



Transcripts



TRANSCRIPT OF MINISTER MENTOR LEE KUAN YEW'S INTERVIEW WITH MARK JACOBSON FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ON 6 JULY 2009 (FOR NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE JAN 2010 EDITION)

Singapore Government
MEDIA RELEASE

Q: "I don't think you'd be dazzled but this is what they give when they interview a big shot."

Mr Lee: "Okay. Barbara Poulson, she's the CEO, owner?"

Q: "She's the editor. The writers don't deal with the CEO. The writers go economy class."

Mr Lee: "Thank you."

Q: "It was interesting. The thing about National Geographic is the joke but it's not really a joke, I guess, the photographers go business class and the writers go economy class. I never cared for that very much myself."

Mr Lee: "The writers go by economy class."

Q: "The photographers go business class."

Mr Lee: "They'd get tired. They don't have, what do you call it, DVD?"

Q: "No, you can watch it. In the airplane, the DVD is about this close to your face, so you can't really move very much. It's sort of like sitting in the first row of the movie theatre. So actually I've interviewed Presidents and I was born in 1948, there've been 10-12 American Presidents. They come and they go. But I've never interviewed anybody who has stayed the length that you have. It's like interviewing George Washington and Thomas Jefferson rolled up into one, so it's kind of nice."

Mr Lee: "It was one of these cataclysmic moments in history when empires dissolved and invading armies came in and lorded it over us for three-and-a-half years, in this case the Japanese Imperial army who were quite brutal and then the Communists who were armed to fight the Japanese, made a bid for power. So after all that, we came through as the Communists would call it the crucible of fire."

Q: "The crucible of fire. In your book, you said that the three years of Japanese Occupation were the most, probably the most important years of your life. Do you feel that way, do you still feel that way?"

Mr Lee: "Yes, of course. First, I was in my late teens, they captured Singapore in February 1942. I was 18-plus and they didn't leave until 1945 when I was 21-plus."

Q: "Those are significant years in anybody's life."

Mr Lee: "So I was Chinese male, tall and they were going for people like me because this was the centre for the collection of ethnic Chinese donations to Chungking to fight the Japanese. So when they came in, they were out to punish us. So they slaughtered 50,000, well the numbers estimate go up to about 90,000 but I think verifiable numbers would be about 50,000. And just randomly but for a stroke of fortune, I would have been one of them."

Q: "Well, 1945 seems to be a, if you look back over history, 1945 was a cataclysmic year for humanity in general. You see difference between the combination of the detonation of the atom bomb and the discovery of the Nazi camps. So at that point, tell me what you think? It seems that humanity began to stop thinking of itself as made in the image of the creator so maybe it weren't so wonderful."

Mr Lee: "I don't think I ever started off with that hypothesis or that basis. I always thought that humanity was animal-like and that Confucian theory was Man can be improved. I'm not sure it can be but it can be trained, it can be disciplined. I'm not sure you can actually change the character of a man but you can discipline him and make him, you make a left-hander write with his right hand

but you can't really change his natural born instincts to use his left hand. But a Confucianist belief Man is perfectible which is an optimistic belief."

Q: "I would say so."

Mr Lee: "And there are many American sociologists who also would like to prove that to be correct, the latest one being the professor who has done some research insists why ethnic Jews and Asians and West Indian Blacks do so well in America and they came to the conclusion that's because they emphasised upbringing and education."

Q: "Actually, I went to the University of California at Berkley back in the 1960s and early 70s, I never graduated, then I went back and finished my degree in 2004 to show my children their father wasn't a bum and it was interesting to see how the demographic composition of US, that's the number one public college in the United States. It was like half of the graduating class was Asians and it was interesting and it made me feel like I would never have gotten there."

Mr Lee: "Most of the Asians settled in California because of the climate."

Q: "It was sort of striking because you feel like, what you're saying is interesting because it's like some people seem to thrive in certain environments and some people don't, I don't know why."

Mr Lee: "Well, we've got ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians here. The settled ones have become less hard-driving and hard-driving and we've got recent migrants, they are hungry, they're determined to succeed having uprooted themselves and they're doing better."

Q: "Is that okay? Is that fine, I mean?"

Mr Lee: "No it worries the old citizens. They say look this is fierce competition, my children won't be getting the scholarships because they're doing well in schools, they push their children very hard. In fact, they need no pushing. They come here from China with no English language and they know that without English, they won't get along. So there are many cases of boys and girls aged 12, 13 who come into our secondary schools and by the time, they finish the schools, they top the class in English."

Q: "That's interesting, it's like my grandparents came to New York. When they came in, they don't speak English and they did great. They just really tried hard and made a life for themselves and I think after a number of generations, it's very difficult to keep that kind of drive up."

Mr Lee: "Of course, of course."

Q: "Do you think that's inevitable or do you think that people just get lazy or what?"

Mr Lee: "No, I think the spurs are not stuck on your hinds. They are part of the herd, why-go-faster? But when you're lagging behind, you must go faster to catch up with the herd. I'm quite sure that there are children of the migrants who strive arduously. When they grow up in the same schools as the Singaporeans, the same playing fields, same environment and they begin to adopt Singaporean habits in the ways of living and thinking. So I'm quite sure they'd become like us. Well, because we're shrinking in our population, our fertility ratio is about 1.29.

Q: "I actually wanted to ask you about that."

Mr Lee: "So it's a worrying factor. So we'll need a constant inflow but we're a small population, so we get the inflow and we get the inflow from the educated end of the population, both Indians and Chinese and they've got surplus populations. Well, I won't say surplus but they've got huge population, huge numbers."

