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Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education, at the Launch of Honour (Singapore), on Tuesday, 5 August 2014, at 8:05pm at the Fullerton Hotel

Founding members of Honour (Singapore),
Mr Lim Siong Guan
Mr Khoo Oon Theam
Mr Georgie Lee
Mr Richard Magnus

Panel of community advisors of Honour (Singapore),

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to join you at the launch of Honour (Singapore).

2. In this room, there is a great depth of knowledge, and practice, of honour. I feel humbled to speak to you on Honour and hope I can make a modest contribution on this very important concept.

3. The concept of 'Honour', like others such as respect, love, dignity, rights and responsibilities, is iterated in many forms in our society. There is the notion of:

'junzi/ 君子', 'ren/仁' and 'yi/義' in the Chinese language,
'budiman' in Bahasa Melayu, and
'mathippu/ மதிப்பு' in Tamil.

These words altogether represent how individuals relate to one another, and how members of a society relate among themselves. They reflect deep beliefs about the kind of society we seek to build. These concepts shape societies across time, and across cultures. As circumstances change, these concepts are often debated and re-interpreted. But the fact that they retain their central appeal speaks of their timeless value. At its most basic level, Honour connotes conduct that commands respect, that sets a benchmark for us to strive toward, and in that way shapes a better society for all. Indeed, what we choose to Honour reflects what we value as individuals and as a society; and shapes the character and success of our society.

4. I commend Siong Guan and the founding members for setting up Honour (Singapore) as part of our SG50 celebrations, driven by your commitment to the survival and success of Singapore, for the benefit of current and future generations. Certainly, as we approach the 50th year of our nation's independence, we must strive for a deeper appreciation and understanding of what has made Singapore successful so far, and what would help us to succeed in the coming years. In particular, we should reflect on the values that have underpinned our success.

5. Allow me, then, to pick up on Siong Guan's opening remarks and speak on three aspects of honour. First, to Honour our past and the pioneers who built the

foundation to give us opportunities we have today. Second, to Honour our word so that we may be individuals worthy of trust. And third, to Honour one another by appreciating one another, understanding one another, and respecting differences in views as we build a common future.

We Honour Our Pioneers

6. Last week, MOE held our pioneer tribute dinner to honour our pioneer educators, who laid the solid foundation of our education system. This foundation is an important legacy, but an even more important legacy is their pioneering spirit -- a pioneering spirit founded on resourcefulness, resilience and responsibility. Our pioneer educators' words and deeds forged generations of committed citizens.

7. As part of our SG50 celebrations, the Pioneer Generation Package is a visible and meaningful way of honouring our pioneer generation, to express our appreciation for their contributions. While the material benefits of healthcare subsidies matter, the real meaning lies beyond that. The true meaning lies in honouring the values that built a multi-racial, multi-religious society out of a group of fragmented people with meagre resources, so that they could forge a national identity and build a better future together. Remarkably, this was done amidst all the uncertainties of internal divisions in our society and external tensions, including the Vietnam War, in our region then.

8. As our SG50 celebrations progress in the coming months, we will have many more stories, including many of *your* stories. Your stories will reflect these values that we should Honour, and which will serve to inspire us all. When we Honour our pioneers in this way, we Honour their spirit and values. The best way to Honour them is to live out these spirit and values, so that the next generation can take our society forward.

We Honour Our Word

9. Let me now turn to Honouring our word.

10. When visitors come to Singapore, we often have them tour our HDB estates, view the URA masterplan, observe our education and healthcare systems, study the PUB's water treatment technology, enjoy the city greening efforts of NParks, hold dialogues with our security forces, and hear about the work of the EDB and other institutions. While we can always be better, we can acknowledge our institutions have done well. It is not only government agencies, but also our business federations, unions, VWOs, self-help groups, and our arts and cultural organisations. While their success comes from careful thought and plain hard work, I believe there is something even deeper to explain Singapore's progress over the last 50 years.

11. We are a people and a government whose word can be trusted, who can be relied upon to work hard and do our best, and who can be trusted to keep our promises and ensure the predictability in public policy which will make others feel safe for decades to come. Most fundamentally, we are a people whose word is our Honour; we are a people you can trust. This has brought us prosperity over the last 50 years as local and foreign investors took us at our word, and as union leaders,

workers and employers work together in a relationship of trust to create fair outcomes for all.

