

# Transcript of Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the OnePeople.Sg's Community Leaders' Conference at The Grassroots Club

OnePeople.Sg Community Leaders' Conference



Mr Janil Puthuchery, Chairman of OnePeople.sg, fellow Singaporeans, a very good morning to all of you.

SG50 has been a year of celebration, celebrating the progress we have made as a nation, celebrating the shared values and beliefs which define us as Singaporeans. One of our most remarkable achievements over these last 50 years, has been our racial and religious harmony. It stems from a strong belief in the ideal of a multiracial society where everybody is equal, regardless of race, language or religion, and it was the most fundamental reason why we left Malaysia and went our own way on 9 August 1965. Since then, we have held firmly to the belief that before race, language and religion, first and foremost, we should all be Singaporeans together and so, we have built a fair and just society, based on meritocracy, where ability and not your background or the colour of your skin, determines how well you do, determines what contributions you make, and what rewards you get.

But what we enjoy today is not a natural thing. It does not just happen and fall from Heaven. It was an act of will which we have sustained over many decades because our pioneers knew that for us to survive as a nation, we could not be a divided society. They brought the communities together, extended the common spaces and they policed the rules, and made sure that everybody knew this was how Singapore was meant to work, right from the beginning. In fact, this morning, I was reading The Sunday Times. The Sunday Times has got a page every week which talks about what Singapore was like 50 years ago this week, and today's page, which is on B8 Insight, has an article about what was happening 50 years ago this week. What was happening? What was happening was that Mr Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, was putting Chinese chauvinist groups in their place because he had said recently, just before that, that all four languages would be official languages and that would be enshrined in the Constitution, and the Chinese groups had gone on to ask the Government to guarantee the status of the Chinese and have that written into the Constitution of the new Republic. All the time when we were in Malaysia, they kept low. When we came out from Malaysia, quite safe, they became 'garang'. So, Mr Lee reminded them. He said, 'I would like to hear the end of all this. Language, culture, religion - they are not political issues. We have defused the big bomb.' And then he went on to say, 'If you keep on pushing, you will jeopardise the struggle for the Chinese elsewhere in Southeast Asia, fighting for a fair place for their language. So, I say to all those who want to be language heroes, just pipe down. They had better calculate very carefully before they say these things and if they do not know what this is all about, better leave these things to

those who know what all this is about.' And then he went on to declare that Singapore would be an example for everybody else to follow. We will establish a model society and show that this is the type of society Southeast Asia wanted. This is our sacred role to play.

So, right from the beginning, we set the ideals, we policed the norms, we built the society and Singaporeans worked at it, and supported many hard decisions along the way. For example, housing. At the beginning, we were not integrated housing communities. We lived separately and gradually, we redeveloped the enclaves, like in Geylang Serai or Farrer Park, and rehoused the population into integrated housing estates and every block, you have a mix because in the balloting, we made sure. But then when we had resales and people gradually moved, and then it looked as if we were going to separate out again, we made sure we stop that separation, and we had an ethnic integration policy and housing quotas. So that every precinct, every HDB block, would have a certain proportion of Chinese, of Malays, of Indians and we would not be living in separate places but integrated together, as one society. Not easy, even now, but necessary.

Education – we had English schools, Chinese schools, Malay schools, and Tamil schools. Gradually, we brought them together and made all schools teach in English as a medium of instruction. We gave parents time. They chose, and we adjusted. Gradually, it happened. The last Chinese school did not convert to English until 1988. It is just less than 30 years ago. But while we went into English as a common teaching language and working language, we also introduced the bilingual policy, the mother tongue language policy, so that children will know their mother tongues and maintain their sense of identity, their values and their culture. We introduced National Service (NS) and every able-bodied male young man, citizen, had to give up a few years of his life in order to serve the country, become a soldier or civil defence or police, and over time, NS became a rite of passage for citizens of all races and religions. And so, we brought them together in the big policies, but we also made sure that in the small things, we got it right also.

