

His Decades in Parliament

The Parliament buildings, both old and new, was a silent witness to founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's rapier wit and laser-sharp analyses made in the long years he served. Here are some significant moments:

The New Paper Friday, 27 March 2015

1961

A MOTION, AND MOMENT, OF CONFIDENCE

Following by-elections in Hong Lim and Anson, where the People's Action Party (PAP) lost their seats, Mr Lee Kuan Yew tendered his resignation as Prime Minister but it was rejected.

Five days after the by-election, Mr Lee moved a motion of confidence in his own Government.

It was agreed to with 27 "ayes". Eight voted against and 16 abstained. Out of the 16, 13 were left-wing PAP members who were then expelled from the party. They went on to form Barisan Sosialis.

Mr Lee said he had moved this motion of confidence in the country's interest, not the party's.

"The people want a rapid rise in the standard of living. There is no base for your economic expansion. Your entrepot trade is restricted. Your industrialisation has come to depend upon factors beyond your control, and so on. Whoever remains in office bears the odium of failure..."

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, a sociologist at the National University of Singapore, explained that this split is significant because it led to the one-party dominant system that still exists today.

1962

MERGER WITH MALAYA

The Singapore National Referendum Bill was read a second time at the Legislative Assembly in March 1962 to decide on the "mode and manner" of the merger with the Federation of Malaya.

While the Government was not legally bound to call for a referendum on the issue of the merger, Mr Lee explained that the people would feel that they had "missed something by not getting full merger" without a referendum.

"The conclusion we have come to is that in the long term, it would be foolish to help the communists in their smear campaign that merger between Singapore and the Federation is a sell-out of Singapore, where the Chinese are in the majority, to a Malaya, where the Malays are in the majority," Mr Lee said.

Prof Tan said: "The merger enabled Singapore to gain independence and define itself as a multiracial society."

Added Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan: "The subsequent failed merger confirmed in the minds of Mr Lee and his team that the new society in Singapore must be premised on multiracialism and meritocracy."

1965

INDEPENDENCE AND ANGUISH

Singapore achieved independence in August 1965, much to Mr Lee's anguish.

He had believed in merger and unity of the two territories. In the first post-independence session in December, the opposition benches were left empty after MPs from Barisan Sosialis staged a boycott.

Addressing the House, Mr Lee said: "We have not sought this particular formula of survival, but it is now the basis on which we move forward; and with independence, comes an independence of action in policy and planning.

"It is with confidence - a confidence born out of the past performance of our people - that we feel we can overcome problems of economic development, problems of unemployment."

This marked the start of Singapore's transformation. Prof Eugene Tan said: "It marked the start of a very busy legislative agenda for the government of a fledgling state, including the drafting and passing of the Constitution."

1968

SURVIVING BRITISH EXIT

The British had already announced they would be withdrawing their forces by the 70s. They later changed it to 1971.

Defence Minister and Leader of the House Dr Ng Eng Hen, speaking in the Special Parliamentary Sitting yesterday, spoke about Mr Lee's resolve in the face of the withdrawal.

Dr Ng said that, without any sugar-coating, the British bases made up 20 per cent of the gross national product and tens of thousands of jobs would be lost.

When an MP had asked Mr Lee then about getting aid from Britain, he said: "We cannot change our attitude to life, the world does not owe us a living and we cannot live by the begging bowl.

"The best way of meeting the problem is to go about it quietly and intelligently discussing our problems in a low-key manner and with as little fuss and bother as possible."

Through sheer diligence, determination and hard work, Singapore avoided massive unemployment when the British left.

1999

A MODEST NEW BUILDING

When Parliament made the move to its new premises, Mr Lee said: "The importance of this Chamber did not, and does not, depend on its size and its grandeur, but upon the quality of men and women who occupy it as representatives of the people.

"By the standards of other public and private buildings in Singapore, it is modest by comparison. But that is a virtue.

"Behind the understatement lie great strengths of character, integrity and determination. That is what will see Singapore through, not the grand statements and monuments in brick and mortar or steel and concrete, with which so many other new nations try to impress themselves and their followers."

Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob, who brought this up in Parliament yesterday, said: "Mr Lee could very well have described himself and his own life when he made that statement."

2005

WHEN MR LEE CHANGED HIS MIND

Mr Lee, then the Minister Mentor, gave his blessing for the integrated resorts to be built. This came after years of resisting casinos in the city-state.

To Hong Kong businessman Stanley Ho's casino proposal in 1970, Mr Lee had said "no, not over my dead body".

But ever the pragmatist, he eventually changed his mind.

He said: "Once upon a time, there were no cruise ships. When I said 'no', there was no Genting, and no casinos in Batam. Now, Singaporeans fly to casinos in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Queensland, Las Vegas, Britain, Australia, Canada and Europe.

"Ask ourselves, everyone of us, after all the heart-wrenching stories and anecdotes, if you are in charge, if you are responsible for Singapore's future, for its well-being, for its vibrancy, for the kind of life Singapore can provide its people in 10, 20 years, can you say no? That is the question you have to answer.

"If I were the Prime Minister and I was challenged, I would take every challenger on and set out to convince Singapore that this is right, that the price is high, but the price of not having the integrated resorts is even higher."

Prof Tan Ern Ser said: "As a pragmatist, it does not mean that he did not have any value positions, but that he recognised that there are trade-offs and thereby, hard choices to be made."

2009

MAINTAINING A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY

Mr Lee joined a debate on a motion about equality of the races.

He said: "Sir, I had not intended to intervene in any debate. But I was doing my physiotherapy just now and reading the newspapers and I thought I should bring the House back to earth.... and remind everybody what is our starting point, what is our base and if we do not recognise where we started from, and that these are our foundations, we will fail."

In his speech in Parliament yesterday, Dr Ng said Mr Lee went on to explain why the Constitution of Singapore "enjoins us (the Government) to specifically look after the position of the Malays and other minorities".

Dr Ng said Mr Lee refused to be swayed by ideology that could not work. Mr Lee dubbed these "highfalutin ideas that misled Singaporeans".

"As a result today, many countries come to Singapore to study how we have maintained harmony in a multiracial society," added Dr Ng.