12. In Our Singapore Conversation, participants constantly spoke about the importance of trust. We distilled the aspirations of Singaporeans for the future into five themes: trust, purpose, spirit, assurance and opportunities. Trust and Honour are inextricably interlinked, and we must continue to practise this virtue of Honour so that we will be found trustworthy for the next 50 years and more.

We Honour One Another

13. I now come to Honouring one another. In the first phase of our nation building, we were confronted by a set of stark differences and fault lines. It took us decades of sound thinking and hard work to bridge these differences, to build up and expand on our common space. This is an achievement that we should Honour.

14. But we must never assume that these differences have been resolved once and for all. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the tragic outbreak of World War I. As many thoughtful commentators have pointed out, the fault lines that led to this outbreak are still present, and the reverberations from the War are still felt in many societies, such as that in Ukraine. Matters of race, language and religion are deeply visceral, and require constant vigilance. This is true for across the globe, and all the more so for small Singapore. But even as we forged deeper understanding of these issues, new differences are emerging – be it in attitudes towards sexual orientation, new migrants, social status or the distribution of wealth. How we manage differences – to ensure that these do not become new fault lines which polarise our society – *this* will be our critical challenge in the coming years. What we need is a keen sense of responsibility of acknowledging, accepting and respecting differences. That is how we Honour one another.

15. It is natural, indeed good, for Singaporeans to have diverse opinions. We are all thinking, rational beings and our differences in temperament and experiences naturally lead to differences in perspectives. This can contribute to our vibrancy as a society. We want a Singapore that gives maximum space for each of us to develop our ideas to the fullest, and at the same time allow space for others. We want different voices, and we hope that they all add to the shared dream of a common Singaporean future.

16. But it is not an easy thing to do. At some point, after we air our different perspectives, we have to bring everyone together to move forward in a fair and just way, in a way that protects the vulnerable, and that grows the opportunities and welfare of everyone. This cannot be a matter of one side winning and the other side losing. Rather, it is a matter of concerned, thinking citizens hearing and respecting other perspectives. We Honour one other by developing empathy, by trying to understand rather than waiting to be understood, by avoiding making judgement. The space to express our views is best coupled with a commitment for greater good.

17. We must work together to make differences productive, rather than divisive. One way of doing so is for us to advocate solutions, rather than positions. By

agreeing on our common goals, we derive better solutions if the different perspectives lead to a richer synthesis and more creative, robust solutions. If our starting point is a better Singapore for all, our different perspectives can be a source of strength if we can honour these. But if our starting point is a narrow advocacy of particular positions, the differences can become a source of division.

18. Certainly, there will be areas where differences cannot be easily bridged. But I hope we can altogether build a culture where it is the Singapore way for each of us to say, "I may not share your view, but I want to understand it, and I will try my utmost to Honour it."

19. To do all these, we must have trust. Let our differences be respected, but more importantly let our trust, our empathy, and our commonalities grow. Let us Honour one another, and in that way Honour our society.

Conclusion

20. Schools are one place in which we instil values, in partnership with parents. In a world of flux, more than ever, we need to be anchored with timeless values that help guide our thoughts and actions, in ways that let us be better versions of ourselves, and to do our best for others around us.

21. Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) seeks to instil in our young the core values of respect, responsibility, resilience, care, integrity and harmony. These values are very closely related to, and underpin, the concept of Honour. We hope that these values are widely practised and deeply internalised. For this reason, we encourage students to understand the needs around them, initiate projects to meet these needs and uplift others, and reflect on their experiences. Through Values-In-Action programmes, I am optimistic that our young will grow up to be concerned and active citizens, who Honour their words and Honour others, and go on to develop a democracy of deeds.

22. Now, I think we must Honour the quiet leaders who brought us together this evening. I commend Honour (Singapore) for your initiative to promote a culture of honour and honouring in Singapore. I feel encouraged that we have a group of people who act on their love for Singapore and concern for the well-being of succeeding generations. I am extra encouraged that so many of you are here to inaugurate this worthy enterprise.

23. I look forward to following the progress of Honour (Singapore) as you promote a culture of Honour and Honouring for the well-being of Singapore. I wish Honour (Singapore) every success in your noble mission.

24. Thank you.