the southern regions of Australia in Hobart, in Tasmania. There are no longer these great geographical divisions there used to be. There are no longer these great differences in time and in travel that there used to be. We are getting closer and closer together in point of time; we are getting, I hope, closer and closer together in point of understanding.

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You spoke, Sir, of expecting from Australians a hard-headed appreciation of where Australian interests lie. I think it is natural and right that this should be so, for the first duty of any government of any nation is to look after and to advance the interests of those people whom that government governs. You, I think, have the same approach. But this doesn't mean that either country, ours, or yours, or any other country in the region can be unconcerned with the interests of the neighbouring countries, because that very hard-headed appreciation of which you spoke must lead one to the conclusion that the ultimate interests of any country in a region can only properly and fully be served if the progress, the stability, the economic viability of the neighbouring countries are also served. For otherwise, there is always a potential threat.

The future of this region, as you said, Mr. Prime Minister, is likely to be shaped by the answers, as yet unknown, to the questions which you posed. Some of them will be answered relatively soon; some of them will take a longer time to answer. But some of them are at this very moment being hammered out, or at least the initial steps to hammer them out are being taken, at the Five-Power talks occurring in Kuala Lumpur; Five-Power talks which are, as I suspect, only the precursors of discussions between the Five Powers, but which are at least starting now and which regarding what you have said from a purely military standpoint, are the beginning of trying to get the answers to some of the imponderables which you have posed to us. And I think I should say no more on that, than that these talks are progressing and that as the answers come from them so the future course of events is the more likely to be properly assessed.

But stability won't depend merely on these kind of talks. In the long-range, stability will rather depend on the economic progress which the various governments of this region can secure for their peoples, and this, in turn, will depend on the dedication of such governments to the interests of all their peoples, not just that section which forms the governing class. It will depend also on the administrative capacity of these governments to translate their intentions into accomplishments, for only in that way will the peoples of the nations in this region feel an identification with the governments who rule their nations and swing in behind those governments to help themselves and sacrifice and work to see that a government in which they believe will bring to them the benefits that sacrifice and work will ultimately bring. That, I think, will be the abiding basis for security and stability in this region; which is not to say, Sir, that it will be the only basis.

And I say, with genuine belief as far as I am concerned, that here in this city state, perhaps the inheritor of the tradition of Venice, and perhaps a city state destined to hold longer than did Venice that leadership in this part of the world, you have provided a shining example of what a government concerned with advancement of its peoples can do. You have shown what a government which has skilled and devoted public administrators can achieve, and the loyalty and support which such a government can generate in the people it rules.

It fills me, Sir, with respect and envy to think that a government is able, at an election, to win every seat. . . . to win every seat on its record, and I have no doubt that every seat was won on your record. I think that the drive, the energy, the hard work, the initiative which you have shown, the realization you have shown of the possibilities inherent in a private enterprise system damped down by government to see it doesn't become an exploited system, guided by government to see that its energies are pulled into channels which are designed for the public good, but not overseen in every detail of its work by government and by bureaucrats - have achieved what this city state has, in fact, achieved.

I hope that this example which I have called a shining example will be able to be emulated by all the countries in this region, because I am sure that if it is, then the worries one has of subversion, of terrorism, of infiltration will be so minimal that they will not any longer pose a significant threat. And because if it is, then I feel that the other major threat that might hang over the region, that of an organized invasion, would run so counter to world opinion that it would have no chance of achieving what it set out to do. So these are the abiding things on which the stability and security and progress and prosperity of this region must be built.

Of course going along with them, especially in the initial stages, must be some significant capacity to reinforce what one is doing with the military arm. But, Prime Minister, I know that you and I have the same ultimate goal, the same ideal of what might be achieved, and I know that you and I both realize the inherent difficulties which will need to be overcome and the slow progress which will necessarily be made, because these new worlds cannot be built and varnished and brought new into being in a day.

But knowing this, I assure you, Sir, of this: we stand ready, in my own country, to endeavour to play our part in a co-operative enterprise with you to bring about what I believe we want, and we expect, and I have no doubt that we will get. And just as you have pointed out that we have reached the stage now in history as a result of hard work and endeavour over 200 years, and have in front of us the future - because we must look to that and not to the past - so I believe if you and we and the other nations of this region can achieve this administrative capacity, can use aid from whatever source it comes and see that it is used to the utmost benefit of all the people and is not wasted, then those 200 years of which you spoke are but a prelude.

Mr. Prime Minister, I am reminded of this saying:- "All of the past is prelude", which has been irreverently translated as meaning, "You ain't seen nothing yet". Really, I think this is true, because casting one's mind forward, and we can only do it for ten years, for a decade, but trying to cast it forward further still it is possible to envisage here, not in Singapore, here in this region, in Australia, in New Zealand, in Singapore, in Indonesia, in Malaysia and in bordering countries, a technological base, and education and administrative capacity, which will enable each to develop and advance in peace and in progress.

That, Sir, I think, you and I would seek to see achieved and that, Sir, while we each hold our respective positions, we will work to see achieved. I hope that not only will my wife and I return here to see you, but that you will come to see us, for the invitation for you and your wife, Sir, stands open for as long as you are the Prime Minister of Singapore, and a private invitation stands open if you ever cease to be Prime Minister.

Thank you.

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