

Speech by President Halimah Yacob at the Opening of the Second Session of the 14th Parliament

Transcript of President's Address in Parliament on 10 April 2023.

Parliament is re-opening at an important milestone in our history. We have spent the last three years fighting the crisis of our generation.

Together, we found our way through the uncertainties and fears of the pandemic. Because everyone played their part, we emerged stronger and more united than before. Social capital amongst Singaporeans has deepened, trust in Government has strengthened, and our global reputation has been enhanced. These strengths will prove crucial on the road ahead.

A Different World

The worst of COVID-19 is now hopefully behind us. But there are new challenges ahead, as we enter an increasingly dangerous and troubled world.

The war in Ukraine rages on and is unlikely to end soon. How the crisis unfolds will have major ramifications for the security of countries everywhere.

The rivalry between US and China continues to intensify, and has recently taken a turn for the worse. Near-miss encounters are happening more frequently around the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. Neither side wants to go to war, but events have their own momentum, and accidents can easily spiral out of control in ways no one can predict.

The global order is also being reshaped by strategic geopolitical rivalry. The major powers are focused more on unilaterally securing their own advantage, than on promoting mutual interdependence or strengthening the multilateral system. The international norms that underpin peace and prosperity in the world are under severe strain.

Securing Our Place in the World

These are realities we have to adapt to. As a small nation, we must take the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. But we are far from powerless on the

international stage by acting together with like-minded partners, both big and small. We remain vigilant and proactive in defending ourselves against external threats. We will continue to build a network of friends to advance our shared interests. We will strive to preserve our sovereignty and the right to determine our own future, as we have done since independence.

Against the backdrop of great power rivalry, smaller countries like Singapore are experiencing growing pressures to take sides. We will be subject to foreign influences and disinformation campaigns, aimed at shaping our domestic public opinion, and pressing the Government to adopt certain positions.

We must do our utmost to resist such pressures. We have to close ranks and stay united, regardless of race, religion, or political affiliation, especially when it comes to core national interests. We must never allow external parties to divide us, and should always stand together as one people to uphold Singapore's vital interests.

Growing our Economy

Unity will also be important as we push forward against the economic headwinds. Global trade and investment flows are facing growing obstacles. Governments in the major economies are providing substantial fiscal support to develop strategic industries and strengthen their own industrial bases. This creates a more unlevel playing field, and tougher competition for us.

We will adapt to these new circumstances and find opportunities amidst the challenges. We cannot compete head-to-head with big powers seeking to control key technologies and industries in the global economy. But we can be more agile and nimble than others, and respond more quickly and effectively to new challenges and opportunities.

We will run up against more binding constraints in land, labour and carbon over the coming years, and will have to do our best to manage them. But even as we adjust and adapt, a few fundamental imperatives will not change.

We must stay connected to the world, strengthen our connectivity infrastructure, and entrench our position as a trusted and reliable business hub.

We must develop talents and skills of our people throughout their careers, and continue to attract foreigners with entrepreneurial networks and expertise to help grow opportunities for Singaporeans.

We must invest in innovation to unlock new areas of growth, including in digitalisation and sustainability.

Importantly, we must nurture the strong tripartite partnership between Government, businesses, and workers.

If we are adaptable and resourceful, we can strengthen our competitive advantage, and position ourselves best to prosper and thrive in this new environment.

Refreshing Our Social Compact

To do well in this troubled world, and remain one united people, we will need to strengthen our social fabric. Every Singaporean must feel that they have a stake in our country. The fruits of our progress must be shared fairly, and no one should feel left behind.

This is the main purpose of the Forward Singapore exercise – to renew and update our social compact even as we refresh our goals and strategies. Collectively, the 4G team have engaged more than 14,000 Singaporeans over the past six months, and are continuing to deepen these engagements.

This exercise reaffirms the core values that we hold dear as Singaporeans – fairness, inclusivity, mutual support and the desire to give back to society. We want every person to be treated equally with dignity and respect. We want a Singapore where everyone belongs, and every citizen has the chance to achieve his or her fullest potential. We want a society that values and supports families; where we care for and help one another, and pitch in to make a difference to our community.

These values will shape the Government's agenda:

We will expand opportunities throughout life for every citizen, regardless of their starting points.