So, when we celebrate SG50, we celebrate together. Malay/Muslim organisations held a National Day Observance, SG50 Kita, at ITE College Central, just near here, the day before National Day and they invited other communities to join them. When the Catholics held an SG50 mass, when the Taoists held their Silver Jubilee celebrations, when the Buddhists held the Vesak cum SG50 celebrations, all the other communities were also invited, they attended, and celebrated together and that is the way Singapore is.

So, we have made a lot of progress over these 50 years, but we have made so much progress that sometimes, Singaporeans may be lulled into thinking that we have arrived. No need to work hard anymore. It is like this, it is naturally like this when you wake up it will still be like this, can go to sleep, do not have to worry, and race and religion can no longer divide our society. I think that is being complacent. That is dangerous because in any society, race and religion will remain as difficult issues, will remain as sensitive issues and I think today, compared to 50 years ago, in some ways, are more complicated and more difficult than it used to be.

We discuss things more openly now. Even sensitive matters, we discuss openly in mixed groups and we speak candidly with one another from the heart. But it is very unwise to assume that we do not have to be careful, that we do not have to be sensitive when we are dealing with issues of race and religion. It is always work in progress. If you just look at our society on the surface, if you just read the newspapers, what is reported or even on the social media, you may not know how much work goes into making sure everything runs well. But from time to time, we will have prickly issues; we will have incidents with a racial tinge. We have to deal with them and we have been dealing with them quietly, cooperatively, and maturely. The community leaders, the religious leaders and the groups themselves, not allowing it to boil over and become an issue.

You just look at what happens when we do not manage to keep things under control. One person puts one rude post on his Facebook Page, go to sleep, and the next morning he wakes up, half of Singapore is angry with him, sometimes, angry with her. It happened, more than once. Sometimes, we have real life incidents, not just in cyber space. For example, when you are dealing with families where they have been convergence, where there are inter-religious marriages, where there are children involved, somebody's baby is born, someone passes away, whose rites do you follow? Do you baptise the baby or do you take him to the temple or to the mosque? Or somebody dies, where do you bury him, what prayers do you say over him? It is very sensitive. Emotions are up. Everybody is already upset and when something like this

comes along, it can easily become a problem. It happens, and the religious leaders know; we have been working with them from time to time. We talk candidly, maturely, but we know one another, we have handled this more than once. Together, we know what to do.

And so, fortunately, we have maintained the peace, and strengthened the trust and harmony because we have responsible religious leaders. There is personal friendship, there is trust, they have set the example and so we have been able to have amicable, compromised solutions with a spirit of give-and-take. Of course, the Home Team is also important. The police have to be watching. The grassroots community leaders also have to be letting us know when something happens so that we can respond quickly, manage the incidents well and treat everybody fairly.

We did a study two years ago, OnePeople.sg, together with IPS, the Institute of Policy Studies, and they found that overwhelmingly, Singaporeans believe that the Police treats them fairly regardless of race or religion and that is very, very remarkable. You read the newspapers, what is happening in the United States, every time there is a report, a minority gets shot, a Black man gets beaten up, a tennis star get mistaken for a crook, there is a big uproar. Policemen overreacted sometimes, they have riots. You look at Britain, they have the same problem, policing the minority areas in London and religion may not be involved, maybe Indian areas, South Asian communities, may be people from the Caribbean, but they feel that the police are not on their side. You look at Southeast Asia, some of our neighbours, you will know that when you go to the police, you do not know whether you are going to solve the problem or going to look for a problem. Yes, but in Singapore, all the races, all have a high regard for the police. I think that is a remarkable achievement for the police and for our community.

