

SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
AT THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE
DINNER AT THE FEDERAL HOTEL, KUALA
LUMPUR ON 23RD OCTOBER, 1961

Mr Chairman, Hon'ble Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Originally your farewell dinner was scheduled for tomorrow, and I suppose you were a little disappointed because our respected Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, could not accept your invitation to attend. You know why now, as he is leaving for the Republic of Vietnam tomorrow.

I don't think it is very often that newsmen or news organisations such as yours get their wires crossed, but this almost happened in relation to this dinner. Your organisers asked me whether I would speak instead of the Tunku. Unfortunately, your day chosen, that is tomorrow, could not suit me at all as it happens to be the United Nations Day, and it is one of my duties to preside on that day at the annual United Nations Association Dinner.

Not to be outdone, and showing quick adaptability expected of the Press, your organisers promptly suggested that the date of the dinner should be changed to be held tonight. This suited me, and I promptly accepted. So as Deputy Prime Minister I am here actually as deputy and honoured to speak in place of the Tunku.

My own experience with the Press has always been friendly and co-operative. In fact, I find it difficult to recall any occasion when I have felt at odds with them. The Press I find is always quick to rise to an occasion, and no one feels more shame-faced than they do if they miss a good story. Because you have managed to nab me tonight I have come to the conclusion that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police must have learned from the Press their proud ability always to get their man.

We in Malaya are very pleased indeed that the International Press Institute has chosen Kuala Lumpur as the venue for this Third Asian Seminar. I understand that you have all had a very busy nine days of professional discussion of ways and means to

improve the production and publication of newspapers, and that you have found these meetings both profitable and provocative. In fact, I believe you have even received hot tips from an expert on how to investigate corruption in Government. This does not worry me, however, as we are very proud of the integrity and efficiency of our Civil Service. I will say this, however, that if any sharp-eyed and keen-eared reporter can provide any evidence of corruption in Government, we will be the first to welcome it.

The fact that you can consider such subjects in your Seminar is to me an outstanding illustration of the functions of the Press in democracy. A free Press is and should be a watchdog of democracy, but because the Press has this special character, it also carries tremendous responsibilities. The public has a right to expect in a democracy that the Press not only should present its facts freely but also fairly. This I know is what good newspapers set out to do, and they are the first to be critical professionally of those who break this standard. Nothing can be more disturbing in a democracy than wild rumours, partial truth, or unfounded allegations. Society recognises this, and consequently the freedom of the Press is freedom within the law, not licensed to do as it pleases irrespective of the law. Few laymen realise that the Press always has to watch out for libel, defamation, obscenity and similar provisions of the law. To put it simply, the law as applied to the citizens also applies to the Press.

In our democracy I would be the first to pay tribute to the general standard of responsibility of the Malayan Press. We in Government find that as a rule when the Press wishes to criticise us they invariably do so in a constructive way. We welcome this, because constructive criticism is always helpful.

I do not propose, however, to dwell any further on the functions of the Press tonight, because, frankly speaking, you know more than I do. Taking for granted the freedom of the Press is an essential element of democracy, I would like to say a few words about democracy itself.

Thanks to the double talk of Communists everywhere, the word democracy has become much abused and misunderstood, even, I am sorry to say, in some countries which profess to be democratic. True democracy is unlike Communism, with its set and rigid dogmas, with double standards of principle and practice, with its

moulded opinions and its sweeping distortions of known facts. The practice of democracy has a freedom and elasticity which varies in different societies, but is always dependent on the will and opinion of the majority.

Men being human, and the world being what it is, I do not think anyone can say that an ideal democracy exists this side of Utopia. Few ideals are capable of complete and perfect realisation in human affairs. In democracies circumstance and compromise are always at work, because good democratic Government, while expressing the wishes of the majority, must always take into fair account any very deep feelings of a minority, if there is to be true peace and order in society.

Let me put it more simply. I think it is wrong for a man who considers his country to be a democratic country to point a finger at another country which believes in democracy and to say that that country is not democratic. The reason is basic, because certain circumstances and conditions differ, because customs and morality differ, because even ways of thought and feeling may differ. I believe that while each democracy should strive towards the ideal, its practice must be related to its own personality and character as a nation.

Let me give you a few examples. Everyone admits that the United Kingdom is a democracy, and by the same token everyone will agree that Australia is a democracy also. Yet in Australia, they have adopted compulsory voting, and the democratic Australians are so agreed on its value to them that the question after years of practice is no longer worth an argument. But I put it to you that if it were suggested in the United Kingdom quite seriously that they should adopt compulsory voting, the Conservatives, the Labourites, the Liberals and everyone else would be up in arms declaring that it was undemocratic.

