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DEAN, FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
PUBLIC ORATOR FOR EMERITUS SENIOR MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG
HONORARY DEGREE OF LAWS RECIPIENT
AT THE HONORARY DEGREE CONFERMENT CEREMONY
MONDAY, 6 JULY 2015, 11.00 AM
AT THE UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

As Singapore's second Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong is a man whose life and times have been closely entwined with the fortunes of our country. As Singapore approaches its Golden Jubilee, Mr Goh can also look back with pride to 50 years of distinguished service to the nation, beginning in 1964 as an Administrative Service officer in the Economic Planning Unit.

He had graduated from the University of Singapore with first-class honours in Economics in the same year (1964), and was later awarded a fellowship to study development economics at Williams College in Massachusetts, USA, where he again graduated top of his class in 1967. In 1969, he was seconded to Neptune Orient Lines – Singapore's national shipping line – where he moved rapidly through the ranks from Planning and Projects Manager to Managing Director by the end of 1973.

A major turning point for Mr Goh was to come. In 1976, he was persuaded by the then Minister for Finance, Mr Hon Sui Sen, to stand for elections as a PAP candidate in Marine Parade. He won that seat and has been a Member of Parliament for Marine Parade since then.

From 1979 to 1990, Mr Goh served in many capacities: Senior Minister of State for Finance, Minister for Trade and Industry, Minister for Health, Minister for Defence, and First Deputy Prime Minister. In these positions, Mr Goh excelled in his work and initiated many policies that sought to improve Singapore's economy, defence capabilities and the quality of life for Singaporeans.

Mr Goh took the helm as Prime Minister of Singapore in 1990, a position he was to hold for 14 years. During this time, Singapore's economy grew by an average of 6.4 per cent annually, and an "external wing" was created through a concerted regionalisation policy. He also set in motion social policies to improve the wellbeing of Singaporeans, including setting up the Workforce Development Agency to enhance the employability of the workforce, endowment funds to assist specific groups in need such as the ElderCare Fund, the Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund for low-skilled workers, and Medifund for those with insufficient savings in their Medisave. Through the creation of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and by advancing the concept of Shared Values to bring Singaporeans even closer together as a society, he further strengthened the foundations for nation-building. Mr Goh also showed great leadership in steering the nation through tough times including the Asian Financial Crisis

in 1997, terrorist threats in 2002, the economic recession from 2001-2003, and the SARS epidemic in 2003.

During his time in parliament as Prime Minister and then Senior Minister, Mr Goh placed emphasis on improving bilateral ties with our strategic partners. These efforts have been widely recognised. He received the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 2004 from the Government of India. Other recipients of this award include Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi. He was appointed Honorary Companion of the Order of Australia in 2005, which is Australia's only order of chivalry. In 2011, he was conferred the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun for his part in strengthening ties between Singapore and Japan.

After his retirement from the Cabinet in 2011, Mr Goh's long-standing interest in community wellbeing and services continues, together with his support for research in the social sciences. He is an advocate for the improvement of the quality of living through social policy innovation and sees a role for social science research in deepening understanding of current social issues and calibrating the effectiveness of social programmes. Based on his longstanding and deep association with residents of the Marine Parade constituency, he has deep insights into issues as experienced by ordinary people – HDB buy-back schemes, multicultural families, marriage and babies, community services for the elderly. This first hand feel for issues on the ground complements his interest in social science research that seeks to understand the changes in the community. This approach reflects his thinking, his training, and his deep roots in Singapore society.

Mr Goh's association with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences goes all the way back to his undergraduate days at the University of Singapore where he read English, Geography and Economics. He qualified for direct honours in all three subjects but had to choose one. In his own words, Literature was his "romantic interest", Geography he found to be "a breeze", but eventually he settled for Economics as his "practical streak" won out. He went on to graduate with first-class honours in Economics, but I [as a geographer] have the satisfaction to know that he appreciated the fact that the Head of Geography at that time was the only head to reach out to a brilliant student and try to recruit him into the Geography Honours class. As Mr Goh puts it: "I was touched by the interest the geography professor showed in me and the future of his department...I wondered why the other departments did not make a bid for the better students."

Given his academic aptitude, it is not surprising that Mr Goh had wanted to become a writer or a journalist, and, in fact, he almost joined academia. It was never his ambition to become a politician. After his first degree, Mr Goh had received a research scholarship to pursue a Masters degree at the University of Singapore. However, two weeks after he started work as a research scholar, he was gently told by the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lim Tay

Boh that the Public Service Commission would not transfer his bond to the University. As Mr Goh reflected: “My life would have been quieter had I chosen to study Geography, or had Professor Lim Tay Boh been able to persuade the PSC to release me to the University.” So it was not meant to be – NUS’ major loss would, however, become Singapore’s much greater gain.

As seen, Mr Goh’s time at the University combined romance (Literature), effortless (Geography) and pragmatism (Economics). But to him, what was most memorable was not what he learnt in his classes, but the experiences that came with it. In his words, “When I look back at my university days, what I remember is not what the professors and lecturers had taught us...What sticks in my mind are experiences and the human touch.”

Today, we are proud of Mr Goh’s distinguished achievements as NUS’ alumnus, but more importantly, we cherish “the human touch” he embodies in the way he sustains an attitude of service to the nation. Today, we honour his manifold contributions, over no less than five decades, to bettering the lives of the people of Singapore.

Mr Chancellor, may it please you to confer on Mr Goh Chok Tong the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws.