

Good morning everyone, and welcome. I am very happy to see such a sizeable crowd on a Saturday morning. I will keep my remarks brief.

I have been living a schizophrenic existence the past few months. On the one hand, I had to attend to my various duties here and now. On the other, my mind was in 1964-65, reading about how our founding leaders navigated our sojourn in Malaysia and stumbled into independence. I am referring to the contents of the Albatross file. As Minister Josephine Teo announced yesterday (24 October 2025), both the book and the NLB exhibition based on the book, will be launched by SM Lee Hsien Loong on 7 December.

The book will include all the documents, Cabinet papers, memoranda and handwritten notes that Dr Goh Keng Swee kept in a file he codenamed Albatross in the lead up to separation. We will also be publishing extracts of the oral histories of many of our founding leaders concerning this period — including Dr Goh's oral history, as well as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's. Both for the first time.

When you read the accounts, you will be reminded of why we separated from Malaysia. In one word: race. You will realise why our founding leaders became so obsessed, paranoid even, about race. You will read Mr Lee worrying how to reassure Malay-Singaporeans, they need not fear becoming a minority once again in an independent Singapore. You will read our leaders refusing to concede to Malaysian leaders that they did not have a right to appeal to Malays, that they should abandon their dream of a multiracial society — what they called a Malaysian Malaysia. Above all, you will read how they came to realise that racial and religious identities and the intense loyalties they commanded were almost impossible to eradicate.

Indeed, I think that was the biggest insight our founding leaders gained from our two years in Malaysia. Namely, that you cannot overcome the challenges of a diverse society by simply erasing differences, pretending they do not exist, or somehow forgetting them. They realised that diverse societies could be harmonious only if we accepted our diversities, even as we made sure those diversities were not exploited by chauvinists and bigots or irresponsible politicians to stir discontent and strife. On the one hand, you must give room for each racial, religious and linguistic identity to thrive. On the other hand, you must make sure no identity is emphasised at the expense of others.

We have navigated this paradox fairly successfully over 60 years. You cannot get unity by suppressing differences. On the contrary, if you try to suppress differences, you will find people reacting and emphasising their differences. This is why we never tried to achieve in Singapore a melting pot society. Knowing full well, such a society is more likely than not to result in the dominance of the majority. In France, they used to say: you are French, so long as you spoke French and accepted French culture. By definition, that required every minority to suppress its specific cultural dissidents in favour of the dominant potential. Far from eradicating multiple identities, that model of cultural assimilation has resulted in a more fractured society.

*E pluribus unum*, which means: from many, one. We try something very difficult in Singapore — try to become one united people. Not by suppressing differences, but by allowing each identity to thrive. And at the same time, try to deepen and expand our commonalities — what we call our common space.

In practice, this means sometimes we say differences do not matter, and sometimes we say they do matter — when we take care to provide for minority representations in Parliament, or ensure our public housing estates are diverse. And sometimes we say differences do not matter — as when we assess merit in the workplace or schools. Sometimes we say “remember race”, sometimes we say “forget race”.

Indeed, one cannot forget differences unless one also notices, acknowledges, recognises and respects differences. In our case, this applies to religions and languages as much as it does to races.

We can trace some of this insight when we examine the early drafts of the national pledge. Mr S. Rajarathnam's first draft read, "We as citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to forget differences of race, language and religion, and become one united people." That was the first draft. Forget differences of race, language and religion. Forget, does it mean erase, extinguish, expunge, obliterate differences of race, language and religion? Or does it mean forget, meaning remember by all means differences of race, language or religion, but not at the expense of forging a national identity that has as much reality as your respective racial, linguistic, cultural or religious identities? So your Singaporean identity can exist alongside your identity as a bicultural Chinese, a devout Muslim or a proficient speaker of Tamil. Somehow our founding leaders decided it has to be the latter.

As a result, as all of you know, the final version of the pledge, what we're familiar with, reads, "We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion." Regardless does not mean, does not matter, forget about it. Regardless means despite — remember and forget at the same time. I do not think there was any other way we could have created and sustained a harmonious multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society.

Anyway, that is my hypothesis for your consideration after spending many years with the Albatross file. Thank you very much.