We will strengthen social safety nets so that in every stage of life, Singaporeans can better cope with uncertainties and look forward with confidence.

We will build a smart and liveable city – a green, connected and thriving metropolis that we are all proud to call home.

We will deepen Singaporeans' sense of shared identity and mutual responsibility towards one another.

These will be the key priorities for the remainder of this term of Government.

First, we will expand opportunities throughout life for all, regardless of individual backgrounds and circumstances.

Meritocracy has long been the organising principle of our society. It has provided opportunities to countless Singaporeans with the drive and ability to excel. But as we prosper as a society, those who have already done well will naturally seek to pass on their advantages to their children. This is why absent major upheavals, all societies tend to become more stratified and less socially mobile over time.

We will do our utmost to combat this tendency. We must not allow advantages and privileges to become entrenched and persist over generations. This would weaken and fracture our society. We must ensure a broader and more open meritocracy that works well for all Singaporeans. This means rethinking our approach to education and work.

We will continue to prepare our children for the future, starting from their early years. We will provide more resources to support those who start out with less. At the same time, we recognise the competitive stresses that have built up in our education system, especially amongst certain segments of society. We will provide everyone with access to a good education, and many chances in life to learn and improve. But let us not be unwittingly drawn into an educational arms race, and end up worse off as a society.

We must also re-examine how society rewards different skills and talents, and recognises the full range of pathways to success. We should accord greater value to those who are skilled with their hands and contribute through their technical and practical abilities, as well as those with the social and empathetic traits to excel in jobs such as caregiving or community service. Every

Singaporeans must have the opportunity to take on work they find fulfilling and meaningful, build on their talents, give of their best, and be rewarded fairly for it.

At the same time, we will step up support for the disadvantaged and vulnerable segments in our society. We will uplift lower-income workers and families, and empower them to take the initiative to improve their own lives. We will enhance support for persons with disabilities, so they can pursue their aspirations and participate fully as contributing members of society. We will ensure that Singapore remains an open and inclusive society, where we uplift everyone with opportunities throughout their lives, and where we interact with one another as equals, regardless of our backgrounds.

Second, in a world of rapid change, the Government will improve social safety nets to help Singaporeans better cope with disruptions and setbacks in life.

With more uncertainty in the world economy and faster technological change, workers, especially those in their 40s and 50s, are at higher risk of skills obsolescence and unemployment. During the pandemic, we implemented the COVID-19 Recovery Grant and the SGUnited Jobs and Skills programme to support those who had lost their jobs. We will study how we should extend similar support beyond the pandemic.

Beyond helping displaced workers, we will further strengthen our SkillsFuture ecosystem to bring everyone along on our digitalisation and industry transformation journey. We will enable every citizen to do a significant skills reboot in the course of their working lives. This will help to keep them employable, whether they progress further in their respective fields, or transit across to jobs in new areas of growth.

We will also strengthen the sense of assurance in other ways:

We will take better care of our growing number of seniors. Through HealthierSG, we are stepping up preventive care and empowering citizens to manage their own health, and go for regular screenings and check-ups.

We will help Singaporeans enjoy their golden years with greater peace of mind, by enhancing retirement adequacy, and expanding care and living options. We will enable more seniors to age in place, in the comfort of their own homes, with their families and friends close by.

We will also keep public housing affordable and accessible for Singaporeans. Close to 100,000 private and public homes are expected to be completed between now and 2025. We are giving priority to young married couples and families with children to purchase their first homes.

Third, we will press on with longer-term efforts to build a city that is green, connected and highly liveable.

We will continue to renew and transform our urban landscape. New centres and districts will be developed outside of the CBD, to pilot creative urban solutions that transform the way our people live, work and play. Technology will be a key enabler; our urban plans will be integrated with our Smart Nation vision.

Our built environment is not just about better hardware and infrastructure. The city should also become more people-friendly. We will strengthen the distinctive cultures and heritages of different neighbourhoods. We will have better-connected streets and green spaces that are conducive for walking and cycling, where people can meet, interact and connect with one another. We will make our housing estates more vibrant spaces where children grow up together, where shared memories are formed, and where we nurture our unique identity as a multi-racial and multi-religious nation.

