



# Tripartism and Singapore's Social Compact

Presentation by Mr Lim Boon Heng,  
former Secretary-General of the NTUC  
at the Tripartite Collective Dialogue on 6 Sep 2023

# ROOTS

Mr Lee Kuan Yew began his political life by representing workers.

The Singapore Union of Postal and Telecommunications Workers (SUPTW) were about to go on strike in 1952 and needed a legal advisor

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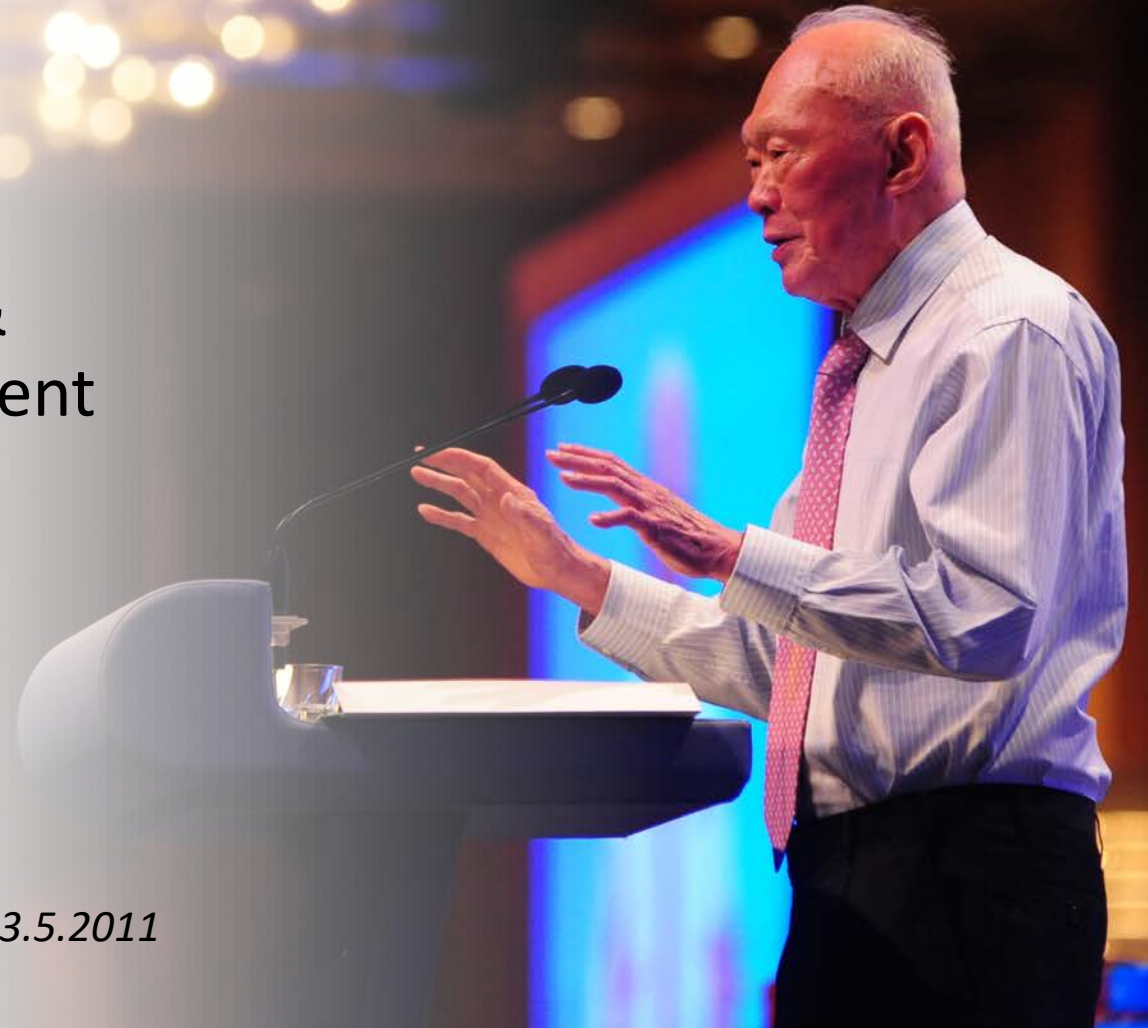
For two weeks the union ding-donged in the press against the Commissioner for Posts representing the Colonial government on the merits of their case. I drafted their statements. Public sentiments swung towards the unions, and the Colonial government had to give way: higher wages and better terms and conditions of service, removal of thick printed red stripes on their trousers making them look like circus attendants.”

