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SPEECH BY DR. TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION,
AT THE LAUNCHING OF THE SEMINAR-CUM-BRIEFING SESSION ON
THE NEW LOWER SECONDARY HISTORY CURRICULUM
AT THE TEMASEK JUNIOR COLLEGE
ON FRIDAY, 23 DECEMBER 1983 AT 9.30 AM

When Raffles came back to Singapore in 1822 on his third and last visit, he found that the settlement that he planted in 1819 had grown into a sprawling shanty town with thousands of settlers. Houses, huts, godowns and shops had sprung up all over the place. The area between Singapore River and Beach Road was covered with a hotch-potch of buildings. There had not been any proper town plan for orderly development.

Raffles proceeded to draw up such a plan. In particular, his plan called for a civic or government centre between Singapore River and the Freshwater Stream (now known as Stamford Canal). Other areas were designated for China Town for the Chinese, Kampong Glam and Telok Blangah for the Malays and a European settlement in the Beach Road and Rochor Road areas.

To put the plan into action, Raffles ordered that all the houses, shops, godowns and huts in the area designated for the government or civic centre to be demolished and their residents resettled in other areas. This was done to make way for the Padang and the Esplanade as well as for government offices and other civic buildings.

Thus Raffles initiated the first Resettlement and URA project in Singapore! Today, we have continued the practice started by Raffles. We acquire old buildings and plots and demolish them for redevelopment. In land scarce Singapore, we have no choice but to renew the use of land. We will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

The story of Singapore's first URA project and many others are contained in the new Lower Secondary History Textbooks which will be used by our schools. The new series is called "The Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore". This new series replaces the present history series. The history taught at Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 up to now covers a very long period of time and a wide range of countries. The time span stretches from prehistoric times up to 1600 AD. The events covered include those in ancient (and medieval) China, India, South East Asia, Europe and the Middle East. This syllabus, which is the traditional comprehensive type of history syllabus, has not been revised since 1960. Because it tries to be all-embracing, it ends up as being superficial and lacking in focus. It also overloads the students with a vast amount of facts which are of doubtful value.

A change in the history syllabus is therefore long overdue. Instead of trying to cover everything, the new syllabus is a completely new departure. It will focus the students' attention on the growth of Singapore from a tiny trading port to a modern metropolis. And it will trace this development in terms of the social and economic conditions of the people who came to live and work here.

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A recent informal survey carried out by SBC has uncovered the fact that all our young people, and most adults too, know very little of the history of Singapore except for a few well-known facts about Sang Nila Utama, Raffles and the Japanese Occupation. This is true especially as accounts of the social conditions and the economic developments which gradually turned Singapore into a major port and a modern industrialised nation are not published anywhere except in heavy, scholarly studies. The History Project Team at CDIS working under the guidance of their consultants have produced a very vivid and readable series on the Singapore that our forefathers knew. They have managed to capture the atmosphere of those early years by keeping to a descriptive and anecdotal style.

A post-independence generation are now going through our schools. The new history series will give them a glimpse and an understanding of how the early **Singaporeans** lived and worked. They will learn that life was very **harsh** in those days and yet our forebears knew what it meant to strive and save for a better future.

Some utilitarian-minded people and cynics might say: What is the use of history? Isn't it all dead and gone? They are wrong. We are **what** we are today because of **what** happened yesterday. A person with a sense of history and a historical perspective has a much better appreciation of **the** present and a better idea of where we are heading. If we do not know our own national history, then one day indeed we as a nation would be in danger of being dead and gone!

I have pleasure now in declaring this seminar open.

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