Q: "They have people to spare, that's for sure."

Mr Lee: "No and they've got fierce competition there, so when they come here, higher standards of living for the time being, better social environment with jobs."

Q: "What would you say the parents of the second or third generation of Singaporeans and their children are not able to compete with the new people? How do you tell them?"

Mr Lee: "We tell them look they have got to work harder or they'll become stupid. It's just that they don't see the point of it. Why race when you can canter and save your energy and do other things? Art, ballet, sports whereas these new migrants, they spend all their time slogging away in the library or at home."

Q: "You're not saying that arts, sports and ballet are not important, are you?"

Mr Lee: "No, I'm not saying they are not important but an inordinate amount of time is spent on extra-curricular activities."

Q: "I told my son if you stop playing basketball, you do better on these tests but I like playing basketball. I said, well."

Mr Lee: "Well, I think it's an inevitable evolution of any society and therefore, a regular inflow of migrants without too huge a deluge will keep that society on its toes."

Q: "You have 25 per cent here of people who are expatriates. Is that too much?"

Mr Lee: "Well, there's a little discomfort in some areas because in some areas, they seem to congregate, the new ones. The Indians somehow find the East Coast congenial. They concentrate there, so they become very obvious. The Chinese are more scattered, not so obvious except in the food courts where they are doing the hard work because Chinese cooks from China are willing to work for \$1,000 less a month and they're just as good. So the employer looks for them."

Q: "Well suppose, if you were the owner of a restaurant and you were going to hire a chef."

Mr Lee: "I'd choose the best chef."

Q: "You'd choose the best chef. It wouldn't make a difference how much you have to pay."

Mr Lee: "Well, because the customer will make up for any difference. I mean, good chefs are difficult to come by. That's as simple as that."

Q: "The talent."

Mr Lee: "It's the taste buds, your nostrils, sense of colour, et cetera."

Q: "We ate dinner at Iggys, somewhere at the Regency Hotel. He was telling us, we were eating the food and he's sitting there watching us eat which is so disconcerting I have got to say and he was explaining how they put together each dish. It was like listening to a painter telling you."

Mr Lee: "Yes, they make it an art."

Q: "It was an art form."

Mr Lee: "It's not only just food. It's presentation, it's for the eyes, for the smell, for the texture and so on."

Q: "You have a favourite food hawker?"

Mr Lee: "I can't go."

Q: "Or is it really too good to say?"

Mr Lee: "Well, I can't go anymore because so many people want to shake my hands and I become a distraction, I can't really get down to my food."

Q: "So can you have take-out?"

Mr Lee: "Well, that's not quite the same. I tend to go to restaurants when I go out and I try restaurants with a quiet corner where I can sneak in and sneak out with my friends and not have a crowd wanting to shake hands with me."

Q: "One of the things that I did when I came, I've been here about two weeks, and I know I have this interview with you. So they say what are you doing in Singapore? I say well, I'm going to interview the MM and they said, oh yeah. I said well, what would you ask him if you have a chance and people have a lot of question. So I have integrated my questions with their questions."

Mr Lee: "That's all right."

Q: "I thought probably you would appreciate that."

Mr Lee: "I'm 85 coming on to 86 this September. I've had many eggs thrown at me."

Q: "One thing that really struck me, coming from an American perspective is how much people, as much as they may seem to complain, they obviously feel a sense of home here and they love this place and this is their home and whatever problems they may have with whatever, that love of it comes through which I don't think the people really in a place like America can really appreciate that. In America, what do they know about Singapore? They know it has an exotic name, the chewing gum and the guy that got caned. That's it. And one of my missions here is to kind of like explode certain mythologies that people might have about this place."

Mr Lee: "Well, the Americans who've been here and done business, stayed here especially, if you ask them, they produced, the Americans get together and help each other, so they produced a book for new commerce, new entrants. So every three, four years they change and they give out all the eccentricities of the Singapore society, where do you get good food, what you have to watch out for, where they give you a bum rap and so on. And I think high on the list is the clean environment, no graffiti, safe personally, health et cetera, clean air, clean water and clean food except for some isolated cases and a safe environment for their children. I

mean, where can you go out and jog at three o'clock in the morning and nothing happens? I think you can see them. You're staying at the marina around there?"

Q: "I'm staying at Merchant Court."

Mr Lee: "Merchant Court? Opposite?"

YY: "In fact, just next to Clarke Quay."

Mr Lee: "Yes, yes. You can. Nobody has been mugged, nobody has been raped. The crime rate is the lowest in Southeast Asia because we have a fairly disciplined population. Everybody is educated, nobody, there are a few dropouts who go in for glue sniffing and drugs and so on but we keep the numbers down and we rescue as much of them as we can. But the social delinquency rate amongst young people is at a minimum."

Q: "One thing that struck me is how you never see a policeman. I live in New York and I see police, cops all the time."

Mr Lee: "You have got to show your presence to scare people, I mean, that I'm around. But in Singapore, we've got what you call neighbourhood police, that they are stationed in the neighbourhood. There's a little neighbourhood post for each precinct and they stay there for two, three, even four years, so they get to know everybody there. So any stranger comes in they know and they become friends with the neighbourhood. So apart from the occasional round in a car, they make sure that houses are properly locked up and not left open inviting thieves."

Q: "It's not necessary to be driving around with the search light and all of the stuff like that. That's the way it is in most places, really. This is a law abiding society in general."