So, we have got to actively preserve our racial harmony in Singapore, and make sure that the next generation of religious leaders, the next generation of Singaporeans also understand this, also can work together, also know how to give and take, where the limits are, and how to make sure we live happily together. But one thing which we must realise in Singapore is that we are not just one island by ourselves. The outside world affects us. There are trends, there are developments, there are events and there are threats. Things happen there, consequences in Singapore. ISIS is in Iraq and Syria. It is very far away, but the threat is not just in the Middle East. It is in Southeast Asia. From all over the world, some 30,000 people have gone to fight with ISIS. Nothing to do with ISIS, but they read the propaganda online, maybe they have got friends who persuaded them but 30,000 people have gone there to fight, more than those who went to Afghanistan to fight the Russians when the Soviets were there. Quite a number have gone from Southeast Asia. From Indonesia, we know that the Indonesians know that there are 500-600 at least who have gone to the Middle East. From Malaysia, there are dozens who have gone to the Middle East and sometimes, not just gone as young men to fight, but sometimes, they bring their whole family along to go and live in ISIS territory because they think that that is the ideal state and they bring their children along. There are so many of them that they have formed their own battalion in ISIS to fight because they all speak Bahasa together, so they are together as one group and they are called the 'Katibah Nusantara', the Malay Archipelago Combat Unit. So, if you go and look for these websites, you will find that ISIS has actually posted a recruitment video in Malay or Bahasa, showing the children training with weapons, speaking, obviously from Southeast Asia, in ISIS held territory: 'Come. Come and join us, this is how we live together.' They are there. Well, it is a problem. They come home, it is a bigger problem, they bring the virus, they bring the knowhow, they bring their networks, they bring that radical crazy ideology, and it is big trouble. I think our neighbours, the Malaysians and Indonesians, are very worried about this.

The Malaysians have arrested 100 of their citizens, more than that, for involvement with ISIS and quite a number of them have been members of the Malaysian Armed Forces, at least 11 and including two commandos in their Special Forces. Can you imagine? Commandos, trained, who changed their minds that they are fighting for the wrong side, instead better go and fight down there. The commandos are based in Malaysian Army Combat Training Centre (PULADA) in Johor. They were arrested, they were charged in Johor and the crimes they were charged with were committed in Mersing. Not very far away, we have all been there. It is a very serious matter for the Malaysians - they have had pictures of Malaysians beheading people. Just recently, Berita Harian reported, I think yesterday or two days ago, they have had reports that three of the Malaysians, at least, have been killed in the Middle East, one committed a suicide attack, two of them were killed in battle.

So, we are worried. We are worried because it is not just a network there but also because individuals are getting radicalised, led astray, and then they do bad things. It happens in Malaysia, it happens in Australia, it happens sometimes, in Singapore. In Australia, if you have been reading the newspapers, you

may have noticed day before yesterday, there was a shooting in Sydney. A man was killed. He was working for the police, he is Hongkong Chinese, nothing to do with terrorism, he was shot dead and then, his attacker was killed by the police. Who was his attacker? A 15-year-old boy, Iraqi-Kurdish origin, so might have been an immigrant, and went up to him, shot him, killed him. Then the police came and the police killed this boy. It is mad!

Can it happen in Singapore? Maybe. Because when somebody goes wrong like this, we may not know. We have arrested people who have self-radicalised. So far, we have arrested nine people, detained nine people who have become self-radicalised like this. It was not from friends, not from networks, not from an underground group, just by themselves. Something went wrong, they went on the Internet, they got led astray, they went deeper, they got into trouble. Some wanted to go to the Middle East, we stopped them. One went to the Middle East, he went to Turkey and wanted to cross the border. When he reached Turkey, the Turkish Government, the immigration found him, said what are you doing here? Sent him back to Singapore, we picked him up when he came back to Singapore. So, we are trying to put him right. Some were here and they have plans. They said: 'We want to go to the Middle East and if we cannot go to the Middle East, then we will do something here, organise a group, we will try to assassinate the President or the PM and strike fear in society in Singapore.'

