

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MR ZAINUDIN NORDIN, CHAIRMAN  
ONEPEOPLE.SG AT ONEPEOPLE.SG'S COMMUNITY LEADERS'  
CONFERENCE 2013 ON SATURDAY, 16 MARCH AT REPUBLIC  
POLYTECHNIC**

Good Afternoon

Fellow Board Members

Guest Speakers

Ambassador, Mr Jakob Finci

Mr Janadas Devan, Director, Institute of Policy Studies

Community and Religious Leaders

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my pleasure to warmly welcome you to today's Conference. OnePeople.sg first initiated the Community Leaders' Conference in 2009. This biennial Conference serves as a platform to engage community and religious leaders and provides a common ground in addressing critical issues concerning our social fabric.

2 Today's Conference aims to draw learning lessons from communal conflicts in history. In conflict, as in war, no one wins. Victory is often short lived while the damage to lives of people can have lasting effects. From the World Wars to the Cold Wars, there is but one constant outcome – deep human suffering. Contrary to popular journalistic

opinions, there is no such thing as a *Great War*. Peace on the other hand, is hard to come by, easy to lose, and certainly less expensive.

3 Though we are a young country, Singapore's peace since independence has been a long journey. As community and religious leaders, many of you would have travelled this journey, working tirelessly to bring communities together, bridging gaps and doing your part. While some countries are embroiled in ethnic and religious disputes, we have gathered here to speak of securing peace and harmony. This exemplifies how far we have matured as a society.

4 Singapore's racial and religious harmony is indeed quite unique to the world. Nations few and far between can attest to 50 years of uninterrupted peace. This is something we can be really proud of. But we must never take peace for granted. We need to always safeguard ourselves from potential risks.

5 I would like to focus my address on key challenges confronting social cohesion. Maybe it is worthwhile for me to put things in perspective. Singapore today is starkly different from Singapore of yester years. We are a more diverse and cosmopolitan city state than what we used to be. Our resident population is also larger and as an open city state we experience the impact of globalisation "first hand". This has brought about quite a number of serious challenges. Never before in our history have we experienced such rapid change and what some have interpreted as a challenge to the very core that makes us Singaporean.

6 First, is the hotly debated issue of integration between locals and foreigners. From “Ferrari” to “Curry”, incidents between locals and foreigners have brought about emotional outbursts, often resulting in dissatisfaction among Singaporeans. The social media is at times, loaded with comments on this topic. We have also seen the other side, foreigners chiding Singaporeans. It has come to a point, where people have started to question: Are Singaporeans xenophobic? This then begs the question: Are all new citizens reckless Ferrari drivers?

7 The point is, we should view things in perspective. Not all things appear as they seem. A recent study by Institute of Policy Studies, between local born and foreign born naturalised citizens revealed interesting facts. The survey asked both groups to indicate characteristics that define Singaporeans. While both groups differed on issues like NS and the use of English, they agreed on one important trait - Respect for multi-racial and multi-religious practices. Both locals and naturalised citizens overwhelmingly felt that to be Singaporean one must respect the multicultural way of life. Another interesting point was that Singaporeans do not expect foreigners to culturally assimilate and behave like locals. Singaporeans were quite happy if immigrants were courteous, acknowledge important ideologies and learn to live comfortably with locals. These are indeed low barriers for new citizens to integrate into our community.

8 I am not dismissing the fact that we need to address these challenges; nevertheless it need to be address not only by policies that shape community integration but also through community efforts. At the policy level it is already made known that there is an immediate need to

calibrate the intake of immigrants so Singaporeans do not feel displaced. Much of the dissatisfaction comes from a high influx of migrants and foreigners in recent years. This has caused pressure on infrastructure, transportation and jobs. It is not that we are in a bad state, but we are somewhat feeling the squeeze.

9 The government is making concerted efforts to look into these areas. Policy-wise, the government is working towards strengthening the Singaporean core as we welcome foreigners in a more calibrated manner. We want to make our home a vibrant city. By the same measure, we should also acknowledge there is common ground between immigrants and locals. Both of us desire to respect and protect Singapore's harmonious living. If we take it from this angle, then we can look at the glass being half full, rather than half empty. We can encourage new citizens to volunteer for community causes. Get them involved in community bonding and civic concerns. And through shared goals, bring opportunities for locals to connect with new arrivals. These people to people interaction can and must happen in the community in our daily lives.

10 Furthermore, the way we communicate has vastly changed. We are in fact one of the most connected cities in the world. Globally, we are one of the highest users of the internet, smartphones and social media. What does all this mean? There is a virtual community amongst us which we cannot ignore. Politics aside, there are issues that crop up in social media which from time to time will warrant our attention. As we have witnessed lately, there have been several incidents of online racism. This is indeed troubling. More recently, two youths were arrested

for derogatory postings online. These incidents show that fault lines can take root in social media. As leaders we must be plugged in and stay vigilant.

11 Corrosive and derogatory language must never be passed unchecked. Authors of offensive content online tend to be among the minority, but if the majority remains silent, then the minority can get bolder. As leaders, we need to speak up when it matters. We must be the first to make a stand against hate speech. We must never allow peace in our country to be threatened by radicals.

12 This is the era of the new norm. We have now a vocal populace. And to me, this is a positive sign. We should ride on this voice of reason and spark dialogues on issues that have not been spoken enough. In tandem with the national conversation, we should create bottom up conversations which bring to the fore challenges, hopes and dreams of Singaporeans. Critical to this, is how we view racial and religious harmony. Let us be honest about these issues and not gloss over differences. As community leaders, this is something we can spearhead, from our doorsteps to community levels. We could take ownership of this cause. The outcome of these dialogues should cast values we stand for, as Singaporeans.

13 We are privileged to have with us today, our distinguished guest speaker, Bosnia Herzegovina's Ambassador, Jakob Finci. He is here to share first-hand, learning lessons from the Yugoslav Wars. Ambassador Jakob is internationally renowned for peace building efforts in Bosnia. He is an accomplished community leader and a leading light in the

Jewish community. Ambassador Jakob is also the founder of the Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia, and La Benevolincija, a Jewish cultural, educational and humanitarian society. During the war in Bosnia, he saved the lives of many souls caught in between life and death. His charity work brought people of all faiths together spreading the message of peace to a shattered country. His personal sharing would certainly give us exemplary lessons to draw from.

14 Our next guest speaker, Janadas Devan Director, Institute of Policy Studies is a passionate advocator of our cause, and his vast experiences in political and domestic developments I believe will shed deep insights into today's Conference theme.

15 Later during the day, Guest of Honour, Acting Minister for Social and Family Development, Mr Chan Chun Sing will be joining us for the dialogue session. Sister Theresa, an inter-faith practitioner would also be sharing her perspectives during the panel discussion. So, we can certainly look forward to an insightful and engaging Conference.

16 I would like to take this opportunity to thank our distinguished speakers for making time for this Conference. I would also like to thank Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Inter-Religious Organisation, National Integration Council, and Tote Board for their kind contributions as well as Republic Polytechnic and Temasek Polytechnic for their support.

17 I would like to leave you with a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, “It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it”

I wish you a pleasant afternoon ahead.

Thank you.