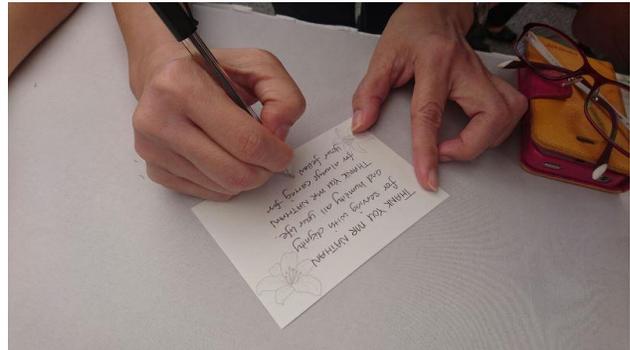


The Passing Of An 'Indispensable Man For All Seasons'

Mr SR Nathan, 1924 to 2016



On the night of 22 August 2016, Singapore was informed of the passing of Mr Sellapan Ramanathan Nathan, Singapore's sixth President who had served from 1999 to 2011. He was 92.

Mr Nathan had experienced extremely trying circumstances in his childhood and youth, but through resilience, hard work and ability, overcame the many daunting challenges and rose in his career in the Singapore Civil Service, where he spent 50 years. Broadly, he had worked in the Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Defence Ministries. In every position that he held, Mr Nathan distinguished himself.

An “indispensable man for all seasons” was how the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described Mr Nathan. Mr Lee said: “Every time there was a tricky task which required a steady hand, someone dependable and who could get things done, his name would pop up.”

Among the numerous responsibilities that Mr Nathan carried out, two incidents that made world news come to mind:

Mr Nathan was with the Ministry of Defence when two Japanese Red Army terrorists and two terrorists from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine tried to blow up the Shell refinery on Pulau Bukom. When they failed, they hijacked “Laju”, a ferry that plied between Pulau Bukom and mainland Singapore. The hijackers demanded a car to the airport and a plane to fly them out to Kuwait. Mr Nathan was asked to accompany terrorists to ensure their safe passage, in exchange for the return of Singaporeans who had been taken hostage. The whole episode ended without bloodshed.

Mr Nathan was Singapore’s Ambassador in Washington when an American youth was caught in Singapore for vandalism, sentenced to jail, fined and caned. The Americans viewed caning as flogging and protested that the punishment that Singapore meted out on the 18-year-old was “inhumane”. Mr Nathan, in front of a worldwide audience on the TV talk show, “Larry King Live”, made it clear that Singapore has its own laws and judicial system, and everyone who lives in Singapore should respect them.

When Mr Nathan became president, he started the President’s Challenge. He wanted individuals, corporations and voluntary and religious organisations to work with the government in creating a society in which every Singaporean matters, to give the less well-off a sense of hope, and feel that someone does care for them. In one of the activities, the “President’s Star Challenge”, he recited a poem, “Desiderata”, about happiness. An overwhelming number of callers pledged donations during his recitation.

Mr Nathan is also a friend of Singapore Sports School. He asked to visit the Sports School during its first year of operations because he wanted to understand how it was going to nurture sport champions for Singapore. On 19 October 2004, President and Mrs Urmila Nathan visited the Sports School, where he spent much time talking to student-athletes and staff on the challenges they faced.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said of Mr Nathan: “To me, Mr Nathan’s most important role was as a tree planter. Wherever he went, he nurtured young seedlings into mature trees. He built up young sometimes nascent organisations into mature institutions – in the NTUC, in SID (Security and Intelligence Division), in MFA, in the elected presidency. He mentored young promising officers and helped them to fulfill their potential and I count myself a beneficiary. He helped Singapore to build and to grow into a modern, prosperous and stable nation.”

PM Lee described Mr Nathan as “one of Singapore’s greatest sons.” Mr Nathan’s passing is a great loss to the nation.