*LKY, NTUC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner, 13.5.2011*

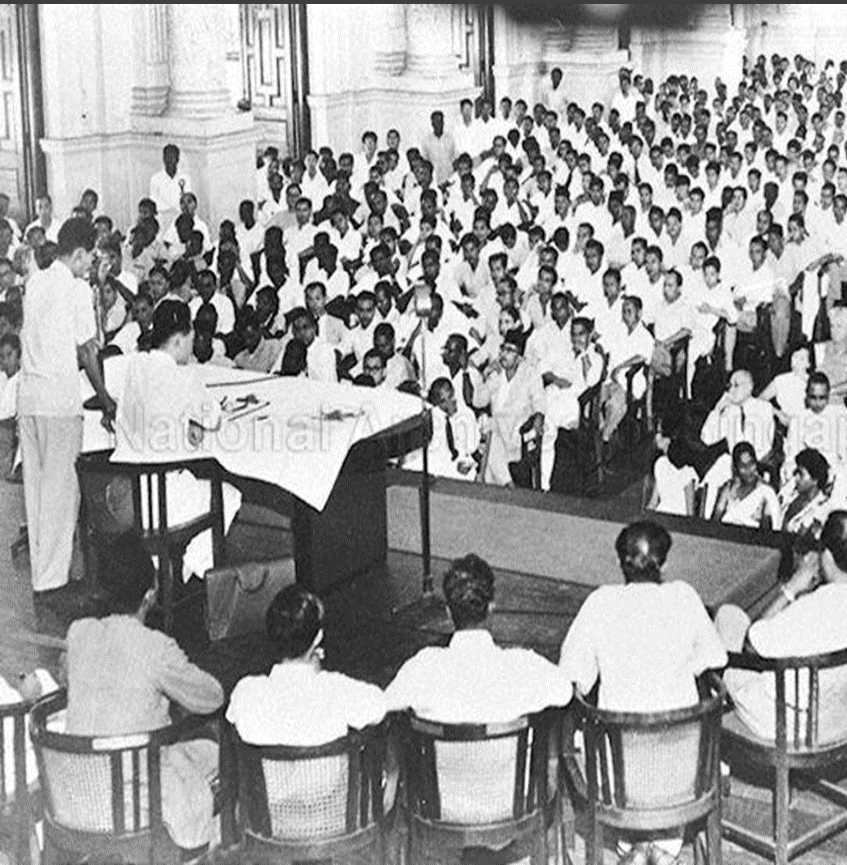
# Unions' Champion

“ Because the union won, I was next briefed by the Clerical Union of Post & Telegraph for their demands, which went to arbitration. Again, the union won. Thereafter, I became advisor to innumerable trade unions – English-speaking, Chinese-speaking and Malay-speaking.”

*LKY, NTUC 50th Anniversary Dinner, 13.5.2011*



# Founding of the PAP



“When the PAP had its inaugural meeting on November 21, 1954, out of the 14 convenors, almost half were unionists including President Devan Nair and the late P Govindasamy. Hence the PAP inaugural meeting could be considered the germination of the PAP-NTUC symbiosis.”

“The emergence of the PAP in 1954 provided the focus of the anti-colonial struggle in Singapore.”