Fourth, we will strengthen our collective responsibility to shape our new compact. More government action should not result in a greater sense of dependency and entitlement. Instead, the Government will, through its actions, reinforce individual and family efforts, and bring forth contributions from other stakeholders.

For instance, employers must do their part to invest in their workers. Community partners must complement government efforts to support vulnerable families, just as we rallied to support one another through the pandemic. Those who have done well must pay it forward and give others a hand, so that we help one another stand tall with dignity and pride.

To tackle the complex challenges ahead, Singapore will need a stronger network of stakeholders to participate in nation building. Committed businesses that champion socially responsible and sustainable practices. A passionate civil society that advocates for their visions of a better society. An

active citizenry that takes ownership of issues. The Government will do more to mobilise and involve all stakeholders. In particular, our youths show strong interest to take action and initiate change on issues they care about, like mental well-being and sustainability. We will engage the ideas, dynamism and energy of our young Singaporeans.

Ultimately, our refreshed social compact is about a shared understanding of how we relate to and support one another in our next phase of nationhood. By pooling our individual expertise, experiences and resources, we can achieve better outcomes for ourselves, our fellow citizens and our nation, Singapore.

Stewarding Our Future Singapore

Even as we focus on our present needs, we must also plan for the future and think on behalf of generations to come.

We are here today only because of what previous generations of Singaporeans did. They were willing to work hard and make sacrifices, to give us – their children and grandchildren – a better life. We must uphold these same values and leave behind a Singapore that is better than the one today, for the sake of future generations.

Climate change poses an existential threat to our island state. We have committed to decisive action to reduce carbon emissions and are taking resolute steps towards meeting our net-zero commitments. We also need to protect ourselves against global warming, especially rising sea levels. We are developing plans for more extensive coastal protection measures, and will dove-tail these plans with our urban renewal strategies.

All this requires responsible use of our fiscal resources and husbanding of our accumulated reserves. We must therefore continue to uphold our longstanding principles of fiscal prudence and discipline, so that future generations too will have the means to weather major storms, and the wherewithal to build the Singapore of their dreams.

Our Unity as a People

Throughout our nation building journey, we have repeatedly faced challenges and setbacks. We survived when few believed we would. When we started out in 1965, the journey looked so daunting, with so many problems to solve. But

with courage and determination, our founding leaders and pioneer generations tackled challenges head-on, one by one, and built this thriving metropolis.

We are now in a much stronger position – better poised to overcome our vulnerabilities and armed with crucial resources to push forward with confidence, however stormy the weather.

Our collective experiences have strengthened the mutual trust between Singaporeans, and their confidence in our system of government. This virtuous circle relies on us partnering one another and working together to make the impossible, possible.

The leadership transition to the 4G team is well underway. They have worked well together and proven their ability and grit through their handling of the COVID-19 crisis. They have also been engaging citizens widely through the Forward Singapore exercise. They must continue to strengthen their bonds with Singaporeans, and work closely with them to write the next chapter of our Singapore Story.

The trust between our political leadership and people, and between Singaporeans themselves, is a key strength we must continue to nurture and cherish. In so many societies, this has gone wrong. These societies face deep divides that are difficult to bridge. Instead of bringing people together, political parties aggravate rifts by divisive appeals for support from competing groups. Their political systems are stuck in gridlock. Consequently, trust in government and its institutions plummets, making recovery even harder.

We cannot afford to let this happen in Singapore. In an open, diverse society, people will always have different views. We must debate them honestly and robustly. But our conversations also must be constructive, respectful and responsible, based on facts and sound analysis. Our interactions with one another must be anchored on mutual respect and trust, and a shared goal of advancing the larger public interest. In this way, we can work through our differences, enlarge our common ground, and draw strength from our diverse perspectives.

So far, we have done well: out of our diversity, we have built a deep reservoir of social capital and trust. As we commemorate the centenary of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's birth, we should reflect on the values and principles of the founding generation of leaders. We should reaffirm and uphold our shared values, while

re-examining what needs to be updated and possessing the courage to break new ground. Only then can we forge ahead confidently, firm in our footing and sure of our destination.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 experience shows what Singaporeans are capable of when we come together as a nation, and gives us quiet confidence and strength as we face the future together. Let us learn from this experience to work together to improve the lives of today's Singaporeans, keep faith with future generations yet unborn, and build a Singapore that thrives and endures for many years to come.