Mr Lee: "Well, it's the education in the schools and at home partly because we're such a densely populated kind of buildings, all high rises, so you have got to develop habits which are considerate to your neighbours. If you have loud blaring noise going through the walls, partition walls to the neighbours, they'll soon complain to the the neighbourhood police or somebody will come up to say will you tone your volume down because you're waking up the neighbourhood. And they learn to accommodate each other because we don't allow our ethnic groups to choose to live together. When they are resettled, they have got to ballot for their neighbours, so you get Malays, Indians, Chinese all shuffled around together when in the first generation, they used to sell and relocate themselves, so we have quotas and no precinct should have more than this quota of the population. So in other words, we bring about an integration by spreading them which means we spread them in the schools too."

Q: "And it's worked."

Mr Lee: "It's worked. And so we have a more homogenous and more homogenous in the sense that they haven't changed their religions, the Malays are still Muslims and they go to the mosques every Friday and they've slightly different habits. The influence from the Middle East has made them have head-dresses for no rhyme or reason."

Q: "Actually, it's an interesting question that just came up recently that I was going to ask you about. I know that you put a premium on racial harmony and religious harmony and it's actually more or less legislated here, right?"

Mr Lee: "Yes, because you can have enormous trouble once religions clash."

Q: "Well, the two things I've been interested to ask you about that because I agree with you is number one, the recent rise of Evangelical Christians in Singapore."

Mr Lee: "As a result of American efforts."

Q: "I don't know if it's American efforts but I went to the New Creation Church and you might as well have been in Tennessee, it was exactly the same. As soon as you walked through the door, it was exactly the same but it seemed very popular. Is that a new monkey (?) ranch in there?"

Mr Lee: "No, I don't think so. You see most Chinese here are Buddhists or Taoist ancestor worshippers, I'm one of them, so it is a tolerant society, it says whatever you want to believe in, you go ahead. And these youngsters, the educated ones, Western-educated especially, now they are all English-educated, their mother tongue is the second language. Therefore, they begin to read Western books and Western culture and so on and then the Internet. So they begin to question like in Korea that what is this mumbo-jumbo, the ancestors and so on? The dead have gone, they're praying before this altar and asking for their blessings and then they have got groups, Christian groups who go out and evangelize. They catch them in their teens, in their late teens when they're malleable and open to suggestions and then they become very fervent evangelists themselves. My granddaughter is one of them. She's now 28. My wife used to tell her look, don't go for any more of these titles, just look for MRS. It's just around the corner, God will arrange it."

Q: "Well, in the US, as you say, it's import from the US or an export. These people have been very politically active."

Mr Lee: "Well, they know here that if you get politically active, you will incite the Buddhist, the Taoist, the Muslims, the Hindus and others to do similar response. We used to teach in the schools in the 1980s to get back some moral values as a result of

Westernisation, Confucian culture as a subject in itself for the Chinese whereupon the Malays, the Indians and so on, they reacted. They wanted not Confucian culture, they wanted their religion, so we decided we'll stop this. So we took the concepts of Confucianism and put it into civic subject, that society is more important than the individual, that the individual must care for the society and the interests of the society must take precedence over the individual, which is contrary to the American or Western system which says the individual trumps everything, freedom trumps everything, freedom of speech, freedom of whatever you tolerate even at the expense of making others feel inconvenient. If I don't like abortion, you're a doctor who aborts people, I shoot you."

Q: "That may happen, that's valid I think there is a rather large emphasis on individual autonomy in Western cultures that is sometimes detrimental to the larger society. But that's the way you're brought up, that's what we're used to, so it becomes...."

Mr Lee: "No, it's the philosophy of society you start with. You get all the Kantian theories and the Rousseau and so on, so gradually it evolved and then along comes Maddox and Jefferson's the right to happiness of the society and so on. So it's an optimistic sort of approach to life. The Chinese start off with a completely different end of the stick that all men are born the same and you have got to educate them and perfect them, otherwise, they will not improve. So they put a lot of emphasis on upbringing at home and in the schools. Well, we're losing part of it because the Chinese schools have disappeared. We're trying to preserve it or introduce it into the English speaking schools but the teachers now are also educated in English speaking schools and have lost the old traditions. So they're trying to get them to go to China and see how they preserve these qualities. But we find that in the cities, they're also changing."

Q: "So when, don't take this the wrong way, but when you decided to close the Chinese stream education and the college, what was the rationale behind that and do you ever regret doing that?"

Mr Lee: "No, I regret not doing it faster because politically, if there'd been a violent electoral protest in the next elections because they're so wedded to the idea that language means, culture means, life means everything. But I'm a pragmatist and you can't make a living with the Chinese language in Singapore. The first duty of the government is to be able to feed its people, to feed its people in a little island. There's no hinterland and no farming, you have got to trade and you have got to do something to get people buy your goods or services or get people to come here and manufacture themselves, export, ready-made markets and multinationals which I stumbled on when I went to Harvard for a term in 1968 and I said oh, this could solve my unemployment problem. So we brought the semiconductors factories here and one started, the whole herd came and we became a vast centre for production of computers and computer peripherals. But they all speak English, multinationals from Japan, Europe, whatever European country they come from, they speak English. So Chinese-educated were losing out and they were disgruntled because they got the poorer jobs and lesser pay. So eventually our own Members of Parliament were Chinese-educated and graduates from the Chinese university said okay, we have got to do something. We're ruining these people's careers. By that time, the university was also losing its good students and getting bum students. Because they took in poor students, they graduated them on lower marks and so the degree became valueless. So when you apply for a job with a Chinese university degree, you hide your degree and produce your school certificate. So I tried to change it from within, the Education Minister was Chinese-educated and English-educated to convert it from within because most of the teachers have American PhDs. So they did their thesis in English but they've forgotten their English as they've been teaching in Chinese, so it couldn't be done. So I merged them with the English speaking university. Great unhappiness and dislocation for the first few years but when they graduated, we put it to them do you want your old university degree or you want English university degree? All opted for the English university degree. That settled it."