*NTUC SG Ong Teng Cheong,  
NTUC Ordinary Delegates'  
Conference, 27.4.1984*

# Convenors of the Inaugural Meeting

- Dr Toh Chin Chye
- Lee Kuan Yew
- S Rajaratnam
- C V Devan Nair\*
- P Govindasamy\*
- Ismail Rahim\*
- Lee Gek Seng
- Fong Swee Suan\*

- A K Kuruppiah\*
- Mofradi b Hj Mohd Noor\*
- Tann Wee Keng
- Tann Wee Tiong
- Chan Chiaw Thor
- Abdul Samad

\* Unionists

# Unions Played Active Part

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- After the Party was inaugurated, in mass rallies to drum up public support, unions took an active part.
- E.G. In a mass rally on 30 January 1955 at the Victoria Memorial Hall, of 5 resolutions passed, 3 were moved by union leaders.
- A Special Party Conference was held on 13 February 1955 to decide to field a token participation for elections to the Legislative Assembly following the Rendel Constitution. The venue: Postal & Telecoms Workers' Union.
- Devan Nair was one of 4 PAP candidates. Ahmad Ibrahim, Vice-President of the Naval Base Labour Union stood as an independent.

# Objectives of the Party



1. To end colonialism...
2. To create a democratic unitary government of Malaya
3. To abolish the unjust inequalities of wealth and opportunity inherent in the present system
4. To establish an economic order which will give to all citizens the right to work and the full economic returns for their labour and skill
5. To ensure a decent living and social security to all those who through sickness, infirmity or old age, can no longer work
6. To infuse into the people of Malaya a spirit of national unity, self respect and self-reliance, and to inspire them with a sense of endeavour in the creation of a prosperous, stable and just society





# Party of the Workers

“ I was involved in about 50 or 60 unions, big and small over a period of ten years before I took office in 1959. . . . We understood that this fight is about a decent life for the workers.”

“ . . . in the first Legislative Assembly in 1959, 35% of our Assemblymen were trade unionists from the ground. . . . There was a shared experience. We went through battles together . . . the people who survived are solid for each other. They learn to trust each other. So, NTUC and the PAP were actually one.”

*LKY, NTUC 45th Anniversary Lecture, 6.9.2006*



# What is our Purpose?

- On 27 May 1965, in a debate in the Malaysian Parliament, Mr Lee Kuan Yew said:

“  
I don't deal in people's miseries.  
My business is the people's happiness.”



# Proclamation of Independence

“ Now I LEE KUAN YEW Prime Minister of Singapore, DO HEREBY PROCLAIM AND DECLARE on behalf of the people and the Government of Singapore that as from today the ninth day of August in the year one thousand nine hundred and sixty-five Singapore shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society.”

# National Pledge

“We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”

# For Workers

“The PAP has been a workers’ movement and has always received the support of the workers. A PAP Government is a government on the workers’ side . . .

It is our duty to see that the worker gets a fair return for his labour, without which capital is barren and fruitless. The wealth and prosperity which labour produces must be shared in wages, medical, health, holiday and other benefits, and in good working conditions.”

*LKY, Mass Rally at Geylang Serai, 1.3.1959*

# Fairness

“Developing the economy, increasing productivity, increasing returns, these make sense only when fair play and fair shares make it worth everyone's while to put in his share of effort for group survival and group prosperity.”

*LKY, NTUC Modernisation Seminar, 16.11.1969*



# Mindset of Leaders

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“We do things today with tomorrow in mind.”

*S Rajaratnam*

“A country big or small can only be great if the spirit of the people is great. That spirit must be devoted to the service of the country and the people.”

*Dr Toh Chin Chye, Inaugural Meeting of the PAP, 21.11.1954*

“An army of rabbits commanded by a lion is superior to an army of lions commanded by a rabbit.”

*Napoleon, as quoted by S Rajaratnam, 16.9.1983*



# Values

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Our Party has, by its clear forthright stand for independence, by the personal honesty and integrity of our party officials, and our party assemblymen, exposed by contrast the crookedness and dishonesty of others.”

