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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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Federation Chamber

CONDOLENCES

Mr Lee Kuan Yew GCMG, CH

SPEECH

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Speaker O'Dwyer, Kelly, MP

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Ms O'DWYER (Higgins—Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer) (11:03): When we reflect on the passing of Lee Kuan Yew, the modern father of Singapore, we cannot help but reflect on Singapore itself. There can be no doubt that modern Singapore is Lee Kuan Yew's legacy, and in that legacy there is much to admire. Singapore currently has a population of just 4.2 million people and limited natural resources and is situated on just 710 square kilometres—roughly one-third the size of the Australian Capital Territory, or less than 10 per cent of greater Melbourne. Singapore is located at the tip of the Malay Peninsula and on the natural sea routes that serve trade between South-East Asia, China, India and Australia. Indeed, since its earliest history, trade has been Singapore's *raison d'être*.

Under Lee Kuan Yew's direction, as Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, Singapore was transformed from a Third World economy to a wealthy and economically competitive nation. With the establishment of a free trade staging post in 1819 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles from the East India Company, entrepot trade flourished. Immigrants flocked to Singapore, with the population growing from just 150 people in 1819 to over 80,000 people in 1860.

The relative peace of British rule of Singapore was shattered during World War II when Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, just 70 days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The strategic and psychological impact on the loss of Singapore for the Allies, and not least for Australia, was profound. However, the invasion was, of course, most keenly felt by the Singaporeans. The Japanese occupation of 3½ years was a period of great suffering for the people of Singapore. Ethnic diversity had largely prospered peacefully under the British. However, under Japanese occupation Japanese culture and language were strictly imposed and food shortages were common.

Born in 1923, this period of Singapore's history would no doubt have had a formative effect upon Lee Kuan Yew's character and his aspirations for the tiny island nation. Following the surrender of the Japanese, Singapore became a crown colony. However, by 1959, the growth of nationalism led to self-government and Lee Kuan Yew became its first Prime Minister.

1960s Singapore faced many challenges including political and economic uncertainty, with a gross national product per capita of less than \$US320. A true political pragmatist, Lee Kuan Yew said:

We knew that if we were just like our neighbours, we would die. Because we've got nothing to offer against what they have to offer. So we had to produce something which is different and better than what they have. It's incorrupt. It's efficient. It's meritocratic. It works.

We are pragmatists ... Does it work? Let's try it and if it does work, fine, let's continue it. If it doesn't work, toss it out, try another one. We are not enamoured with any ideology.

Lee Kuan Yew drove Singapore's political stability and economic prosperity. Lee and his People's Action Party established various economic agencies to spearhead economic development. From 1960 to 1974, the manufacturing sector grew from 11 per cent of GDP to 24 per cent. Unemployment fell from around 10 per cent in 1965 to 3.5 per cent in 1978. Today, Singapore is an economic powerhouse with a strong service and high-tech manufacturing sector and is one of the most developed trade and finance economies in Asia. In fact, Singaporeans have the third highest per capita GDP in the world, 50 per cent higher than Switzerland and almost double that of Australia.

From our nation's perspective, Singapore is Australia's largest trade and investment partner in ASEAN and our fifth largest trading partner overall. Singapore is currently the third highest investor in Australian residential and commercial real estate, with investments of over \$4 billion over the last financial year. In 2003 the Howard government delivered the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement, further cementing the economic ties between our two countries. While our political cultures share marked differences, it must be noted that the Singapore of Lee Kuan Yew had no tolerance for economic corruption and set itself on a path of modernity in

order to benefit its citizenry. Lee Kuan Yew held high aspirations for Singapore and his leadership covered all aspects of government and business activity.

It is all the more poignant that Lee Kuan Yew's passing coincides with the 50th anniversary of Singapore as an independent nation later this year. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the Australia-Singapore bilateral relationship. Singapore remains a significant strategic and economic partner for Australia. As one of our most important trading partners, we share longstanding links in politics, defence and education, and strong people-to-people ties.

Widely reported to be the world's longest serving Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew made close relationships with many of our Prime Ministers and worked to strengthen our bilateral relationships. Indeed, upon his 90th birthday the Australian high commissioner in Singapore presented Lee with an album of signed historical photographs with him greeting every Australian Prime Minister from Gough Whitlam to Kevin Rudd. It did not stop him from providing full and frank feedback to Australian Prime Ministers, with his comments in the 1980s that Australia was at risk of becoming 'the poor white trash of Asia'. Those comments hit us hard.

Lee Kuan Yew is survived by three children, including Lee Hsien Loong, the current Prime Minister of Singapore, whom I had the great honour of meeting many years ago when Singapore hosted the IMF World Bank Meetings in 2006. Sadly, I did not get a chance to meet the father of Singapore—Minister Mentor, as he was then known—but instead saw firsthand the dynamic nation he helped create and shape.

He is also survived by his seven grandchildren, to whom we send our sincere condolences.

At his passing, we marvel at his legacy, the transformation of modern Singapore, and wish its citizenry continued peace and prosperity for the many decades to come.