

# SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

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EXCERPT OF SPEECH BY DR TOH CHIN CHYE, MINISTER FOR HEALTH,  
AT CELEBRATION OF CENTENARY OF ST ANTHONY'S BOYS' SCHOOL  
AND ST ANTHONY'S CONVENT ON SATURDAY, 4 AUGUST '79  
AT ST JOSEPH'S CHURCH COMPOUND AT 8.00 PM.

One hundred years ago it was convenient for a colonial government to assume as little responsibility as possible in educating the population of Singapore. After all Singapore's main purpose was to promote British trade interests while getting involved in the task of education meant paying subsidies to schools. So it was that schools which sprang up then were mainly the initiative of private enterprises, charitable organisations and missionary zeal. Some of these schools have disappeared with the deaths of their founders but the missionary schools have endured.

It is hard for us to imagine today how a school for only six students can be started. But that was how St Anthony's Boys' School began exactly one hundred years ago when Singapore's population numbered 137,000. Very few remember the name of the priest who founded the school. He has long departed but the school has remained so that today there are a total enrollment of 3,256 pupils - 2,027 girls in St Anthony's Convent and 1,229 in St Anthony's Boys' School.

This reflects the tenacity and zeal of those who work in the Roman Catholic Mission. Students may come, teachers may go but the institution remains forever. Indeed the centenary of your two schools must make us ask "what is the driving force that has made the school survive the many political events and social changes that took place over 100 years?".

The founders of missionary schools and their successors had a singular purpose to convert the local population to the Catholic faith or if they did not succeed to teach at least the moral virtues as perceived by the Christian religion. Singapore, however,

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did not develop like Goa in India which has a dominant Catholic population simply because the population in Singapore were already steeped in the ethics of Confucianism and Buddhism and Islamic missionaries had preceded the arrival of the Christians. The students who flocked to missionary schools went there perhaps less with the intention of being received into the Christian faith but to become literate so that they can progress and make a living in a British colony. While most parents were more concerned with matters temporal I have no doubt that the spiritual teachings of the schools' teachers must have also made an abiding impression on their students. They in turn when they became fathers or mothers sent their children to be educated in the schools where they had studied. This provided continuity for the growth of the schools. Thus from a handful of unknown seedlings St Anthony's Boys' School and St Anthony's Convent have turned out several generations of students to become useful citizens some of whom we note with pleasure hold prominent roles in public service.

As independent Singapore is only fourteen years old we can learn from institutions which have withstood the test of time. To make hasty changes for the sake of change as a manifestation of independence can mean learning from trial and error and infliction upon ourselves unnecessary pain. Just as the missionary schools have survived by clever adaptation to changing political and social circumstances so also the survival of Singapore as an independent state must depend upon our ability to learn from historical experience and in the process we evolve political and social institutions such as Parliament, the Judiciary and other citizen organisations which will endure even in the face of future trials and unseen difficulties. Revolutions seek to wipe out the immediate present but even countries which have undergone revolutionary upheavals have settled down and seek inspiration in their historical past. Our task is made difficult that Singapore does not have several centuries of history to look back to but our predecessors have sunk roots deep enough for modern Singapore to flourish so that today education, health and housing for the population are no longer issues left to charitable organisations but are direct responsibilities of government.