Q: "In recent events as China begins to ascend, I mean, would you?"

Mr Lee: "No, no. It makes no difference. We are not going to tie ourselves to China to the extent it makes us hostage. I mean, we have many investments there because the older generation are Chinese-educated, they feel comfortable but the younger generation, they have enough Chinese who want to go there and do business and they can ramp it up if you want because once you are able to listen and speak and read without writing, you can pick it up. And not everybody wants to go there and we've been offering scholarships to their top universities, Beijing, Qinghua, Hudan, very few takers. They say nah, I want to go to America or Britain because they know they're coming back here and competing in English."

Q: "Do you think that, I mean, one question I wanted to ask you was building a country from scratch is obviously an enormous achievement, accomplishment."

Mr Lee: "No, it's not a nation. It's a society in transition. You need a few hundred years to build a nation."

Q: "Oh really?"

Mr Lee: "Yes."

Q: "You have a lot of countries running around claiming they're nations. You don't think they really are nations?"

Mr Lee: "Well, we make them say the national pledge and sing the national anthem but suppose we have a famine, will your Malay neighbour give you the last few grains of rice or will she share it with her family or fellow Muslim or vice versa?"

Q: "Depends on the person, doesn't it? No, it doesn't?"

Mr Lee: "No, I think there comes a time, I read a book by Edward Wilson who was Harvard."

Q: "I know who he is."

Mr Lee: "And he wrote about human beings."

Q: "Actual past ones."

Mr Lee: "And he described the Maoris. So when two tribes were fighting, the third tribe will come and see which tribe is more our side, more genes like us and they joined that side. So it's an instinct. Can you overcome that instinct? Edward Wilson says culture can overcome because he's American, he knows a mix of Europeans and others. But it takes many, many years. Yes, they all do the military service, equal treatment, equal pay, equal hardship, job opportunities but we live in concentric circles. Cross marriages, yes a few, usually the parents are most unhappy. Then where do you belong, the children of the cross marriages? Sometimes they get reabsorbed in their father ethnic group and they carry the father's surname. Sometimes, if you become a Muslim then whether you're male or female, you join the other side. But it has happened to the margins more and more. But I think the instinct, the human instinct is still there. I mean, it's in America."

Q: "I live in New York which is similar to Singapore in a way."

Mr Lee: "No, I mean, I used to talk to an Indian. He was the administrator of Agra and we were driving back to Delhi. This was in the late 1970s. So he was telling me he was writing a thesis on Shakespeare, a highly-educated man. At that time, English-educated, that generation. So I said, supposing I pretend as a caste, supposing I pretend I'm a Brahmin, high caste and I invite you to dinner, he said yeah I'll come. You give me a good dinner, I'll come. Now supposing I want to marry your daughter? He says that's different. The most thorough inquiries will be made. So I said supposing I tell you I came from Calcutta and how you're going to find me. He says no, you've got to live somewhere in Calcutta, you must have your family, your neighbours, your friends in Calcutta, we'll find out. Then we'll know what caste you belong to."

Q: "So as long as you have enough human trail people will figure out who you are."

Mr Lee: "Yes, and in Japan, they do it a different way. They exclude the Chinese and the Koreans who have been there for generations. They're still not Japanese citizens. Some had become since the West started criticizing them because you may have a Japanese name and you speak perfect Japanese, but for promotions, where is your home village? Never mind, I come from Tokyo, Osaka or Kobe. No where is your home domicile and they will trace you there."

Q: "So what you're saying now is this somewhat contradictory to the programme that you have here where you have the quotas? It's really human nature, the people hang out with their own kind. Can you legislate that? Can you do anything about that?"

Mr Lee: "It takes times. You can have a certain, as I said, concentric circles. They overlap at the outer circles. You start with your family, your relatives, your immediate friends and then your school friends and other friends in the outer fringe. In the outer circles, you have common ground but you can even invite them into your home and visit each other on festive occasions and so on but when it comes to marriage and becoming part of the family, that's a very different happiness."

Q: "Is it, will it be your goal to break down those barriers or it's not worth doing, it's just a waste of time?"

Mr Lee: "I think we just leave it alone."

Q: "You just leave it alone."

Mr Lee: "You try to break it down, you're going to cause a lot of unhappiness and the older generation vote solidly against."

Q: "As Singapore moves along, I mean, answer me this question, who has the hardest job?"

Mr Lee: "Hardest job?"

Q: "You or your son?"

Mr Lee: "It's to keep going at the same pace, same quality of governance at all levels, more integrated. I mean not assimilated but more integrated, more easy to get along with each other, a more cohesive society and a better-educated society at all levels, not just the few at the top at universities or polytechnics. Even the dropouts now we're putting them into technical institutes where they learn hands-on preparing engines, electrical equipment and so on in a fairly splendid surroundings because otherwise the old trade schools, they'll say ah, already you're a failure. But now they go into air-conditioned buildings looking the same like polytechnics. You don't feel shy about being seen there. You come out with a certificate and if you make the grade, they will go up one step to the polytechnic where you'll learn nearly a degree status and if you do well in the polytechnic, you go on to university."

Q: "Do you think that the world is more complicated now than it was when you were a young man, when you were in the 1960s when Singapore first became independent?"