“That is the strongest asset of the party today. Our next strongest asset is that we are the only party in Singapore with an organization. Officials of other political parties talk of “the people’. But they only work for themselves and when they speak of the people they only mean themselves.”

*LKY, Party's 1st Anniversary, 27.11.1955*



# Values

“ We had a deep sense of mission to establish a clean and effective government. When we took the oath of office . . . In June 1959, we all wore white shirts and white slacks to symbolize purity and honesty in our personal behaviour and public life”

*LKY, Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, 2000*



# Heart of the Man

“The question today is not whether or not to induct able men into the ranks of union membership. It is how grassroots union leaders are to identify which of the able men brought into their midst are sincere and reliable, are men of principles. For without conviction how can they serve the cause of the working man? Ability is easy to identify. What is difficult to see beyond ability, into the ‘heart’ of the man, for otherwise ability may mask selfishness and opportunism.”

“Those who are unselfish and sincere can instantly ‘feel’ who is selfish and insincere.”

*LKY, May Day Message 1979*

# Shared Interests

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Mr Lee Kuan Yew led unions to orientate  
towards national shared interests

Irrespective  
of Race,  
Language,  
Religion

“Your economic and social common interests must override your race, your language, your religion. If you are poor and have no money, whether you are Indian or a Malay or a Chinese, you are poor.”

*LKY, NTUC Delegates' Conference, 14.12.1964*

# Nation Building

“ Our immediate task is to build up a society in which man will be rewarded not according to the amount of property he owns, but according to his active contribution to society in physical and mental labour.”

*LKY, May Day Message, 1 May 1962*

# Fair Wages, Grow Economy

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...it is our duty to see that the worker gets a fair return for his labour, without which capital is barren and fruitless. The wealth and prosperity which labour produces must be shared in wages, medical, health, holiday and other benefits and in good working conditions.”

“Our guiding principle is ‘industrial peace with justice’. “

“Our policy will be framed not only to secure justice for labour, but also to ensure industrial peace for the further expansion of the economy.”

*LKY, Mass Rally at Geylang Serai, 1 March 1959*

# Think Whole Community

“A new phase has opened in the history of Singapore and with it comes a new phase in the trade union movement in which trade union leaders of stature must respond to the needs not only of their own union members but of the community and people as a whole.”

*LKY, Message to the Singapore Traction Company  
Employees' Union, 15.12.1959*



# Unions have Wider Responsibilities

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“The task of the trade union movement is not just to get more wages and better conditions of service, however important this may be to recruitment and membership. Unless the movement also accepts its wider responsibilities to increase productivity and efficiency, no solid progress is possible.”

*LKY, Message to NTUC @ Referendum Victory Rally, 18.9.1962*

“You are part and parcel of the nation. The trade union movement cannot divorce itself from the struggle of the nation for survival.”

*LKY, NTUC Annual Convention, 4.4.1964*

# A Sense of National Purpose

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In Singapore we have to be a tough people in order to accept stern measures for collective survival. Otherwise, the government cannot govern by consent. If you elect people who offer soft solutions to tough problems, there will be no solution and bankruptcy and chaos will result.”

“... the importance of intelligent co-operation between the labour, management and government. We must have the sense of national purpose.”

“The purpose is national security and a better life for all. What can pay for this security and higher standard of life? Higher productivity, greater economic growth, better distribution of employment opportunities.”

# Nobody Owes Us a Living

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“There is quiet determination that we shall face whatever the difficulties . . . to rise up to any new situation with which we can be presented.”

“What is important are the values and the attitudes which form the basis of the postures which people take on these matters.”

“The world owes us no better a living than we can make for ourselves . . . it is our responsibility to see that Singapore remains at the top of that league.”

