

**CITATION BY PROFESSOR BRENDA YEOH, DEAN, NUS FACULTY
OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, PUBLIC ORATOR FOR MR S R
NATHAN, HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENT
AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE (NUS)
COMMENCEMENT 2012
5 JULY 2012, 11 AM, NUS UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE**

MR S R Nathan

Mr S R Nathan has had a long and distinguished career in the public sector, contributing to the development of the nation of Singapore in many capacities. He has held key positions in social service development, security and foreign affairs, including as a medical social worker, Welfare Officer to seafarers, Director of the Labour Research Unit of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Director of the Security and Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Defence, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, High Commissioner to Malaysia, Ambassador to the United States of America, Ambassador-at-Large, Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, and as Singapore's longest serving President for 12 years from 1999 to 2011.

Mr Nathan's journey of almost six decades from humble beginnings to the highest office in the land was one marked by unexpected turns and formidable challenges. What motivated him to take this road stems from a clear and strong sense of duty, where, in his own words, his 'conscience' was his 'compass'. Whether it was campaigning for the welfare of seafarers in the 1950s, negotiating during the Laju incident of 1974 with hijackers who have entered Singapore waters with the intention

of blowing up major oil installations on Pulau Bukum, or founding the President's Challenge in 2000 to encourage people of all ages and from all walks of life to strengthen 'the spirit of community caring and volunteerism', Mr Nathan walked the talk with courage and compassion, as a pioneer, leader and doer.

Today we honour his manifold public sphere contributions to the collective advancement of the Singapore we all share. But we also want to celebrate his place as a student and alumnus of this university. Mr Nathan's links with the National University of Singapore (NUS) began in 1952 when he enrolled at the University of Malaya located at the Bukit Timah Campus. He was among the pioneer batch of eight students who opted for Social Studies. I am sure some of you may be wondering whether Mr Nathan was a good student so let me recount the story of Mr Nathan's examination results, quoting from Associate Professor Ann Wee, one of his teachers back then:

"Within the Diploma in Social Studies examination regulations, statutory provision had been made only for Pass or Fail status. In the final year of this first cohort, examiners noted that one student was so far ahead of what was on the whole a good class, that this limited categorization of results was grossly inequitable. In order to right this injustice, the University did what universities and all statutory bodies are most loath to do, and indeed are only very rarely moved to do – it added a *retrospective* clause to the regulations, so that in 1954, Mr Nathan's outstanding final examination performance could be recorded as Pass with Distinction."

Not only was he an outstanding student, Mr Nathan's passion for social causes led him to conduct research on gritty issues. His final year dissertation revealed that lodging-house keepers were running a system which amounted to debt enslavement of Asian seamen awaiting their next shipboard employment. These findings attracted the attention of the government, and eventually led to the setting up of the Asian Seamen's Registry.

For Mr Nathan, the opportunity of a university education is to be seized upon and made full use of in order to prepare for life. In his own words,

“... coming to the University marked the beginning of my intellectual development. University education restored to me all that I had missed in my early schooling. I began to know how to learn and developed a habit of learning that has kept me in a continuous quest for knowledge, be it about current affairs, contemporary political developments and about social and political life. In the University, I realised that there was so much that I did not know. My interest in reading and studying even after my university days has put me in a good stead in the several careers that I subsequently embarked on.”

Many years later, as Chancellor of NUS from 1999 to 2011, Mr Nathan extended strong support to the various educational initiatives of his Alma Mater. He graciously hosted countless University events at the Istana and was unstinting in lending his presence as honored guest at student activities and faculty events. He urged NUS to

become a truly global university that would invest in equipping its students with “the werewithal of multi-cultural awareness and the know-how to reach out to diverse people of the world as well as employment markets of the future”. Mr Nathan also provided strong support for the University's efforts to raise funds for its education and research initiatives. Under his distinguished patronage, the NUS Centennial Campaign, which was launched in 2002 at the Istana, surpassed its goal ahead of NUS' Centennial celebrations in 2005. For the launch of the University's Annual Giving drive in 2005, Mr Nathan's personal letter appealing to fellow alumni to give in support of bursaries for needy undergraduates helped raise about \$1 million.

Born on the 3rd of July 1924, Mr Nathan turned 88 two days ago. We would like to take the opportunity to wish him A Happy Birthday and Many Happy Returns. For all the years of his life, he has tried to live up to a simple code. In his words,

“Duty – to friends and family, to my fellow men, to country – is paramount to my view of life, and I have tried my best to live up to this ethic.”

Today, we would like to honour not just the public figure but the great man whose sense of duty to others has led him to take the path less trodden, in forging a life's journey that, in some ways, began at this university.

Mr Chancellor, may it please you to confer on Mr S R Nathan the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters.