

## Speech by IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan at the Reinventing Destiny Conference

This conference is titled reinventing destiny. It's a contradiction in terms. Destiny by definition, is predetermined; fixed. The English word *destiny* comes from the Latin *destinate* from *destinare*, which means “make firm, establish”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. How do you reinvent the determined, the unalterable?

In Greek mythology, the fates were called *Moirai*. The first of the Fates, *Clotho*, or the Spinner, weaves the threads of your life. The second, *Lachesis*, or the Allotter, allots a portion of mortal life to each of us. And the third of the Fates, *Atropos*, or the Unturnable, the most stubborn of the Fates, presides over our deaths.

There can be no question of reinventing *Clotho*, rejecting *Lachesis* or reversing *Atropos*. Destiny is destiny — as when we say “geography is destiny”. However, when I googled quotes on destiny, I came across this from William Jennings Bryan: “Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for. It is a thing to be achieved.” An altogether American sentiment, you might say.

But from Singapore's own history, you have S. Rajaratnam's famous assertion: “Being Singaporean is a matter not of ancestry [or if you like destiny], but of choice and conviction.” Or what Mr Lee Kuan Yew told The New York Times once: “First, to understand Singapore you've got to start off with an improbable story. It should not exist...”

So, there you have it, what we mean when we say Singapore “reinvented destiny” — meaning it exists as an independent city-state when in actual fact, it should not have existed. Its founding generation, especially the man whose centenary this conference marks, had not intentionally founded it. They stumbled into proclaiming Singapore's sovereignty. Our destiny, our fate, was to be part of something else altogether — Malaysia.

So, we can say with considerable justice and some pride, that independent Singapore was always from the beginning, a matter of reinventing destiny. Consciously choosing some other paths, deliberately swerving from our allotted place in existence. Defying death — “should not exist” in Mr Lee's words.

How did we reinvent our destiny after independence in August 1965? I can't do better than quote what Rajaratnam had to say in his oral history interview in 1981. Looking back on the events of 17 years earlier. He said: “Once you got over the shock [of Separation], was where do we go from here? Because we ourselves had convinced ourselves that an independent Singapore is not viable. That was not a device just to have merger [with Malaya] ... [It] was a genuine basic belief. So now, we had to prove that what we believed in, is not necessarily so. So after that, the major preoccupation was how to make it work.”

Then the interviewer asked him: “Today, 17 years later, how do you feel about Separation?”

As you all know, Rajaratnam signed the Separation Agreement very reluctantly. And he said: “Well, first ... no political analysis is the eternal truth. For years and years, we believed that an independent Singapore cannot work. 17 years later, it works better than if we had been in Malaysia, if you look back. So in that sense, of course, I've been chastened since then, that no political philosophy or policy, especially in politics, that are no eternal truths. It's facts as you make them. You can make any facts that you want, provided you've got the will and the determination.”

I don't need to rehearse here what were those new facts that we made. Briefly, we initially believed our hinterland was Malaysia. After 1965, we decided to make the world our hinterland. Easier said than done, but we managed to make this remarkable shift. It is far too early to say of course, but it is possible that as a result of the shift, our invention of these new facts, Singapore may well come to be regarded as the most successful city-state in history. Indeed, we are the only city-state in existence today.

But least our heads swell too much, we need to remember that the last 58 years of our existence as an independent city-state coincided with a relatively benign period in world history. We weren't to know this 58 years ago, when the Cold War was very much warm, China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War was still raging and Sukarno's Indonesia was still in Confrontation with Malaysia and Singapore.

But gradually from the late 1960s onwards, barriers to trade fell, the world moved from General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework, there was a freer flow of capital and talent, what was to become known as globalisation took off, and the world was 'flat' as the New York Times columnist, Tom Friedman, proclaimed once. Singapore has done well over the past six decades or so, in large part because we made the world our hinterland just at the right time in history when the world was becoming economically, financially and technologically stitched up as it had never been before in history. Sure, we made our luck, and made our facts as Rajaratnam said, but still, we were lucky. What would it mean to reinvent destiny today?

It is clear in retrospect, what reinventing our destiny meant. As Søren Kierkegaard, the existentialist philosopher, famously said, Life can only be understood by looking backward, but it must be lived looking forward.” Alas, there is never a clear view looking forward. We are always in the middle when we look forward, always in a dark wood stumbling, seeing through a glass darkly.

Again, it is too early to tell, but the world may well be de-globalising. Barriers to trade and the free flow of ideas, talent, technology and capital are most certainly being erected. Supply chains are being truncated, and Singapore is being increasingly put in a tough spot, asked to show it isn't taking sides in the tussle between the United States and China, or worse still asked to prove over and over again we aren't taking sides. And it will probably get worse. It is clear what reinventing destiny meant in retrospect, but not so clear what reinventing destiny would mean as we look to the future.

Are we destined to be a hub — and now, do we reinvent hubhood? But how? Are we destined to be forever open, connected to the world — and now, do we reinvent ways to remain open and connected,

though increasingly large parts of the world are refusing to be open and connected to you in the same way? Again, how?

It is a time for humility. We are once again seeing through a glass darkly. We are a small state, an island city-state. But I don't think that imperative that Rajaratnam defined in 1981 doesn't continue to define us. It's facts as you make them. You can make any facts that you want.

So, our distinguished foreign guests here, if I may speak on behalf of the organisers. This is why we chose this title 'Reinventing Destiny' for this conference on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. It is not to celebrate the past — it is in recognition of our fate. We are small, so we can never be cocksure about our future. But we also know Singapore cannot exist without being defiant. Not hubris, which means overweening pride, but let's say "bold". So humble, but bold. Make the facts you want. I hope you can help us see through the glass darkly. Thank you very much.

Find out more about the Reinventing Destiny Conference [here](#).