

# LKY proposes setting up of bilingualism fund

By **LEE U-WEN**

[SINGAPORE] Former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has proposed the setting up of a new national bilingualism fund that he hopes will reach over \$100 million over time.

The 88-year-old said that such a fund would spearhead initiatives to teach children English and their Mother Tongue, especially during their pre-school years, with the aim of making them “proficient listeners and speakers” of the two languages.

To get the fund started, Mr Lee is pledging \$2 million from the sale of 200 autographed copies of his new book on bilingualism – which was launched yesterday – along with a further \$10 million from his own pocket.

He also revealed that some of Singapore’s wealthiest businessmen have also pledged their support. Property developer Far East Organization chief executive Philip Ng will donate \$5 million, while tycoon Ong Beng Seng is giving \$2 million.

Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry president Chua Thian Poh and the Khoo



LIANHE ZAOBAO

**Book launch:** Mr Lee at the launch ceremony of his book – ‘*My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingualism Journey*’ – yesterday

Teck Puat Foundation will also donate \$1 million each.

Mr Lee’s three children are also doing their part. His eldest son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, is committing \$100,000, with younger son Lee Hsien Yang and daughter Lee Wei Ling giving \$50,000 each.

“The government will show its support (for) this bilingual education initiative by matching eligible donations dollar for dollar, up to \$50 million, to make a to-

tal of \$100 million,” said Mr Lee at the launch ceremony of his book, titled *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingualism Journey*.

“I hope that those who are concerned for the future of their children and their grasp of the Mother Tongue will also donate generously,” he told his 650-strong audience gathered at the Singapore Conference Hall.

Among those in attendance were Education Minis-

ter Heng Swee Keat, members of parliament past and present, diplomats and Chinese community leaders.

In his speech which he delivered in both English and Mandarin, Mr Lee said that he wanted to do his part to promote a strong culture of bilingualism among youths in Singapore. He expressed concern that, as more parents speak English with their children at home, fluency in the Mother Tongue – especially in Chinese – would decrease over time.

As far as his latest book is concerned, which Mr Lee described as his “most important” to date, he embarked on it because he believed bilingualism was a cornerstone of Singapore’s success story.

“Singapore was not always the way it is today, where people from all over the world can come and find themselves at home here because English is spoken so widely,” he said, noting how the majority of Singaporeans could not speak English when he became the country’s first prime minister back in 1959.

“They spoke Chinese dialects, Malay, Tamil, other languages. They were like tanks of fish in an aquarium, together and yet apart, each community in its own world. I made it my mission to bring them together in real, meaningful ways,” he said.

Mr Lee’s book is now on sale at major bookstores. Both Chinese and English editions of the book are priced at \$39.90. Each book comes with a DVD of extracts from various speeches made by Mr Lee – in English, Mandarin, Hokkien and Malay – over the past 50 years.