Mr Lee: "Of course, I mean everyday is more globalised and more complicated. You look at this swine virus. In the old days, it'd have died in the village where the Mexican got it. He wouldn't have been traveling to Mexico City. Now it goes to Mexico City, it

infects people there, within 24 hours, it's around the world."

Q: "That's one thing I want to ask. As the country moves along, we won't call it a nation, as the country moves along..."

Mr Lee: "It's a nation in the making. The optimistic view. We must have optimism."

Q: "Absolutely or else why bother to get up in the morning?"

YY: "Mark, MM has another appointment if you want to spare two minutes."

Mr Lee: "I give you 45 minutes, you carry on."

Q: "Carry on?"

Mr Lee: "Yeah, yeah, it's all right. If you've come all the way two weeks, I can postpone my appointment later."

Q: "I appreciate that very much. But I will stick to only the questions I have."

Mr Lee: "No, when you say you spent two weeks here, that means you're doing a serious piece."

Q: "It's a serious piece and also as I told you, I'm very anxious to give a realistic portrayal of the place that people have a lot of illusions about. So therefore, I want to find out really what's going on. Let's ask you a question about Singapore. One of the things that people say about Singapore is it's too, life is too easy here. People have lost their curiosity and that's the problem. How do you respond to that?"

Mr Lee: "No, I don't think that is so much..., that's a stereotype view. If they've lost their curiosity, they wouldn't be striving so hard to get to university, to travel abroad, to go to higher education institutes abroad, to learn higher skills. I mean, I'm undergoing physiotherapy because I had a fall on the bicycle, so I'm stuck there for one hour talking to the physiotherapist and she's upgrading herself, she's done her training here. Her next stage is to go to Australia and get a degree in physiotherapy. I said is the hospital sending you? She said no, I'm paying on my own. I said will you get a pay rise when you come back? She said no but my chances of promotion will be there. So you see it's not that they have lost the curiosity. I mean, they're prepared to spend two years in Perth or Brisbane or Sydney. That's where they get the most physiotherapists because their children are great sportsmen."

Q: "It's truly they keep on driving their motorcycles into the wall and then they get up and say, let's do it again."

Mr Lee: "So there is this curiosity to find out about the world and it's affecting how they live. I mean, she was 32-years-old. I said are you married. She said no. I said you shouldn't leave it too late. She said well, I haven't found the right person. I said how is that? you are meeting fellow nurses, you better join, you have got a social development unit where you meet men above board, they are looking for spouses, you are looking for spouses and you meet in groups, unless you decide we are friends, and you want to cultivate a closer relation, and she said no, no, no, I'm a Christian, that limits my choice to 20 per cent of the population and we meet in Church."

Q: "Do you feel a complacency among the people here?"

Mr Lee: "No, a complacency in the sense that their expectations are high and they expect their expectations to be met. But they want higher and higher opportunities, more and more opportunities."

Q: "Why does Singapore have to be number one in everything? Why can't you just be one of the ten great cities of Asia? What's wrong with that idea?"

Mr Lee: "If we don't strive to be number one, you won't be number ten. You will be number ten. You try to be number one, you might be number two or number three. Do your best. You don't have to be number one but do your best and try to be number one. That's our attitude. Look, we have got no natural resources, we have got nothing except human beings in a small strategic location."

Q: "You have got a good location."

Mr Lee: "But you must have people with training, with skills, well-organized, disciplined and productive. I mean so if we didn't have an efficient port, we wouldn't be the biggest container port in the world. Where are the container TEUs from? We are not a big manufacturing China centre, they are from China, they are from Europe or Japan, but they transit through to Singapore because that's where they come in and six hours before they are in, they telegraph what containers they want removed, where they are."

Q: "I was there, I was very impressed. It was pretty cool."

Mr Lee: "So they arrive, immediately work starts, cleared, loaded, off they go in four or five, six hours depending on the number of containers."

Q: "Do you use a personal computer?"

Mr Lee: "Yes, I do."

Q: "And do you are really up on this stuff?"

Mr Lee: "Well otherwise I'm out of the loop. I used to correct my copies and fax it back. Then I find the young ministers are all correcting each other's copies on the net. So I decided I better learn this or I'll be out of it altogether."

Q: "What do you think really the overall effect that the internet is going to be in the general sense and especially in a government like the one that you have here where suddenly like there is this degree of personal freedom as given to people by using the internet and a lot of this stuff on the internet is not stuff you really want your children to see for instance."

Mr Lee: "What can you do?"

Q: "What can you do? Is that the answer?"

Mr Lee: "You have got to decide as the Chinese have decided that they have to take the risk and they try to minimize the risk and censor this and censor that."

Q: "Do you approve that?"

Mr Lee: "No, but we cannot censor it because you just go to some server outside and you have got access, so it's a waste of time."

Q: "And also no matter what you do, you are not going to be able to, these hacker guys, you can't beat them."

Mr Lee: "You have got to leave it to the parents and the schoolteachers and peer groups, to say look don't waste your time doing this."

Q: "One thing that puzzles in Singapore is actually a very interesting place because of different paradoxes I find in this country. What would be, forgive me if this a little bit on the lewd side, why would you ban Playboy for instance and allow prostitution?"

Mr Lee: "We banned Playboy in the 1960s when it was a different world in a different standard. It is still banned, that's all. I mean why do you want buy Playboy now if you can go into the internet? You get more than what you get in Playboy, that's that."

Q: "I'm not going to ask you if you looked at it recently."

Mr Lee: "No, you can't, I mean it's not possible. It's part of the globalized village we live in and we have got to learn to adapt and live a sufficiently wholesome life to succeed. If you become addicted to all this porn and drugs and gambling on the net, then you are finished. I mean in Korea, they have become addicts at this."

Q: "I think that there is a lot of addiction in that, yes, there's no doubt about it. Speaking of that, so what made you decide to have these casinos?"

Mr Lee: "When I was a student in England, the only casino in Europe was in Monaco."

Q: "I remember that."

Mr Lee: "The younger ministers have said look, we must have a casino, otherwise, we are out of the circuit of this fast set that goes around the world, with F1 and so on. And it will increase the tourist trade because the casino will pay for all the shows. Otherwise, the shows are too expensive. So I've been resisting it and I've told the Prime Minister, I said no, no, don't do that, you'll bring mafias here and money laundering and all kinds of crime."

Q: "I think it is a definite risk."

Mr Lee: "Then I see the British having casinos and Switzerland having casinos. I said God, the world has changed. If I don't change, we'll be out of business. So alright, we'll put up two casinos, so obviously they are not going to target Singaporeans because there are not enough numbers for two casinos. So they got to bring them in from China, India and elsewhere and we have passed legislation to say that any family can ask for a ban on ..."

Q: "A person from that family."

Mr Lee: "And the Singaporeans when they go in, they have got to pay \$100."

Q: "That doesn't sound quite fair."

Mr Lee: "No, they are going, driving up to a place called Genting, Star Cruises come in and they go outside the territorial limit and they gamble. So I said you do that because I do not want to be blamed and the Prime Minister doesn't want, and his Cabinet doesn't want to be blamed for those who get addicted. And there will be those who will get addicted."

Q: "How do you, are you still morally opposed to them or does pragmatism always take precedence in your thinking?"

Mr Lee: "Well, it is useless to resist when it is everywhere."

Q: "Well, the fact that it's everywhere, maybe it is the reason to resist."

Mr Lee: "No, you cannot stop it. You want to cut off the internet? You want to cut off your cellphones? You want to cut off satellite TV? Then you will become like Myanmar. It's not possible."

Q: "No, thank you. That's interesting. I hate to be jumping around but I don't want to take so much of your time. What do you do about this kind of thing? I would assume in a government, it is easier to legislate people having less children than it is to legislate having them more children."

Mr Lee: "No, we can't legislate. We don't legislate, we just encourage and we say if you have the third child, you will get these benefits."

Q: "Well, legislate is the wrong word but ..."

Mr Lee: "We encourage them with incentives. Yeah, we pay for full pay leave, we don't burden the employer because the employer will then say look I'm not going to employ these women. So the government pays for them, the employer is entitled to two-three months, three months?"

YY: "Four months now."

Mr Lee: "No, no. Employer two months, we pay two months and it will become six months and so on."

Q: "During the 1960s and the 1970s, you ran a programme 'Two is Enough'. Did the government succeed too well?"

Mr Lee: "No, it has happened all over Asia. It has happened in Hong Kong, it has happened in Korea, they never had this Stop at Two, it has happened in Japan, it is the education that the women and equal job opportunities. Once the women are educated, they have equal job opportunities, some of them earning as much if not more than men, there is a certain independence of choice. I mean they say what's the hurry? Singlehood is no burden, my daughter is 55, unmarried, mother has been nagging her when she was in her 30s, she's quite happy."

Q: "Do you feel an urge to have more grandchildren or is it."

Mr Lee: "I've got two boys who have got grandchildren but I feel sad for her. Because when my wife is gone and I'm gone, this hotel which keeps her going. She will have to manage it."

Q: "I mean the thing is like, occasionally, it seems like the Singapore Government succeeds as I was talking to a gentleman today, he said in India, they propose a lot of things, and fairly high percentage are never going to get done right but in Singapore, things are proposed and you do it. And you finish it. Therefore, if it is a mistake, then you have to redo it."

Mr Lee: "No, what is the mistake? We can't undo women's education, equal job opportunities. But the whole problem springs as I was talking to this physiotherapist, I said suppose you were not educated to a point where you are independent, your mother and father would have got you matched off."

Q: "Matched off, what does that mean?"

Mr Lee: "Father and mother will look for another father and mother with an appropriate background, no inherited diseases and similar social affluence and then they marry them off, they get them together and meet and no objections and then you are married. Then you love the man, or you love the woman you marry. But she's educated and she's thinking of a degree in physiotherapy and upgrading herself and so..."

Q: "There is this feeling that you want to keep the society going."

Mr Lee: "Well, fortunately for us."

Q: "And reproduction is an important part of that, right?"

Mr Lee: "I've been urging them. The only developed societies that have succeeded are Sweden and France and that's not that they have succeeded, they have just about reached replacement rate. And we've studied their incentives and they are enormous. Crèches, full pay leave for husband and wife, nine months and you can extend it and so on and free nurseries, factories and offices have nurseries and feeding rooms for the mothers. We will get to that stage eventually but meanwhile, it takes a long time to change mindsets."

Q: "That's true."

Mr Lee: "Since we are small population and we can top up, we are topping up. The trouble is the moment they come here, they also have one or two children because they begin to think like Singaporeans. Why? I will lose my chance of promotion. So I'm out of business for six months, nine months, I come back, the others have overtaken me."

Q: "Well, I think that's what I've heard. A lot of people say like well, foreign workers have come here and they've just come to work. That's what they do, they are here to work, so it's hard to compete with people who are just don't have any other distractions. I mean I've heard this several times."