So, these are very real things which can happen to us. Last month, we picked up another couple, a 18-year-old boy and 29-year-old young man. They wanted to go, and they wanted to pursue this. They thought it was their religious obligation. They are wrong, but they were dangerous. So, we have got to be on our guard. It can happen and it is happening around us. If it comes to Singapore, I think we must be very, very, very careful that we do not let it pull our fabric apart. We cannot rule out that possibility, it can happen.

Now, if it happens, what must we do to make sure that we do not destroy our racial harmony? I think we have got to nurture our racial ties and our trust and confidence and build that up now. That it is what we have been doing through the OnePeople.sg, through the Steering Committee on Race and Religious Harmony, through the Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles, through so many events, including this event today here where we come together and talk seriously about the problems, and we try and understand what is it we face, how we must work together. And we create many different opportunities to do this, like harmony games, like doing community work together, getting people to interact with one another so that we know we are friends with one another, not just understand that we must be friends, but we actually have friends with one another, and we can sit happily together, share a meal, share a joke and share happy events, or for that matter, unhappy things happen, well, we are in it together.

In principle, I think we have made a lot of progress. I think in practice, we need to do more. For example, the survey which I have talked about earlier found that we all subscribe to race and religious harmony, we all understand this, but in practice, if you ask: 'How many close friends do you have who is from a different race', I think less than half the respondents will say, 'I have at least one close friend from a different race.' For many people, the friendships are within their family or still within their own groups. So, I think we have to continue to work at it and to do better.

Therefore, OnePeople.sg has a lot of work to do and I congratulate you on the work which you have already done, like the Orange Ribbon Movement which involves students and teachers every year, inculcating the values of respect, understanding and friendship. Last month, you had 7,000 people in the Orange Ribbon Run. You do the run every year and it is just to show we are taking a stand against racism. So, we have got to keep on doing this, organising activities, training our youth leaders, getting involved, making sure that we keep our ideal clear and paramount in our minds.

I think, overall, although my message today is a serious one, I think, we can celebrate SG50. We have reason to be satisfied that we have come this far. We have done well, we can come together, we can talk and I think we can trust one another. You can see it in little signals, little signs of things which are going right. For example, in Sembawang, there is a church and a mosque which are side by side. There is a church next to the mosque and the communities come together to organise carnivals and to promote racial and religious harmony and on Fridays, when the Muslims come to pray and there are not enough carparks and they do not want the parking attendant to come, the church opens its grounds and welcomes the congregation to park their cars there, and this solves the practical problem.

So, we work together in these practical ways, it makes a lot of differences. It takes a long time to get here. We started off in the 1960s with race riots. For those who experienced it, lived through it, it changed us. We will never forget the experience, the fear, the uncertainty, the anxiety, the loss of lives and you know that you should never take race and religious harmony for granted. For the younger ones who are lucky, who have never seen such racial strife before, well, we have to constantly remind them, how precious this harmony is, how unusual and rare it is. That is why we celebrate Racial Harmony Day on 21<sup>st</sup> of July. That is why we organised exhibitions, tours, we have the photographs, the old pictures, the stories and we try and get people to understand what it is which we are trying to do.

But it is not easy. I attended one of these exhibitions a few years ago, in a school in Teck Ghee, and the kids took me around. The kids were trained, they became docents, you know, guides, so they can tell you this slide, what is this, this is this event, this is such and such a day, so and so happened, this and the other. Then they took me through the whole exhibition, very good. Then at the end, we finished, I chatted with them and then one of these young docents asked me, he said: 'Sir, when you were in school, did you also celebrate Racial Harmony Day?' I was so taken aback. I said: 'No, I did not celebrate Racial Harmony Day. On 21<sup>st</sup> of July, when I was in school, one year, there was a riot. That is why you are celebrating Racial Harmony Day now'. I think he understood me, but in a way, he was not there, you do not want that generation ever to be there and yet, you want the generation to understand what it is, which is precious, which is important, which we have got to safeguard together in Singapore, so that as SG50 is fine, we make sure SG100 would be all right. And that is your work. Thank you."

