

**SPEECH BY TAN CHUAN-JIN, 10TH SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT,
DURING THE ELECTION OF SPEAKER ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2017**

Honourable members, thank you for your support, your kind words and for electing me as the 10th Speaker of Parliament since our first legislative assembly. I would also like to thank the members of the public who have expressed support for my nomination when the announcement came out just under a week ago.

Many were surprised and it sparked off some discussion about the role of the Speaker. That is not a bad thing. We do need fellow Singaporeans to be involved, and to gain a deeper understanding of not just the Speaker's role but also that of Parliament, its proceedings and how all of us here contribute to making Singapore a better home for our people.

As Members of Parliament, whatever our stripes, we need to be accessible, relevant and to be real. We need to present the voices and needs of our individual constituents, but we need also to stand for a united Singapore, to speak with one voice in a fissiparous world.

The business of Parliament is multifarious.

In the first session of Parliament in Dec 1965, we saw the presentation of bills that ensured Singapore's independence, as well as her first Budget, which assured her defence. It also oversaw bills on the care of orphans and widows, destitute persons as well as the incorporation of the Singapore Asian Seamen's Club Incorporation Ordinance.

Members will also know that, in that session, the Barisan Socialis, the main opposition force in Singapore, had boycotted Parliament. Among other things, they said this was because Parliament was giving "legal seal to our departure from Malaysia"

which they saw as a “neo-colonialist plot to divide and rule”. They also saw it as a “legal cover for our abuse of public funds.” And as a platform for “propaganda to cheat the people and confuse them.”

Today, the Barisan is no more but opposition voices are well-represented and participate fully. We have 6 members of the Workers Party, with whom the Barisan merged in 1988, 3 Workers Party NCMP, as well as 9 Nominated Members of Parliament.

In a Parliamentary democracy, the legitimacy of the laws we enact rests on the scrupulous attention we – on both sides of this House – pay to the reasoned debate which accompanies the passing of each law. No one doubts that our goal in these sittings must be to advance the interests of all Singaporeans.

I therefore see the presence of our opposition colleagues here in the House today, as a strength and positive step towards constructive contestation of ideas.

Such contestation will be even more complex in the future.

We live in an era where information flows almost unbounded and in copious volume. The world continues to change with ever accelerating speed. We feel uncertain. The challenge is to discern, sense-make, and find clarity.

The term “fake news” is oxymoronic – because fake news is not news at all but lies. Putting on a sheep’s coat does not make these falsehoods true. And yet we have seen time and again, how misinformation can have serious impact on people’s lives.

New platforms also allow people’s views to be channelled directly to leaders. Very involved discourse is also taking place outside this House as people are more aware and informed.

This is the environment within which we operate.

To be effective, we do need to engage beyond this house, to tap on the collective wisdom that lies without. While we all need to be grounded and engaged, it is also clear that the buck stops here. We need to be the institution that channels and reflects the voices of the people, so that we can query, answer and debate in a manner that provides hope and clarity. We need to be a beacon from where Singaporeans can take reference, with confidence, when addressing and understanding issues that will matter greatly for our collective well-being. To be this beacon and to do this well, we need to gain the trust and respect of the public.

We therefore need to uphold the honour and dignity of this House in the way we conduct our proceedings. I want to facilitate good free flowing debate where the desired outcome is better policies and laws. I expect you to debate vigorously, but maintain mutual

respect, do not abuse our parliamentary privileges and to keep to the Standing Orders. I will be impartial and fair, but I will also be firm.

Before I end, allow me to say a few words about my predecessor. First, my sincere and deep thanks to Madam Halimah Yacob for her generosity in advice and support as I assume this appointment. She has more than enough on her plate at the moment, but as it is typical of her, she has made time for me in her tight diary. That is the woman she is. For that, I am grateful.

Last but not least, I look forward to working alongside all of you as your Speaker.

Earlier I had referred to that first session of Parliament in 1965. At the time, the first Finance Minister Lim Kim San recounted the loss of \$70 million in revenue as a result of our independence – no small amount for Singapore, since our total budget at the time was only \$275 million.

But the Prime Minister then counted it cheap as the price of independence. “Be that as it may, perhaps it was our good fortune that you get a circumstance where someone with an antique, gold sovereign goes and exchange it for a bag full of sweets. And, who are we to explain when we have found ourselves the proud possessor of an antique gold piece.”

We today, remain the possessor of this gold piece, which we have burnished to a shine and multiplied several times over.

Our focus is and must be to ensure that these gold pieces work better for Singaporeans, for Singapore, for today and compounded in force, for all our tomorrows. Thank you.

References:

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