Mr Lee: "Without them, what will happen to us? We will shrink and eventually, one- and-a-half workers will have to support two parents and is that sustainable?"

Q: "I don't know, probably not."

Mr Lee: "Therefore, the one worker will move out rather than pay the heavy taxes. And move out and give remittances to his parents wherever he is."

Q: "So, well, this is a question that came up several times when I have been driving around in the taxicab, all I have to do is say "how's business?" and then you don't have to say another word. The Singapore people, they just start talking."

Mr Lee: "The tourists have gone down."

Q: "And they have all these life stories."

Mr Lee: "Swine fever and so on."

Q: "Then I would say I'm going to see the MM, what would you ask him? And he goes...and one thing did come up which is not, I don't mean to...one of the things he said well, he's the father but he should let us go. Then with words like as a patriarch of the country, is there a point in which you should step away because the perception is I guess that I know what you really do, but the perception is that you are still the face of the country."

Mr Lee: "Well, no, that's a public perception which is not held by those in the know. I mean all the top executives know that they are dealing with the ministers and the decisions are made by the ministers. My job is really as a long-range radar to look out for opportunities and for threats. So I can sit down and talk to you because I have got nothing urgent in my tray."

Q: "I'm glad to hear that."

Mr Lee: "I cannot work at that old pace. I can work with subjects that require contemplation, time, which really is backed up by my experience and my feel of how things will develop."

Q: "Well, nobody knows Singapore better than you."

Mr Lee: "I mean, I guess, supposing I had not intervened in the casino debate, the religious groups would fought tooth and nail to stop it and the Prime Minister and his Cabinet were in a lot of trouble, so I stood up and said look, I understand the views, I was of the same view but I'll tell you the reason why I have changed my mind and that had a calming effect because if you don't do this, you are not going to be part of the modern world. Either you accept that this is part of today's globalized world and you have F1 and all this glitzy events, closed roads, light up the city and so on, or you are out of business. And in Singapore, if you are out of business, you are out of food."

Q: "Singapore is always been about business. They say in America, business of America's business, I think it's true here too, right?"

Mr Lee: "It has to be. Otherwise, we won't survive."

Q: "When you look out the window, and you see all these big buildings, is this what you envision? Is this the world that you hoped to be?"

Mr Lee: "After we were booted out from Malaysia, before Malaysia or during Malaysia, we thought we'll grow together as a commercial centre of the federation, the capital being Kuala Lumpur, like Washington, we'll be a kind of New York. But once we were out on our own, I studied what happened to Malta, Gibraltar, all the island colonies and Hongkong and I thought we were in a similar position to Hongkong, so I knew that high-rises will be inevitable. And Hongkong is all economy, they have packed all of them together in a little piece of flat land across the Bay, across the harbour, and very few houses up on the hills, on the peak, because that's where the British overlords used to stay and moreover it's costly because they have got to have retaining walls otherwise, you have landslides and so on. So we decided we'll have to spread out over the whole island and have high density living but with lots of green spaces and room for recreation and breathing space. The school I was at was the best school in Singapore, Raffles Institution, now we have Raffles City, four big high rises designed by I M Paye. But what's the choice? It's a prime site, so the school has now got spanking new buildings, where is it now? Bishan which is near Bishan Park but it has lost, but that old school we thought, I thought about it hard and it was made of bricks and mortar and boards, so they keep it going in a tropical climate, prone to white ants, will be a very expensive business. So I said let's give up."

Q: "I mean one of the things, what is the value of past place like Singapore? Several people actually use the same metaphor, it's interesting, I have two movies in my head, I have the movie of the world that I grew up in, and I have the movie of the way things are now. One in my head is getting very frayed of the past and I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Mr Lee: "I used to cycle to school. Empty roads, when it rains, I have got to have a raincoat. Now it's just not done, with all these huge buses and cars, so my grandchildren are advised not to travel by bicycles. London has lost a lot of its ancient buildings but it's got enough solid buildings of stone like St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey or the Houses of Parliament which are very costly to maintain and they keep that as icons. Well, also the Oxbridge Colleges, they are very uncomfortable to live in, I mean you want a brand name, you try and get there but choose a nice new building annex that they have built, if you are put into one of the old rooms, then you are cold and it's several centuries old."

Q: "I mean they didn't have central heating then."

Mr Lee: "Now, they have put in some central heating, I mean they are piped."

Q: "Never so cold as I was in London."

Mr Lee: "But that's a trade off. So we keep a few along the riverside and amongst the better buildings which are worth preserving because it's not so expensive and they are also architecturally interesting. So there are few landmarks. In my own constituency, I've got two streets which have been kept up and the rest have just gone high rise but they have been kept up and used for other purposes, no longer domestic but boutique restaurants, studios and so on. Otherwise, you can't justify the economic costs of maintaining them."

Q: "As you get older, do you get more sentimental?"

Mr Lee: "Sorry."

Q: "As you get older, do you feel more sentimental and nostalgic or do you manage to avoid that? I mean I know you are a pragmatist."

Mr Lee: "No, it was a nice leisurely place, large spaces, I would travel along what is called now Mountbatten Road, used to be called Grove Road and there was a swamp on one side and now we have all built up areas, it was an airport, now the airport is gone, the British flying boats used to land on the river which I remember. I mean look, do you want to, if we were the size of let's say the US, lots of empty spaces, then you might be able to keep more of it. But I see New York hasn't kept much of it either."

Q: "Well, it's a mix. In Manhattan, it's true."

Mr Lee: "You have kept the churches because they are made of stone."

