

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,
AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AT THE ORANGE RIBBON
CELEBRATIONS, ON FRIDAY 23 JULY 2010, 8 PM, THE RIVER
PROMENADE, 1 OLD PARLIAMENT LANE**

Mayors,

Parliamentary Colleagues,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening.

It is a cheerful spectacle to see everyone gathered here in various shades of orange for this year's Orange Ribbon Finale. Originating in 2006 as a district level event in Central Singapore, the Orange Ribbon Celebrations have grown into a national movement championed by OnePeople.sg and its community partners, as a focal point for all racial harmony and integration events throughout the year.

2 The choice of the Singapore River's waterfront for this year's finale is of great significance. It is where Raffles first landed in Singapore in 1819, finding a small fishing community here. It is

from this site that modern Singapore took shape, and where many of our forefathers must have first set foot on Singapore, coming from the archipelago around us and further afield. Raffles put in place an urban plan that organized the various immigrant races into geographically distinct areas.

3 People from different races thus lived separately. As they gradually sunk roots here, the immigrant population built their own schools. But these taught in their own languages, with a structure, curriculum and content based on their own countries of origin. This was largely the pattern in Singapore for the next century and a half.

4 Clearly, the residency rules had a big influence on where the different races lived and how they interacted with each other. These rules segregating the races reinforced the natural preference to live together with others who were like themselves, who come from the same home-town or village, speak the same language or dialect, eat the same food, and worship at the same religious institutions.

5 Differences could be easily exploited and misunderstandings magnified. The racial riots in 1964 remain a

bloody reminder of the turbulent start to our history as a nation. Everyone whose lives were touched by the riots understood how we all lose when racial differences spill over into actual conflict. Lives were lost, work slowed down, there was food shortage, hawkers could not conduct their business and children could not go to schools. It was a setback for all of us, and generations after have remained convinced that we cannot afford to ever bring ourselves down this road again.

Race Relations: The Singapore Model

6 Nevertheless, in spite of such differences or perhaps because we saw the ghastly consequences of them, a sense of community and common destiny was gradually building, forged by the experience of the war years and the journey towards self-government and independence.

7 This was the legacy that Singapore inherited when we became independent in 1965.

8 Contrast this with what we have today.

9 The handling of race relations is at the heart of Singapore's nation building challenge. Our national pledge enshrines the principles which we strive to live by – "...regardless of race, language or religion..."

10 Whether we are from a majority or minority community, each of us has the space to express our own culture, language and heritage. But we are also committed to maintaining and gradually expanding the common space we share, where we all interact with each other.

11 We have incorporated racial integration explicitly into our public housing policy – the opposite of what Raffles had mandated. When we see neighbours from different races in our vicinity every day, we will understand and be more tolerant of the different practices and traditions. But we seek to go beyond just living in the same precincts and casual contact. We want to create opportunities for social interaction and mixing.

12 Hence the importance of the various programmes that we have in the community organized by the CDCs and other grassroots organizations, and in our schools.

Challenges Ahead

13 In many parts of the world today, racial and religious issues have gained more salience, and have been misused and exploited to sow discord and conflict. In Singapore, in spite of our long record of harmonious racial and religious relations, we are not immune to such negative influences, and have to work to counter them. Strengthening the understanding and bonds between our various races is thus an ongoing journey.

14 We also face new challenges as we welcome new citizens, and others who come to live and work here for a time.

15 Apart from their knowledge and skills, they bring a new culture and their own perspectives.

16 You may now have a neighbour or a colleague who was not born here. He has not shared the same life experiences even though he may be a Singapore citizen. What do you do? You welcome him as a friend. It is through simple actions such as greeting one another, celebrating our festivals together, and visiting each other, that we bridge the cultural gap and make everyone feel welcome and at home in our neighbourhoods.

Youth Engagement

17 The other challenge that we face in our quest for racial harmony is the engagement of our younger generation. In one sense they have an advantage as they have no direct experience of the horrific consequences of racial strife, and do not carry the baggage of the past.

18 But this may also give rise to complacency. They are less aware and less sensitive of how a careless act or word can be misinterpreted and lead to a misunderstanding or quarrel. What they take for granted, they may be less prepared to work to preserve and strengthen.

19 Hence we need to find new platforms to demonstrate the value of multiculturalism and racial harmony and make it relevant to our daily lives.

20 This year's Orange Ribbon Celebrations are an opportunity for all of us to reflect on the theme "Friendship Without Borders". Many people have come forward to share their stories of friendship between diverse cultures. These have come from

people of all ages, and from all walks of life, from different racial and religious communities and nationalities. Their stories demonstrate that friendship has indeed no boundaries.

Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games

21 I am also glad to note that the Orange Ribbon Celebrations has chosen to promote racial harmony and celebrate cultural diversity through sport. In a matter of weeks, Singapore will be hosting the first ever Youth Olympic Games (YOG).

22 The YOG provides us with the opportunity to create a special multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Singapore experience to touch the hearts of the young athletes and countless other visitors.

23 Let us welcome our guests and make them feel at home in Singapore. Our diversity will be comforting to the athletes who have come not only to compete, but to live among, and learn about Singaporeans. The experiences that our visitors share with us will in turn add to our knowledge and understanding of other cultures, and help us build upon the racial harmony that we have enjoyed which is the foundation of our peace and prosperity. Thank You.