

**TRANSCRIPT OF MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SECOND  
MINISTER FOR DEFENCE DR NG ENG HEN'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
AT THE 2ND CONNEXION SEMINAR AT YISHUN JUNIOR COLLEGE  
ON 2 NOV 10, 0900 HRS**

Good morning,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

**NEw Dreams, NEw Challenges, NEw Opportunities**

It is my pleasure to be here again at the 2<sup>nd</sup> seminar in the "Connexion" series. This series provides important networking opportunities for National Education (NE) practitioners. National Education is not just about the content. The key challenge is how you get your audience to internalise their own beliefs. That is the greatest challenge. So this series of seminars is supposed to build new capabilities among the practitioners to use new tools, skills and resources to effectively reach out to their audiences. And I am happy to say that many agencies are using these platforms extensively to better engage younger Singaporeans especially, like students and National Servicemen, as well as the general public. Let me highlight a few examples.

Many of you remember Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports' (MCYS) Filial Piety campaign earlier this year involved a Father & Son TV commercial which was also uploaded on

both Facebook and Youtube. It drew about 550,000 views – generated much discussion online which promoted the campaign’s message.

MINDEF produced *Every Singaporean Son and* put it on Cyberpioneer TV. Cyberpioneer TV is MINDEF’s channel on Youtube. For this series, *Every Singaporean Son* is a reality-TV show. The idea is to take a bunch of real recruits, 15 of them, follow them through their BMT, actual settings which also captured their spontaneous and candid views and the others around them during their national service experience. It was an authentic portrayal which attracted thousands of viewers and comments. And some of the episodes attracted many viewers and I think because many people could identify, either they themselves had gone through it or some relatives had gone through it, they knew that it was real and that was how they felt. So it provided a rich and natural platform for the sharing of opinions and experiences which allowed viewers to internalise their own set of learning points and conclusions about what they value in our nation. And I think this is the goal for all NE practitioners for National Education. Because you and I may have different things that we value in Singapore, we can give a list of things that people should believe in. But beliefs are something which you own, which you had come to your own conclusion.

MINDEF also produced another mini-series, *Basic Military Talk*, (BMT), for mothers, wives and girlfriends of servicemen to gain a better understanding of what their loved ones do during NS. The 200 clips on CyberpioneerTV have garnered more than 2 million views thus far, a 10-fold increase from a year ago.

The question is often posed – as practitioners you ask your audience, Singaporeans ask Singaporeans, foreigners looking at Singapore also ask the same question – do Singaporeans value this country and will they defend it? What will they defend? This is exactly what MINDEF asked Singaporeans in their Total Defence campaigns in 2009 and 2010. So instead of the usual Total Defence’s messages where you show messages, this was unscripted. You turn it around and ask people, “What would you defend? Will you defend Singapore?” Again an exciting idea but it is completely unplanned and you never know what the responses are. Suppose nobody replied? So I think it was a bold move and one that was set in real beliefs and I am happy to say that thousands of Singaporeans felt strongly enough to respond. Not only because they were asked to give their comments on cards, they can make their own videos as well. But there is no production house helping you. You go out to make a video and send in your clip about what you will defend. Thousands of Singaporeans felt strongly enough to respond and not only that, they rallied friends and family to participate in the videos which they subsequently put on their own blogs, Twitter or Facebook accounts. In 2009, that question “What Will You Defend?” drew 10,000 responses through pledge cards where people can publicly pen down their thoughts, and over 400 online video submissions. What would Singaporeans defend? As they said in their videos, they listed their family, friends, favourite toy, playground, school, neighbourhood -

answers different from what we are used to in the big picture: “I just want to defend my country”. Because this is what matters to me, my family and my way of life are things that are dear to me and worth defending. This is a very authentic response. If you go back and ask veterans who have been through war, the experiences show that if you asked them “Why did you fight so strongly, even risking your lives? Why did you do this brave act and fight so staunchly?”, more often than not, the real answer many of them give is that “I couldn’t let my buddies down”. It was for that point of moment. So the answers that Singaporeans gave were also authentic. I believe the way of life I have had and created, in the housing estates with my family and my extended families. So, Singaporeans from all walks of life responded. And it was very different from just we ask a question and somebody replies. Here we ask them to submit the videos. They have to think about it, they have to pen down their thoughts for a short period of time and then decide how to do it. Some of you may have seen these clips. I particularly enjoy the one with the girl, using the hand-phone to capture the image of an old school and saying that “this is what I would defend”. This is what I like about Singapore. Very touching, very spontaneous and very creative expressions from Singaporeans from all walks of lives. And there was another one about a two-year-old boy, produced by his mother. Obviously he wasn’t speaking, but it was a memorable on-line video clip titled “Poetic Defence”, a tongue-in-cheek presentation.

