

**Welcome Remarks by Prof Tan Eng Chye, NUS President
at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference
30 September 2019, 6.30 pm,
Fairmont Ballroom, Raffles City Convention Centre**

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Mr Heng Swee Keat and Mrs Heng;

Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy;

Mr Janadas Devan, Director of the Institute of Policy Studies;

Esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the National University of Singapore, I am delighted to welcome you to the Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

This year is a special year for Singapore, as we commemorate the 200th year of Sir Stanford Raffles' arrival on our shores. In 1819, Sir Stanford Raffles, representing the British East India Company, concluded a treaty with the Sultan of Johor to establish a trading post on this island; this marked a key inflection point that set Singapore on its trajectory to modernity.

Singapore became part of a global network of trade in goods between the East and the West, a hub for the exchange of ideas, and a theatre of shifting geopolitical power as competing ideologies and empires wrestled with one another, in cycles of war and peace in the region.

After the Second World War, our founding fathers fought for independence from the British; our port city became a sovereign nation; settlements became homes, and sojourners who came to Singapore to make a living, became citizens; in fact, the legal status of Singapore citizenship came into being only 62 years ago.¹

It is this long and full journey to nationhood – from Singapore to Singaporeans – that the national Bicentennial commemorative events seek to examine. Indeed, Singapore’s journey started more than two hundred years ago; the *Sejarah Melayu*, or Malay Annals, records that in 1299, the Sumatran Prince Sang Nila Utama founded the Kingdom of Singapura on the island of Temasek, as it was known then.

The national Bicentennial commemoration has generated lively debate among Singaporeans both online and offline. (It is said that *Hindsight is 2020*, but I do not quite think my Historian colleagues will agree with this!) History is often complex and multifaceted, with competing viewpoints about any one piece of historical evidence. The Bicentennial commemoration efforts have heightened awareness and consciousness of Singapore’s past. It is heartening to see Singaporeans taking an active interest in our nation’s history; they are desiring to be critically aware, exploring and discovering evidence and sources, and making sense of them.

¹ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/evolution-singapore-citizenship>

The centerpiece of the commemoration efforts is the multisensory, immersive show called the Bicentennial Experience at Fort Canning, which traces Singapore's history since 1299. The show has proven to be so popular that its run has been extended by three months, as announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at his National Day Rally speech. May I encourage everyone to attend this show; admission is free. The show and exhibition are very well-curated, with many fine details. Everyone will learn and discover something about Singapore. I must congratulate Gene Tan, the Executive Director of the Singapore Bicentennial Office, and his team, for putting together this novel, impactful and successful show that resonates with the public, and provokes each of us to think and reflect on Singapore's journey.

In the same spirit of curiosity, intrigue and learning, this special Singapore Bicentennial Conference seeks to discuss Singapore's 700-year history, spanning the eras before, during and well after British colonial rule. It hopes to enrich our understanding of how life was like, how Singapore came to being, and to present the sense of complexity and rich tapestry of what makes us who we are. The conference assembles a stellar line-up of academics and public intellectuals, from Singapore and international circles, and they will take us through the vicissitudes of Singapore's journey.

It was not a predictable linear arc; there were highs and lows; there was the role of luck; of moving forward and backwards; of being part of larger political entities and of being kept separate from them. There was the role of shaping our own destiny but of also being part of broad civilizational forces.

I am sure we will all draw lessons, insights and inspiration from our history. This will in turn will guide us, and give us confidence to navigate this future of change . It seems to be that there is much for us to have to grapple with, individually, and as a society in the face of technological disruption, climate change, identity politics, and the changing world order amongst others. But as a small, open island, Singapore has never been immune to dark clouds, to global and regional developments, and to opportunities. History offers insights and perspectives on the decisions we have taken that have shaped our course, and how we can remain relevant. On this note, I must thank all speakers and chairpersons who have come from far and wide to share their scholarship and to enrich our discussion.

Beyond academic discourse, it is also crucial that we hear from our political leaders on how this history influences their own grasp of contemporary challenges. This evening, we have the great pleasure of welcoming Acting Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat to participate in a dialogue session with Ambassador Chan Heng Chee. Thank you DPM Heng for accepting our invitation, and thank you Prof Chan for moderating the session which will follow

our meal. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the generous gifts of our sponsors.

To conclude, let me share a quote by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In a speech marking the 150th anniversary of Britain's arrival in Singapore, he said, "Anniversaries must not mean a harking back to some idyllic, romanticised past, even though such an exercise in nostalgia is not without its therapeutic value. For us, this anniversary is a significant and formal moment, for a brief pause, to study and scrutinise the record of the last 150 years, learn the lessons therefrom, and with confidence renewed, surge forward to improve upon the past".

This Singapore Bicentennial Conference aims to fulfil such an aspiration, by critically analysing the records of seven hundred years of history. It is an ambitious goal but with the thought leadership on stage and also across the room, I know we will step out at the end of the conference more fully grounded in our past, more appreciative of our present achievements, and certainly primed for a bright and better future.

It therefore leaves me now to wish everyone a fruitful and enjoyable conference. Thank you.