*LKY, NTUC Delegates' Conference, 2.10.1968*

# Employers Must Have Profits

“ Not only must we ensure that existing employers are giving their workers a fair share of the fruits of their labour, but we must also ensure that a reasonable margin of profit is left for the employer so that he will find it worthwhile to re-invest and expand.”

*LKY, May Day Rally, 1.5.1960*

# Don't Kill the Goose that Lays the Eggs

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“ It must now mean a system in which employers whether local or foreign get their returns, or else their capital must go elsewhere . . . with unions led by men who understand just how far they can go without really crippling or killing the goose whose eggs they want. It is only in these conditions that urbanized situations like Singapore can continue to thrive and prosper.”

“ . . . and a grasp of realities on the part of union leaders that ultimately more pay, more fringe benefits, more security can only come with higher productivity and greater economic growth.”

*ILO 13<sup>th</sup> Session at the Singapore Conference Hall, 28.11.1966*

# An Ever- Bigger Cake

“What happens to us will depend, first, on the cultural and work habits of our people; second, the soundness of the social and economic policies we are pursuing; and third, the manner in which management and unions co-operate in a sensible and realistic way in sharing an ever- bigger cake.”

*LKY, NTUC Delegates Conference, 5.3.1972*

# Hard- Working, Highly-Skilled

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Every time you read the newspapers, you see that people like to belittle our harbour and our port. It does not matter. But, we continue to work efficiently with good pay and full work. Not good pay and half-work; that is sure collapse. Good pay must go with good work. If there is good pay and no work – out. Good work with poor pay is no good. If there is enough for food, not enough for the children, it is impossible to work hard. What we want is a highly paid labour force, hard-working, highly-skilled.”

*LKY, Opening Ceremony of Nelson Road Community Centre,  
12.11.1966*



# Faster, Better, Cheaper

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“To survive, to thrive, we have to get better all the time. We have to provide services which nobody else can do at that speed, of quality, or price.”

“Change is of the essence of life, whether in the individual or in a people, or in the world. But for us, our basic position means that we cannot afford to be a soft or easy-going society.”

“... remember, if our workers lose their drive, their willingness to work, we shall not be eating bread or rice at all. We shall be eating tapioca.”

*LKY, NTUC 1<sup>st</sup> Triennial Delegates' Conference and Symposium, 27.4.1973*

# Upskill

“To climb up to a higher plateau, we have to scale up the ladder of education to acquire more knowledge and higher skills relevant to our next stage of economic progress.”

“What is your role as union branch leaders and activists? It is, in cooperation with the government and with management, to help your members realise their full potential in knowledge and skills.”

*LKY, May Day Campfire,  
@National Youth Leadership Training Institute, 30.4.1980*

# Productivity Habit

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Habits that make for high productivity in workers are the result of values implanted in them at home, in school and at the workplace. These values must be reinforced by the attitudes of society. Once established like a language a society speaks, the habits tend to become a self-reproducing and self-perpetuating cycle.”

“Productivity habits must become a part of the Singaporean work ethic. In factories, offices or shops, managers and grassroots union leaders must set the example.”

“Singaporeans must understand that their group interests will be advanced if each worker strives to achieve his best, and thus encourages his peers to do better by his example.”

*LKY, Inauguration of the Productivity Month '83, 1.11.1983*

# Union Businesses

“ . . . in 1969 . . . besides just cooperating with companies, . . . we got the unions to go into...co-operatives . . . to show them that if you run an enterprise, you’ve got to consider costs and revenue . . . So, when they negotiate with the employers, they know that the employers have to consider these points. So that changed the mindset and the approach the union leaders and the union members. They understood beyond a certain point from a black revenue to red minus the enterprise will fail.”

*LKY, NTUC's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Book, 9.4.2010*

# Unionists in Statutory Boards

“ . . . we put trade union leaders on key statutory boards so that they will understand and shape the policies of these boards . . . unionists also played a key role in the productivity movement. They decided that the objective should be enlarging the pie rather than fight for a bigger slice of a small pie.”

