

Speech by Nominated Member of Parliament Mr Raj Joshua Thomas

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Promoting Racial and Religious Harmony Through Legislation

1. Mdm President, ethnic and religious harmony has been a fundamental objective in the governance of Singapore since our independence in 1965. We have consistently emphasised and celebrated that we are a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This is despite that our population is in fact overwhelmingly constituted of one race. 74% of our population is Chinese, 13% Malay, 9% Indian and 3% Eurasian and others. Our Constitution enshrines the fundamental principle of meritocracy, that all Singaporeans can progress and be rewarded based on individual merit, and that no one is discriminated on the basis of race, language and religion.
2. Our Constitution and laws also ensure the protection of minorities. At the highest level, we have *inter alia*, provision to ensure that the President comes from a different race over time; the Presidential Council for Minority Rights that scrutinises Bills passed by Parliament before the President provides her assent, and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the upcoming Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act that criminalise actions that stir up hatred amongst our ethnic and religious groups, but which also provide for rehabilitation of such individuals.
3. However, aside from Constitutional devices and laws to take action against divisive behaviour, Singapore has also made significant effort to ensure inclusiveness and integration amongst our communities through public housing. 85% of our population lives in public housing and the Ethnic Integration Policy prescribes that every apartment block, and we have about twelve thousand of these blocks, must be made up of roughly the same ratio as the national ethnic ratio. The effect of this is that in every single public housing block in Singapore there will be persons of all races living together in that block. So every public housing block is a microcosm of Singapore.
4. Why have we done this? First, we wanted to ensure that all the races of Singapore interact on a daily basis with each other. Our view was that in order for us to build strong relations between our different races, it was important for them to see each other and to talk to each other. Second, and related to the first point, we wanted to prevent ethnic enclaves, where people of the same ethnic or religious group lived together, as this could promote insularity and such groups could become separate. Third, within each neighbourhood, we also built religious and community buildings so that the reality of being in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society is emphasised every day. In every Singapore neighbourhood, there are mosques, churches and Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu temples. In every Singapore neighbourhood, at hawker centres and shopping centres, you will find halal food for our Muslim residents and vegetarian options for Buddhists and Hindus. Fourth and importantly, our children and young people go to schools in these neighbourhoods so at the very start of their education, they are interacting with people of different races and religions, and they grow up together.
5. This of course, was not an easy policy to implement and to maintain. It has been described as an “authoritarian” policy. There have also been issues that have arisen from the policy. For example, in order to maintain the ethnic balance, some minority apartment owners may be

allowed to sell their apartments only to other minorities, and because this becomes a closed market, the prices of these apartments have become slightly higher. But the government has stepped in with a buyback scheme, where the government can purchase apartments from minorities and resell them at market rate to other minority buyers. This helps with the affordability of the apartments.

6. The government has been steadfast in maintaining and where necessary, modifying this policy at significant effort and cost. But although this is admittedly Singapore's most intrusive social policy, it has turned out to be our greatest strength. Studies have shown that the Ethnic Integration Policy has been extremely successful in promoting racial and religious harmony, fostering understanding amongst our different cultural groups and preventing segregation. Polls have also shown that our population strongly supports our integration policies.
7. Of course, this model has worked for Singapore, and it may not be transferable to other countries, which have different socio-political characters. But it demonstrates that in order to build inclusivity, promote peaceful co-existence and to fight intolerance, governments and parliaments must have the political will to enact laws and implement policies that have a real impact on the ground. We can recite United Nations Declarations, we can speak of lofty Constitutional ideals and aspirations, these are of course important, but as legislators our distinct role is to translate these goals and aspirations into laws and policies that make a real difference in the lives of our citizens.
8. In Singapore we have implemented a whole myriad of laws and policies to foster racial and religious harmony, including the Ethnic Integration Policy for our public housing. But despite all these efforts, we do from time to time have racist incidents or those that hurt religious feelings. This underscores for us that despite the strong racial and religious relations we have built in Singapore, that building inclusivity is an unending project and needs constant work from our government, our parliament and our people.
9. Upon Singapore's independence, our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew said: "We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation, this is not a Chinese nation, this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place, equal. Language, religion, culture." This was the lofty goal set down at the birth of our nation. But it was not merely a highfalutin proclamation. Over the five decades of our independence, we have enacted laws and put in place policies to try to achieve this in reality. To a large extent we have succeeded, but we continue to be vigilant against divisive forces that can threaten to tear apart the social fabric of our nation, and we continue to evolve our laws and policies to deal with changing circumstances. We do this because we know that our social harmony is hard bought, and that it is fragile.
10. But we continue to work at it, in the hope that one day, we can create in all our people the natural impulse to say that, you may look different from me, you may sound different from me, you may do things differently from me, but despite all these differences, you are yet my sister and you are yet my brother.
11. Thank you Mdm President.