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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

by

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on

**SOCIAL SERVICE, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND GRACIOUSNESS – THE  
TRIANGLE OF VIRTUE**

Thank you for inviting me to address you on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

Let me start with a confession. I am an outsider to the social service sector. I have not done social work of any significance. Apart from my monthly contribution to the Community Chest of Singapore and the ad hoc token donations to charity, I am not a philanthropist.

The fact is there are numerous acts of social service all around us every day. Perhaps for many of us, we have blissfully taken them for granted. Allow me today to reflect on this part of our humanity and let it serve as a reminder of what is possible for the better society we long for.

I would like to talk about what I call the “Triangle of Virtue”. As we know, the triangle has three sides. My three are social service, good governance and graciousness. If we get them right, the promotion and sustenance of social cohesion and stability in Singapore would be better off.

Graciousness

The need to promote a gracious society has been highlighted repeatedly over the years. In the 1970s, the Government introduced the Courtesy Campaign. Since then, many other initiatives and incentives have been undertaken and provided to promote considerate social behaviour amongst Singaporeans. For example, we now have the Singapore Kindness Movement.

In the 1996 National Day Rally Speech, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reiterated the benefits thoughtful social behaviour supported by a strong economy and a good government would have for Singapore. He emphasized that Singapore should not only continue to

develop its economy, but that economic growth should be complemented with personal development and the embrace of social graces.

In the latest National Day Rally Speech on 17 August 2008, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong talked about how we can make Singapore a more gracious society. He mentioned several examples of the many civic-minded and social things we ought to do better. The Prime Minister stressed that how we behave and relate to one another as Singaporeans not only reflected our ability to upgrade and improve social norms and work on the Singaporean “heartware”, but they also indicated our ability to improve and progress as a society. He called for more awareness, education and responsibility to achieve this goal.

To me, a gracious society is not only about shedding anti-social behaviour. Graciousness also encompasses warm, friendly, generous and elegant kindness. In the rush to get ahead in the competitive economy, we may have unwittingly relegated the importance of being gracious. Singaporeans have acquired a reputation for being business-like, impatient and self-centred. We need to look at ourselves and ask what other positive traits must be encouraged and ingrained. In particular, if we cultivate the habit of serving the needs of less fortunate Singaporeans and internalise it as a core value, we will transmit a caring attribute which over time is likely to refine our culture and inter-personal relations. For the immediate situation, it will help to ameliorate the rigours of the rat race.

Some people have told me that the gracious culture of the Japanese is a model to emulate. However, that wonderful aspect of Japan has developed over many centuries. It is the very essence of being “Japanese”. Can Singapore evolve into a community where grace and caring for one another would distinguish us?

When he was the Minister of Community Development, our Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi stated that altruism and volunteerism are two important positive traits that need to be inculcated in the lives of Singaporeans. Notwithstanding the social pressure to succeed and the highly-competitive environment, many better-off Singaporeans have come forward to offer their time and own resources to help others in need without expecting any reward. This display of altruism is inspiring. We need more Singaporeans to emulate these selfless volunteers.

When volunteers offer their personal involvement, they provide services with a human touch which says “I care”. Not only do the recipients of this generosity get the opportunity to overcome their adversity, those who have been helped are also given the chance to resume productive activities. This heightens the sense of satisfaction which the donors receive from their caring and sharing work.

According to the Individual Giving Survey 2008 of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, the rate of volunteerism has risen from 15.5% in 2006 to 16.9% in 2008. The number of volunteer hours was 45 million hours. These are encouraging signs. Yet, more can still be done.

To sum up, as the pace of life quickens, public spiritedness and volunteerism are important aspects needed to strengthen Singapore’s social fabric. Having passed the stage of requiring improvements to the “hardware”, Singapore must now focus on “heartware”, refining social behaviour, spreading the caring attribute, and developing the foundation of a gracious

society. In this way, we would reinforce the bonds and inherent strength of our multi-racial society.

### Social Service

As I mentioned earlier, acts of social service are all around us. Acts of charity and social service organisations come in all forms and sizes. There are “OMOs”, that is, “one-man operation”, self-help groups, grassroots organisations, community centres, religious bodies, clan-based associations, VWOs, Community Development Councils and NGOs. Some of the NGOs are multi-million-dollar operations in and out of Singapore. Within the corporate sector, various companies have their own social service activities. The NCSS has linked up with the corporate sector to further encourage corporate involvement in the social services.