*LKY, NTUC's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner, 13.5.2011*

# NTUC Represented in Cabinet

“ . . . we have always a member of the NTUC on the Cabinet. So in every issue at stake, we take into account what's the benefit to workers here, what's the disbenefit. So whether there is a growing disparity in wages at the top and the bottom because of globalization or whatever, we try to bring about a more equitable solution.”

*LKY, NTUC's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Book,  
9.4.2010*

# Common Interests

“There can be no successful union without a successful company. There can be no successful company without hardworking and efficient workers co-operating with management.”

*LKY, Message to Silver Jubilee of Singapore Air Transport Workers' Union, 24.11.1972*



# Consider All Interests

“ . . . Never take any direct industrial action without first consulting . . . If there is any other way of solving the problem, and if not, whether you are right from, not just your point of view, but also from the country's point of view. For the State must protect your rice bowl, your friend's rice bowl and also that of your children.”

*LKY, May Day Rally, 1May 1960*

# With Power Comes Responsibility

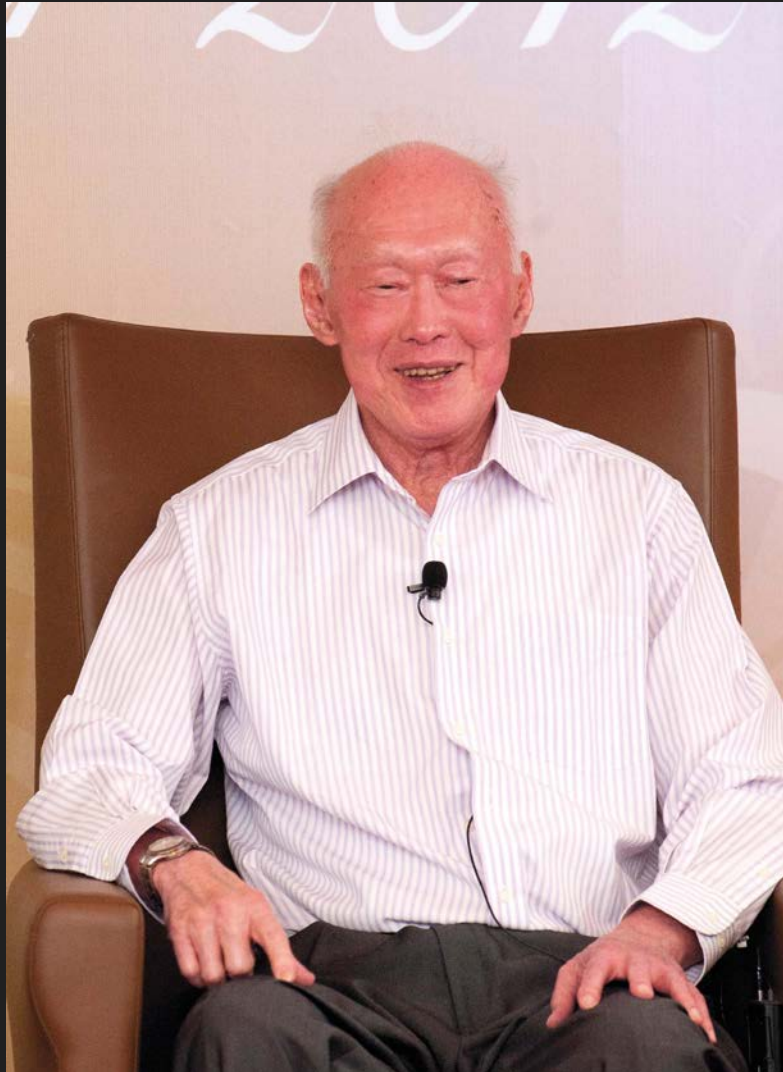
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“ . . . with that power comes responsibility, because, if you do that without calculating the consequences, you may be doing grievous harm to your own members and worse to the children of your members, because if no economic development takes place, where are your high wages?”

