

This is a reproduction of remarks made by IPS Director Janadas Devan at the IPS Corporate Associates Lunch with former President S R Nathan on 22 February 2012. The IPS S R Nathan Professorial Fellowship in Public Policy, announced at the lunch, was later renamed the [S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore](#).

A TRIBUTE TO MR S R NATHAN

Janadas Devan
Director
Institute of Policy Studies
22 February 2012

We are here to honour someone, the likes of whom we will not see again in our lifetime. The sheer range and breadth of President Nathan's life and career takes one's breath away. His childhood reads like a Dickens novel — a cross between *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, only located in Malaya and Singapore. His early adult years, through the Second World War and the post-War period, read like a Conrad novel — not quite *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps *Lord Jim*.

And then the public career: the astounding trajectory from office boy to trade unionist to diplomat to intelligence chief to newspaper publisher to academic administrator to chief of state — there is no single novel I can think of that would come close to matching this improbable, astonishing life. Perhaps some unlikely combination of George Orwell, John Le Carre and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

And what is equally improbable, astonishing, is that through this amazingly variegated life, Mr S R Nathan remains today the same simple, unassuming, authentic human being that he was decades ago. Like the bass line running through the twists and turns of a vast sprawling symphony, a few simple themes recur again and again in his life: Duty. Honour. Country.

I can testify personally to this for I have known Mr Nathan since I was a child. Mr Nathan was among the small — a tiny group actually — that established the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in the early 1960s. They had their backs to the wall; they didn't think they would survive; they did. And this is something very important, especially for the young, to know about the people of Mr Nathan's vintage, our founding generation: They are survivors who didn't expect to survive.

When Singapore found itself independent in 1965, Mr Nathan moved back to the civil service. Again, he was present at the creation — this time of the Foreign Ministry — where he worked with Mr S Rajaratnam. Then it was on to the Ministry of Defence, where he took charge of the Security and Intelligence Department, Singapore's external intelligence wing. He worked with Dr Goh Keng Swee, meeting him every Saturday morning, for nine years or so. I hope someday a record of the meetings, if they exist, would become available, for they would make for extraordinarily interesting reading.

Then it was back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where Mr Nathan served as Permanent Secretary, and later as High Commissioner to Malaysia and Ambassador to the United States. In between, Mr Nathan helped NTUC's modernisation — he was one of the key figures behind its famous Modernisation Seminar in 1969 — ran the Straits Times Press, founded the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies — and oh yes, had a few other adventures along the way, like offering himself as a hostage to terrorists. Even Gabriel Garcia Marquez wouldn't have thought of that — and then topped all that by imagining two terms as President for the hostage!

Mr President — if I may call you that — we thank you, and Mrs Nathan too, for your service. Few people remain touchstones through the years, decades. You are one of the few.

As a token of our regard and appreciation for your career, I would like to take this opportunity to announce that the Institute of Policy Studies will seek to endow a Distinguished Professorial Fellowship in your name — the S R Nathan Professorial Fellow in Public Policy¹. It will be the first of its kind for IPS — and indeed, perhaps the first of its kind for any research institution in Singapore, for there is no other named professorial fellowship

¹ This Fellowship was later renamed the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore

in the country. But we think that is only appropriate — a *sui generis*, one of its kind fellowship, for a *sui generis* man, the only one of his kind: Mr S R Nathan.

For the report on Mr Nathan's dialogue with IPS Corporate Associates, please [click here](#).

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