Q: "The Empire State Building is still there."

Mr Lee: "But the Empire State Building now looks tacky compared to the others...."

Q: "It looks great!"

Mr Lee: "It looks old fashioned."

Q: "Well, the view, I mean the Chrysler Building is a work of art. Most of the buildings they've built since then are not works of art."

Mr Lee: "That's what you think but the architects. Their grandchildren would say what a wonderful architect that was. I mean aesthetic taste varies with each generation."

Q: "I don't know. I think there's a kind of, did you see that building, a picture from China and the building just fell over. I know you don't have that kind of construction processes here."

Mr Lee: "You see the Chinese are nouveau riche and the contractors want to be part of the nouveau riche, so they ..."

Q: "I mean how does it feel if you were living in a building next door, I feel I have got to move."

Mr Lee: "They are in a very fast transition and they see their neighbours getting very wealthy and they say I must get wealthy too because my children, the money that I have got a house, got a car and so on. So they take these shortcuts at the expense of public safety. Bridges have fallen down, when they built this enormous barrage up the Yangtze River and the Three Gorges, Jiu Rongji had a very hard time knocking heads together. It's the process of getting rich in transition and watching your neighbours get rich and you say I must get there too quick or I lose my opportunities. That's that."

Q: "I don't want to take more of your time. Let me just ask you a couple more things. How would you like to be remembered?"

Mr Lee: "I don't think I can decide that. I live my life in accordance to what I think is worth doing. I never wanted to be in politics. I wanted to be a lawyer and make a good living, to be a good advocate but I was thrown into it as a result of all these political earthquakes that took place. So I was saddled with the responsibility and I just have to be responsible to get the place going. That's all and I mean we've got here and I can't decide what posterity is going to do. I studied law and in the law, the British said you can will yourself, you can will your property, the longest you can do it is life and lives in being and 21 years thereafter. After that, you can't control your trust. So in my case, I can't go that long. All I can do is to make sure that when I leave, the institutions are good, sound, clean, efficient and there's a government in place which knows what it has got to do and is looking for a successive government of quality. That's all I can do."

Q: "If you were to leave the stage in the larger sense, and say in ten years, I think you are seen as a cult figure as you have just said about the casino thing, I mean does it have to be somebody like you to keep the place going or ..."

Mr Lee: "No, I mean look America got going long after Jefferson, George Washington and all that."

Q: "But I think ...(indistinct)... who did big things."

Mr Lee: "Nobody, Charles de Gaulle says nobody, I am not indestructible. When I read his biography, I read in English, and he said that, I said that is a wise man. So I remembered that and I know that come a certain time, and I didn't expect to live so long either, it's just good medicine and good surgery that has kept me here."

Q: "We used to have a joke, if I knew I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself."

Mr Lee: "Well, it so happened and I just do what I think I can contribute to make the place, to consolidate what has been gained and it can still go to waste. It can still spiral down."

Q: "Through no fault of anybody's?"

Mr Lee: "Look, I once had to make an impromptu speech in Sydney, I've just come from New Zealand. So in the end they said no speech, no speeches and the Premier of the state made a very well-prepared speech so I had to respond. So what do I say off the cuff? I said I've just come from New Zealand and I'll tell you what my thoughts were. In 100 years from now, I go back to New Zealand and there will be the grass, the sheep, the cows, the tornados or hurricanes at Wellington, and there will always be this green pleasant place and not industrially developed because it's the last stop in the bus line and in 100 years from today, I'm not sure that there'll be a Singapore. It depends on what my successors do. I mean that's the cards we were handed. So it's not up to me. What is up to me is make sure the place is ticking, make sure the institutions are there, the systems are in place, make sure there is a government that is fit for the job and then it is up to them to ensure continuity. That's that."

Q: "Do you feel satisfied that that's moving along quite well? Or do you worry?"

Mr Lee: "I think for the next ten years, with this team in charge, it is going to be fine. Whether they will do well for the next 10-15 years depends on whether they get a younger team in place, well imbedded into the methods of the government, integrity, ability, and making decisions for the public good, and not for your personal benefit. That's all. It is difficult because it means sacrificing privacy and sacrificing pay. Now we solved the pay problem or semi-solved it by giving them 80 per cent of the average of six major salary earners."

Q: "Is that how you arrived at it?"

Mr Lee: "Yeah, but we are always lagging behind because whenever there's a downturn, we don't give the rise. Whenever there's an upturn, the private sectors goes up, shoots up suddenly and we can't keep pace because the public says no, this is too much."

Q: "Well, when people are getting US\$16 billion bonuses for bringing the country into the ground, it is hard to keep up."

Mr Lee: "I was once asked about the enormous, the best paid ministers in the world. I said you should look at the wives. The lowest-paid ministers have wives who are glittering with jewels and with big mansions."

Q: "So that means they are corrupt."

Mr Lee: "No, I didn't say that."

Q: "That was pretty way to be said."

Mr Lee: "But it's true. So Singaporeans have to decide. Do you want to underpay a minister and you have the kind of shenanigans as you have in the British Parliament? You know they repair their homes in the country and in London and charge it to their account. Or you pay them a proper wage and said after that, look after everything. Nobody gets any special perks. That's your salary, you buy your car, you do what everything is yours. Official entertainment, you have got an expense account. Your secretary monitors it and audits channel clears it. So everything is above board and the public knows that. So whatever they grumble, they know that they are not being shortchanged."

Q: "There are grumbles but there are always grumbles."

Mr Lee: "There must be. Singaporeans are champion grumblers."

Q: "Thank you so much."

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