In England also, as in this country, and most of the Commonwealth—all of it I think—judges are chosen, not elected. Yet in the United States it is quite a common practice for judges to be elected by public vote. The British would not like this practice at all, yet the Americans see nothing wrong with it. And I don't suppose anyone is going to argue that the United States is not a democratic country. In fact, there would be some Americans who would be extremely angry at such a suggestion.

That is why I say that while the ideals and principles of democracy are common to all democracies, the practice and the procedures differ. Unfortunately, there are many critics, in the Press and elsewhere, who do not realise this important distinction, and as a result some remarkably ill-considered and ill-suited opinions are scattered freely around the world by rapid modern communications. For me I always think it is important to have an image in one's mind of, shall we say, life in India, before jumping into conclusions about some new story or article reporting a new and acute issue of topical interest in India. Is it any wonder that the democratic Indians should get excited about some foreign news report which is critical of their democracy as they see it, as they live it, as they believe in it?

I think the same observation can be made of any country of any democracy. We in Malaya, no less than elsewhere, have our own ways of looking at things, we have our own sense of the meaning and practice of democracy and we hope that we will always be given credit for knowing what is best suited to ourselves. We have a written Constitution which sets out and guarantees our fundamental liberties, and it is a Constitution framed to meet the needs of a multi-racial society, which we are welding together as one nation.

For instance, the Constitution states that there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the grounds only of religion, race, descent, or place of birth. The Constitution also provides that every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression, but Parliament may by law impose such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interests of security, friendly relations with other countries, or morality, for instance. All citizens have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms, but Parliament may by law impose such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interests of security or public order. All citizens have the right to form associations, but again Parliament may by law impose such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interests of security, public order or moral.

I cite these few provisions from our Constitution to make my point that our democracy reflects, and must always be interpreted as reflecting, the Malayan way of life.

Let me step aside from the legal aspects and give you another illustration from the human angle that we in Malaya are firm believers of democracy and that we intend to make democracy as we know and interpret it as the one and only system of Government that can produce results and provide our people with a new and better way of life. As you may be aware, in my capacity as Minister of Rural Development I am responsible in the execution and achievement of the growth of our vast Five-Year Plan. Rural Development is a radical national effort on the part of our Government to redress inherited imbalances in our society, imbalances between the rural and the urban people. Because the majority of our people live in the rural areas, it is essential for the good of the national economy and for the peace and happiness of our country that they should have the best possible opportunities of development and amenities of living. Now, how are we doing this? Firstly, we make the people plan, put up proposals for development in the areas through their respective elected representatives, and that plan was embodied in the "Red Book" which each District has completed. With the completion of the planning at District level of the various Districts, plans were embodied in the National Plan which is now known as our Second Five-Year Development Plan. We have now implemented this Plan for nearly a year and our first task is for the Government to endeavour to provide the rural people with such amenities as roads, water supplies, community halls, education and health services and such other amenities as are required for the better and happy rural life. This is called the first phase of our Rural Development Plan. Now, having completed this first phase and having implemented it for a year, we have decided to launch the second phase of our Rural Development Plan and this we did on the 4th September this year and in this second phase we geared the people into this national task of rural development, because we believe that the responsibility of improving the standard of living of the rural people must be on the rural people themselves. It is necessary that the people should be alive to the national task—they should have the initiative, the enterprise and the enthusiasm to better their standard of living. In this national task the Government and the people must work in partnership and it is only by this joined co-operative efforts between Government and the people can thus be done. I am glad and proud to say that the response of the people to this call to action by the Government has been most

gratifying. Now Ladies and Gentlemen, this is what I mean by an example of democracy as we interpret and practice in this country.

It would seem to me, therefore, that one of the great services the Press can render internationally for the good of democracy is to emphasise greater understanding of how democracy works in different countries. Good news from the newspaper point of view, should not only be reports of crises—although these make the headlines—but also reports of good developments.

I know you have been busy with your Seminar, and you are closing your sessions soon, but I think it would be a great pity if you should leave the Federation of Malaya without having had an opportunity to see our National Operations Room which will give you a very quick and vivid picture of the working of our democracy in the advancement of our national development. I hope it may be possible for you to make this visit.

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I trust that I have given you a few interesting thoughts on aspects of democracy, and I hope that when you return to your own countries you will do so, not only with satisfaction of having attended a very fruitful seminar, but with happy recollections of our democracy in Malaya. Finally, in this connection, I would like to say how pleased we are that the International Press Institute with its world-wide ramifications has decided to establish its Asian Headquarters in our Capital, and that we look forward to friendly and close association with your organisation and your ideals.