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SPEECH BY DR. GOH KENG SWEE, MINISTER OF DEFENCE,
AT THE OPENING OF JURONG BIRD PARK ON SUNDAY, 4TH 3rd
JANUARY 1971 AT 6.00 P.M.

Since Mr. Woon Wah Siang has revealed, doubtless with the best intentions in the world, my involvement in this project, some words of explanation from me seem to be called for, perhaps even some words in exculpation. For in the history of mankind, there have from time to time risen to eminence men of high principle and staunch moral character, who are prone to regard aviaries and bird parks as unworthy frivolities.

The Confucian scholar Mr. Ni Jo-shui was one such person. He lived during the time of the great Tang Emperor, Hsuan Tsung, whose reign from A.D. 712 to 756 witnessed the apogee of the dynasty's cultural brilliance. In the year 716, Emperor Hsuan Tsung decided to build a bird park in the Imperial garden and despatched collection parties to the four corners of his realm.

Mr. Ni objected to this enterprise and addressed the Emperor as follows:-

"Though farms and mulberries are in a critical states just now, collection parties capture birds and wildfowl in their nets to supply frivolities for garden and pond. From far beyond the river and mountain passes, these are transferred under escort by water and land and fed with millet and meat, so that passers-by cannot but conclude that Your Majesty esteems birds while despising men."

It is difficult to follow the logic of this complaint. Apart from the elementary point that one can contain both birds and men, birds, unlike predatory animals like tigers and leopards, do not eat much and impose no strain on the nation's food supply. However, this was preparatory to the main argument to come and Mr. Ni continued: "To Your Imperial Majesty, a phoenix must surely be an ordinary bird and a unicorn an ordinary beast."

This was hitting below the belt for Mr. Ni knew that Hsuan Tsung could contest this proposition without serious damage to the

dignity of his office. Then came the telling blow: "If so, how much more ordinary is a pond heron or tufted duck! In what way are they so worthy of esteem?" Thus cornered, Houan Young was obliged to disband the collection parties and release the birds. He then presented Mr. Ni with forty pieces of rich cloth. I suspect that this is in subtle revenge. Though the history books did not record it, this present to the austere Mr. Ni must have led to a rupture of domestic peace between him and his wife as to what to do with it.

It is more than possible that there may be people in Singapore who question the propriety of building the Jurong Bird Park at a time when the Republic is assailed by so many problems. I will justify the project on four grounds.

First, its origin is impeccable, its conception immaculate. The idea first occurred to me while attending the World Bank meeting in September 1967 in Rio de Janeiro when during a free moment I visited the Rio Aviary. It was confirmed in the soundness of the idea when attending an ECAL meeting in Bangkok the following year. The authorities managing the Bangkok Aviary which I made a point to visit assured me the main problem was what to do with the millions of bahts they had accumulated over the years.

My second line of defence is that this enterprise should be self-supporting, though it may not be in the same money spinning class as the Bangkok Aviary because of its much higher capitalization.

The third justification is that, unlike the aviaries of the Emperor Houan Young, this one will be open to all people and at all times, albeit for a modest fee.

And finally, the purpose of the Bird Park. Here one should be careful not to overstate one's case. It is as well to concede at the outset that the Bird Park will not make our society more rugged certainly not with the train service Mr. Woon is providing. It will have negligible effect on the productivity of workers in the Republic. Its efficiency as a means of tightening national cohesion is also open to doubt, as is its contribution to raising cultural or education standards of the population. I am afraid that the Bird Park will achieve none of these admirable ends. But it will add to the enjoyment of our citizens, especially our children. At the risk of appearing less than God-fearing, I give this as my final justification.

The bird park is incomplete in one respect. I had originally planned to introduce falconry displays as part of the bird park's activities. The valley next to this seems well suited for this purpose. We approached the British Services for an adviser in the belief that among these versatile and intrepid people, can be found experts in any of the more esoteric pursuits of man. However, it turned out that this royal sport had died a long time ago, most likely a sad victim of the great egalitarian movement of recent history.

I do not know whether any of the Ambassadors and High Commissioners gathered here represent a country where this noble sport is still practiced. I am not optimistic about the modern industrial nations. But perhaps in some quiet corner of the world, in some last refuge of reaction and obscurantism, people still happily engage in falconry without let or hindrance from tiresome moralisers. If one of Your Excellencies represents such a 20th century Ruritania, may I suggest that our respective Governments immediately enter into a Bilateral Technical Assistance Agreement for the Promotion of Falconry in Singapore.

DATE: 2ND JANUARY, 1971.