

**Welcome Remarks by
Prof Tommy Koh, Chairman NHB
For NHB Gala Dinner
2 July 2010, Island Ballroom, Shangri-La Hotel**

Mr President and Mrs Nathan, our Parliamentary Secretary Sam Tan, our Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies and Friends of NHB. On behalf of the NHB family and the organising committee for the gala dinner, I welcome you and thank you for your overwhelming response. We have over 70 tables at the dinner. Later in the evening, I will try to visit each table to greet you and to express my gratitude. If I do not succeed in making it to every table, I hope you will understand and forgive me.

2 In accordance with my wife's standing instruction, I will make my three points.

3 First, Mr President, I note that this has been a very good week for Singapore. We have successfully hosted the third annual International Water Week and the second World Cities Summit. The inaugural LKY World Cities Prize was awarded to the City of Bilbao, in the Basque region of Spain. Twenty-five years ago, Bilbao was a declining and dispirited city. The leaders of Bilbao, joined by the business community and the civil society, decided to turn the city around. It cleaned up the river, relocated the port, built a new subway system, conserved and restored the old city but, most of all, it decided to use culture as the driver of Bilbao's renaissance. The Guggenheim Museum, an architectural masterpiece by Frank Gehry, was a spectacular success. It attracted 1 million visitors in its first year. Today, Bilbao is a lovely, clean, green, vibrant and very liveable city. The lesson I have learned from the Bilbao miracle is that culture has economic value. It can play a critical role in a city's re-invention. I would argue that the Singapore government's investments in culture and the arts, in the past two decades have also paid handsome dividends for Singapore. We cannot imagine life without the Esplanade. For me, the symbol of the new Singapore is the Esplanade and not the Marina Bay Sands. Mr President, we thank you for displaying the beautiful works of our artists at the Istana.

4 Second, Mr President, the theme of tonight's dinner is - Singaporeana: Celebrating Our Diversity. We live in an increasingly

diverse and multicultural world. The unhappy fact is that in many countries in the world, diversity is viewed as a negative. It is a source of division and conflict. By contrast, we regard our diversity as an asset and not a liability. We celebrate our diversity. We respect and enjoy each other's cultures. At the same time, we welcome the fusions which are taking place: in music, dance, theatre, food, and even between people.

5 Tonight's décor, food and entertainment are inspired by our diversity.

6 Third, Mr President, I want to briefly answer an important question raised recently by a columnist in The Straits Times. She asked : Does Singapore belong culturally to Southeast Asia? NHB's answer is an emphatic yes. Since I became Chairman of NHB, I have led delegations from NHB to visit all 9 ASEAN countries. NHB convened the first conference of ASEAN museum directors. It was very successful and we have decided to repeat it every two years. Each year, NHB celebrates the history, heritage and culture of an ASEAN country, beginning with Vietnam in 2008 and the Philippines in 2009. This year, we will celebrate Indonesia with a major exhibition on Sumatra at ACM. We are currently building a new museum, at the City Hall and the old Supreme Court, tentatively named, The National Art Gallery. When it opens in a few years, it will showcase our collection of Southeast Asian art, which is the largest and the best in the world. We are destined to live in Southeast Asia till the end of time. We are proud to be part of the region and happy to champion its culture to the world.

7 Let me now conclude by thanking you, Mr President and Mrs Nathan, Mr Gilbert Cheah and his able team at the Singapore Tatler, our sponsors and donors, Shangri-La Hotel and the Singapore Repertory Theatre, Dick Lee and Irene Ang, Irene Lee and all my other friends and colleagues who have joined me in making this wonderful event come true.

8 Thank you very much.

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