Schools too are reaching out to students to hear from them and in that process, to allow them to build shared values. Nexus, working with MOE, has introduced an interactive Choose-Your-Own Adventure game. This is a game set in the fictional town of Safeville, where students have

to make choices which encourage students to think about security and defence issues.

The South 1 NE cluster of primary and secondary schools has created their own games using the 3-D social-networking platform Second Life. One of their creations, Ge.N.E.ration Z, won the Singapore Schools Best Virtual World Game award at the Shoot Awards Night. This is an award given out to best 3-D videos. This video is targeted at students, and the game requires players to deal with terrorists and recapture national monuments. So the scenario is that national monuments have been overtaken by terrorists. How do you take them back or recapture them? It could be the National Museum. It could be the area around Sir Stamford Raffles. It is a fun and engaging way to learn what it takes to keep Singapore safe and secure. Fun and educational but with a serious message.

### **The New Media Environment**

These innovative approaches are necessary if we want to effectively reach out to young Singaporeans. Singapore Polytechnic last December conducted a survey and they found that at least two-thirds of our youths visited social media platforms on a daily basis. Facebook has now overtaken Google as the most visited website locally. So beyond the online search that they are using, we see that students are also multi-tasking, speaking to one another, studying and doing their papers at the same time. This explosion of networking has taken place in our young generation.

Through the use of new media tools, we encourage more voices, participation and ownership in writing a richer narrative for Singapore. Nexus plans to open up the connexion.sg website. Now it is limited primarily to NE practitioners, but Nexus wants to open it up, for it to become the one-stop website where all Singaporeans can visit to find out, or share knowledge and ideas, about what they believe, what they value in Singapore, or what they hope to improve in Singapore, what they think needs improving. And this, I think, is the core of National Education.

I know that some of you may be involved for many years in these National Education and nation building efforts. As we persist in our efforts to build a nation by rooting and bonding its people with shared ideals and values, we must not lose heart or become sceptical when there are criticisms or negative sentiments. To me, questioning forms part of the discovery and internalisation process. In fact, if people don't question, I am worried. You put up a set of messages and expect audience to say "I believe you". Do you really believe me? Why do you believe me? Then the conversation starts. What is it in your life that helps you share my perspective? Do you have a different perspective? If you disagree, what would be your response? Then the conversation really gets going. This is a process that had deep questioning. Healthy criticisms are part of this discovery and internalisation process. The majority of Singaporeans do believe in this country and are willing to defend it. Because from time to time, we conduct objective surveys that confirm positive sentiments. These are surveys that were commissioned objectively by experts who designed how they select the survey audience. They also designed the questionnaires so that it doesn't pre-fix the outcome based on the questions, because this is important and

real information that we want to know and it tells us what is the actual sentiment on the ground. We conduct it periodically because we not only look at the percentages, but sometimes, just as important or if not more importantly, the trends. Because sometimes when you find that there is a particular episode, the sentiment goes down and then comes up. Because that is natural. And indeed, when it moves according to circumstances, it tells us that that survey is a useful one. Because if you have a survey where the results are constant all the while, I get a little bit worried for its accuracy. It is heartening to know that surveys of full-time national servicemen, NSmen and the public in recent years have consistently shown that more than 90% of those who responded said that Singapore is a place where they belong, and they would defend Singapore should it come under threat<sup>1</sup>.

I believe this piece of important information that has been reproduced over time because I have seen the way Singaporeans respond when it is under threat. What do I mean? When we are prosperous and peaceful, sometimes we think that Singaporeans don't care. But I've seen them in action when something else does happen, not only to ourselves, but when it happens outside. Many of you remember the Tsunami, off the Indian Ocean, Meulaboh. It was heartening to know various groups of Singaporeans spontaneously coming out to respond to help, and activating themselves. There were some driven by religious groups, some VWOs, that spontaneously reacted. I give you another simple example to show how Singaporeans care. Do you remember SARs? There are some families who were quarantined. So in my constituency, we had a list and I received one day