The NCSS was set up to ensure that every person has the opportunity to live a life of dignity to his or her fullest potential. Over the last 50 years, the NCSS has brought people together for worthy causes and their efforts speak for themselves. By providing leadership, direction and coordination in the social services, the NCSS enhances the quality of the outcome in this sector. The capability of social service organisations has been enhanced. Strategic partnerships have been promoted and these resulted in more programme/project collaboration and sharing of resources. All these have increased cost-effectiveness and productivity. We have stretched the charity dollar received!

Going forward, more tailor-made training programmes for those in the social service sector are needed. The NCSS has established the Social Service Training Institute (SSTI) to upgrade skills and increase specialist knowledge. Lifelong learning is necessary to help maintain the service standards and harness new technology for the social service sector. We cannot neglect training and skills upgrading. Change is the constant and we must adapt and re-learn what we already know.

Another area of interest as we look ahead is how to further recognise and motivate volunteers and social service professionals. Wealth versus goodness of one’s heart is a sticky issue. We have to accept that social workers must be well paid to manage a good system and to deliver better services. Full-time social service professionals should be remunerated adequately. If not, no amount of goodwill and passion will be able to retain talented individuals in the social services.

Succession is another important matter. Leadership development and capacity building are necessary to induct a new generation of social service leaders into the various bodies and organisations in this sector. Recruiting the right mix of board members with the right expertise to make meaningful contributions, consciously making an effort to renew the board, allowing creativity and fresh ideas, and retaining influential individuals, ensure succession, continuity and stability. This is the imperative for today’s context.

Furthermore, the spirit of giving must be inculcated in the young from the early age. Ensuring that the younger generation comprehends “giving”, as not necessarily being in terms of money, but also in terms of volunteering personal time and service, will help enlarge the pool available for future leadership roles.

Singaporeans are increasingly more discerning when assessing whether to donate their resources or volunteer their time. With a framework consisting of the Charity Council, the Commissioner of Charities and the Code of Governance implemented based on a “comply or explain” principle, there have been concerted efforts to improve accountability and transparency in the social service sector. This is part of the modernisation process. The bonus we get is greater public trust and confidence which would catalyse the sector’s expansion and sustainability.

### Good Governance

This brings me to the next component in the Triangle of Virtue, namely, good governance.

Good governance allows people the ability to indulge in their passion to “do good” as there is trust and confidence in the management of resources by those in charge. It reassures the public and facilitates greater resource mobilisation.

The “Many Helping Hands” approach which attracts and welcomes individuals and organisations from a wide range of backgrounds and origins, necessitates the embedding of processes to ensure that there is transparency in decision-making, accountability and appropriate use of resources. We should congratulate the numerous charities and social service organisations which have operated with scarce funding and manpower. This is the good work of the managers and volunteers.

We are facing unprecedented challenges, particularly shifts in service needs. New ideas and solutions have to be put into place to tackle the issues confronting the social service scene. Refinements of current policies and procedures together with the promotion of leadership development and capacity building will help ensure sustainability and the maintenance of efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.

### Conclusion

While decorum, procedures and rules need to be followed, it is important to treat each other with respect and considerateness. Civility promotes courtesy and kindness, which would in turn lead to graciousness and a refined culture. Altruism and volunteerism would flourish.

Once Singaporeans understand the value of doing social good, change their impressions and mindsets of wealth before well-being, the caring and sharing characteristics would be internalized and eventually become second nature to them.

Yet, this hope for a compassionate and gracious Singapore cannot be realised overnight. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said it would take a long time. Still, we must endeavour mass participation and commitment from Singaporeans is needed. These values should in addition, be introduced at an early age, enabling its practice and retention. Society as a whole must work towards making our community a more compassionate and gracious one.

Virtue is a behaviour showing high moral standard which is desirable and exemplary. The Triangle of Virtue can only be effective and promote a distinctively positive culture if all

three aspects are present and overlapping. Without social service, good governance and graciousness, Singapore's aim of becoming a developed nation is incomplete.

Singapore is known to be overly focussed on economic gain and development, and for being too efficient. At the same time, we have a reputation of being able to reinvent ourselves and tackle difficult problems faced by our country. If we can adopt the underlying principles of the Triangle of Virtue and translate them into concrete action, "Majulah Singapura" would not merely be in our national anthem.

Fifty years is not very long in the life of a nation. But the NCSS predates Singapore's independence in 1965. The NCSS has accomplished much for the well-being of our multi-racial society. The demands of demographic changes in a globalised city driven by knowledge and other high-value industries require a different strategy to social service. At the same time, however, the fundamental basis remains the same - "do good", "be good", and "stay good". This means we must manage our responsibilities and tasks differently through our sense of humanity, our camaraderie as Singaporeans, and our creativity as an enlightened meritocracy

Thank you for your attention.

Congratulations on your 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, NCSS!