“ . . . and leadership, whether it is of political parties or political movements or trade union movements, must understand the implications of the wider whole: only then do we survive.”

*LKY, May Day Rally, 1.5.1965*

# Spirit of Tripartism



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“ Our special situation that we have cooperation between unions, employers and government did not come about by accident. We strived very hard, instead of infighting, to try and get each party to understand their obligations and responsibilities to each other. And because we succeeded in that, we created an environment that invited foreign investments, confidence in the future and today’s Singapore.”

*LKY, Labour Leadership Appreciation Dinner, 30.1.2012*



# Tripartism Passed Tests in Crisis

“The test for tripartism is during difficult times when the economic pie is shrinking or not growing as fast as it used to be. The last time this happened was in the 1985-86 economic recession. Then, in order to save jobs, amongst various anti-recession measures, we reduced the employers’ CPF contributions from 25% to 10%. Workers and unions accepted the wage cut and subsequent wage restraint. The economy recovered within two years.”

*PM Goh Chok Tong, May Day Rally 1998*



“

This regional crisis will test our tripartism again. Our economy will grow more slowly, this year and next. Some workers have already been retrenched. More may be retrenched, especially older workers. I am glad that with the strong support of the NTUC and the SNEF, we are able to form the Tripartite Panel on Retrenched Workers to deal with the problems of finding new employment for retrenched workers and upgrading workers for higher skilled jobs.

I am also pleased that the SNEF has backed NTUC's call not to axe staff at the first sign of trouble, doing it only as a last resort.”

*PM Goh Chok Tong, May Day Rally 1998*





# Upgrade, Stay Relevant

“ I say we keep the tripartism formula, but the tripartite partners have to upgrade themselves, have to raise their game. You have to strengthen and maintain the trust that we have built into the next generation. And each of the partners must do its own upgrading – the Government to develop new economic policies, the employers making sure their companies stay viable finding new business opportunities, unions staying relevant to new union members in a new economy.”

*PM Lee Hsien Loong, Opening Dinner,  
NTUC Delegates' Conference, 26.10.2015*



# It Comes Down to Good Leaders

“

. . . it comes down to having good leaders who forged friendships and trust over a long period, who shared the same passion to improve the lives of Singaporeans and who can mobilise Singaporeans, particularly workers to overcome the challenges and build a better Singapore.”

*PM Lee Hsien Loong, Opening Dinner,  
NTUC Delegates' Conference, 26.10.2015*



# Tripartism The Singapore Way

“ Our tripartite partnership has made a big contribution both to our economy and to our cohesion. It is our uniquely Singaporean way of conducting labour relations - where Government, employers and unions are close partners, working together for a common cause, coming up with win-win solutions across many decades. It is how we have come through uncertain times and crises in the past, and it is what we will continue to need, to remain united and successful in the future.”

*PM Lee Hsien Loong, May Day Rally 2022*



“Before You Discuss Your Future,  
Remember How We Got Here –  
The Past.”

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*LKY, NTUC Modernisation Seminar, 16.9.1969*

# Purpose of Business

## *Konosuke Matsushita*

- Some people think that the purpose of an enterprise is to make profit.
- Indeed, profit is indispensable for conducting proper enterprise activities...
- However, profit in itself is not the ultimate goal of an enterprise. More basic is the effort to improve human life through enterprise management. Profit becomes important and necessary only to better pursue this basic mission.

# Statement of Purpose of a Corporation

## - US Business Roundtable, Aug 2019

- While each of our individual companies serves its own corporate purpose, we share a fundamental commitment to all of our stakeholders.
- We commit to:
  - -Deliver value to our customers
  - Investing in our employees
  - - Dealing fairly and ethically with our suppliers
  - - Generating long-term value for shareholders...
  - - Each of our stakeholders is essential. We commit to deliver value to all of them, for the future success of our companies, our communities and our country.