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<sup>1</sup> Defence Opinion Poll 2009

a notice that this family in my constituency was quarantined. It was a needed policy to make sure that it didn't spread. And then, a few hours later, it just occurred to me, "Hang on. If they are quarantined, how would they get food?" Hopefully they would have stocked up provisions and food. But suppose they didn't and they received the quarantine. So I called my grassroots fellows and said, "How are they going to get food?" They said, "Don't worry." I asked, "What do you mean don't worry?" "Oh, we have given food to them." "What do you mean you have given food to them? Then you will be quarantined!" I said. "No. We bought food, put it outside the door, knocked on the door then went to the end of the corridor just to make sure that it wasn't stolen by somebody else there. And the door opened and the person took it." I said, "How did you get the unit number?" "Oh, from the neighbours." I didn't tell them to do that. Nobody told them to do that. We didn't have an SOP at that time. We are creating responses on the run. At the heart of it, I believe Singaporeans care, and if we, as a country, ever become corrupt, inefficient, I'm sure you will not keep quiet. I'm sure you will band yourselves together, to fight injustice when it occurs, to solve issues when they are unjust or when they are wrong.

These positive sentiments of NSmen and our general public are also mirrored in our National Education surveys of students. We conducted one in 2008 and another in 2010. They showed the same positive sentiments towards this country, whether it is primary schools, secondary schools or JCs. Students reported confidence in the future of Singapore and a high sense of belonging. More than 95% of students said they are proud to be Singaporean. I think that is a very positive affirmation. 95% of them say I'm proud to be Singaporean. 90% of them

believe that Singapore will be able to overcome any difficulties to survive as a country.

We ask them specific questions, and our students quite openly declare their love for Singapore and are proud of Singapore's achievements. They cite specific things they treasure in Singapore. It's not just a general or bland statement. They cite specific things. They believe in a society that is self-reliant, intolerant of corruption and meritocratic. They value our cultural diversity and the racial and religious harmony that we enjoy in Singapore. They also want Singapore to continue to be a land of opportunities and are prepared to work hard to succeed. But most importantly, they believe that they have a part to play in making Singapore a better place and in defending what they value about Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

We are thus building upon a strong foundation already laid by our nation building efforts. Because many of us are busy in our work and sometimes, we may not have time to stop and ask, "Have we succeeded?" I want to share with you this morning that we have. We are building upon a strong foundation. Though we are relatively young as a country, our people do have a sense of belonging to the country. We have woven a strong, cohesive and resilient social fabric that has withstood tests in just this recent decade.

I name you three major shocks to the system. The way I tell whether a system is strong, is not when things are going right. How you

tell that a building is strong is how it is after an earthquake, which you have seen, occurred in Christchurch or Japan. Our country has received three major shocks in the last decade -- 9/11, SARs and the global financial crisis. There is actually a fourth. But in Singapore, it is not seen as a major change. Can anyone name that? Change of Prime Minister. To you, it is ok, it shows continuity. But in many countries, you will get revolutions. Change in policies. Complete disruptions. But for us, well, this is the same train, someone different in charge but moving onwards because it is the government that plans the long term. But three shocks? 9/11 -- if we didn't survive 9/11, we would be a different Singapore today. As Senior Minister Jayakumar said, "We have to make sure that we succeed everytime, But terrorists only have to succeed once." So, such attacks could still happen. But we are confident that even if it did, we have built up a strong fabric to hold us together. It will be strained, some strands may snap, but I think by and large, we've woven a strong fabric to hold this together.

SARs, or biological pandemic we called Avian flu. It could have been a very different outcome for Singaporeans. We learnt to protect ourselves and make sure that those who are infected are not pushed out or ostracized, and to exercise social responsibility. And the global financial crisis -- if we didn't have the employers, the unions, the Job Credit Scheme, the plummeting unemployment would have created a very different Singapore. This is not a system that has not been tested. One of the problems is that this is a system that has been tested and sometimes responds so quickly that we may get the wrong messages. We are doing something right. We are building something precious here that the majority of Singaporeans are willing to defend. We are succeeding. This should encourage us to keep on finding innovative

ways to directly engage students and all Singaporeans on important matters of national and social concern. I hope today's seminar will inspire you to explore effective ways to engage your stakeholders and I know that many of you are very creative. I want to encourage you to continue to give your passion in teaching this important aspect of National Education. And I wish you a fruitful session ahead. Thank you very much.

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