

Securing Singapore's future in a changed world

In her address at the opening of Parliament yesterday, President Halimah Yacob spoke about the imperative of adapting to a new domestic and international environment if Singapore is to continue to succeed. The text of her speech follows:



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We are starting a new term of Government under the shadow of Covid-19. Singapore has been fully engaged in this fight. New infections have been brought under control. We have completed testing all the migrant workers in the dormitories, and are progressively returning them to work safely. Fatalities have been kept very low.

But the situation continues to unfold. Many cities that had initially suppressed the virus are seeing infections rise again as they reopen their economies. Scientists are still learning new things about the virus - including how best to protect ourselves, and how new medical treatments and vaccines can help.

We must therefore adjust our Covid-19 strategies and plans along the way.

We have prepared our healthcare system and expanded reserve capacity to deal with a possible resurgence of cases. We are continuing to ramp up our ability to conduct aggressive testing and contact tracing. Most importantly, all of us must stay vigilant to prevent a new wave of infections.

At the same time, we are facing our worst recession since independence. Our economy will likely shrink by 5 per cent to 7 per cent this year.

The Government has acted decisively to save jobs and provide emergency support to workers and companies. We are injecting almost \$100 billion into the economy, including the latest package that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat announced last week. These measures have reduced the immediate pain, but things will remain grave for quite some time.

IMPERATIVES FOR CHANGE

The situations globally and domestically have changed and there is no going back to the status quo ante.

For decades, Singapore has thrived under globalisation and a stable international order. But our external environment has become less benign and predictable. Covid-19 has reshuffled the deck. It has revealed new threats, while also opening up fresh opportunities.

Global fault lines have sharpened, and US-China rivalry has intensified. Supply chains have been disrupted. Countries are fighting to meet their own needs, fuelling a new wave of protectionism. This is especially challenging for Singapore as we make our living by doing business with the world.

Domestically, Singapore is at an inflection point of our history.

New generations of Singaporeans are coming of age. We have new aspirations and expectations, including a desire for more diverse voices to be heard, and stronger checks and balances. At the same time, new leaders are emerging to take Singapore

the next steps forward.

The new generation of leaders and Singaporeans will have to form bonds and connections afresh, forge their own compact, find their own ways of working together and strike their own balances.

They have to continue to deliver effective and sound government, while accommodating the growing diversity of views. And they have to foster a more open spirit in our society, even as we strengthen the common cause holding us together as Singaporeans.

For Singapore to continue to succeed, we need to understand these changes in our external and domestic environments, rethink our problems and improve on the status quo.

The Government will continue to evolve our economic and social models and our policies to suit the new circumstances. We will encourage citizen initiatives and participation. We will listen to and examine novel ideas objectively, recognising that no solutions are right for all time.



President Halimah Yacob at the opening of Parliament yesterday. In her speech, she urged Singaporeans to come together to "pursue the greater good, united by a belief in Singapore and a desire to turn our vision into reality".
PHOTO: GOV.SG

Sometimes, staying the course will remain the best way forward and we must convince Singaporeans to persevere. Other problems will require fresh approaches and the courage to take a different direction. In all cases, we will seek to do what is best for Singapore and Singaporeans.

Despite the sea change in our environment, one thing remains constant: Singapore is still a little red dot in an uncertain world. To survive and thrive, we must stand out compared to other countries.

We need to be more resilient and nimble than others in responding to change. We must do things that others cannot do, and do the things that others can do, even better.

This requires us to reach a broad consensus on the economic and social changes necessary, the Singaporean identity we aspire to forge, and the kind of politics we want to have.

SECURING JOBS FOR SINGAPOREANS

We recognise the fears and anxieties about jobs that Singaporeans have today. Covid-19 has amplified the pressures caused by a slowing global economy in recent years, especially on certain groups of workers, such as our lower-wage workers, mature workers and mid-career Singaporeans with heavier financial commitments and families to support.

Jobs will remain our top priority for the next few years. Keeping people in work is the best way to help them take care of their families, and to keep their skills current until the economy improves.

We are doing all we can to help. We are supporting businesses, especially SMEs, with cash flow and credit so that they stay afloat and hold on to their workers. The National Jobs Council is working closely with tripartite partners to create new job and skills upgrading opportunities for Singaporeans.

We will continue to look out for our lower-wage and mature workers, many of whom are also essential workers who have been keeping Singapore going during the crisis.

We are also making a concerted effort to help workers in their 40s and 50s, by matching them to suitable jobs and SkillsFuture programmes. I urge employers to see mid-career Singaporeans as valuable assets, and provide them with opportunities and training for new jobs.

To sustain job creation, we must keep our economy strong and competitive. Our economy will undergo significant structural changes. Some sectors will not return to what they were before.

Some jobs will disappear altogether. Much of our economy thrives because we have made ourselves a vibrant hub for the region and an attractive place for trade, investments, talent and ideas. We cannot take our hub status for granted, or assume that its scope and role will remain the same.

There is therefore great urgency to transform our economy and find new ways to make a living.

We will resume air travel safely, to maintain Singapore's role as a global and regional hub. We will strengthen digital connectivity and help companies develop their links to new markets. Our efforts to fortify our resilience in critical areas like food, healthcare and supply chain management can become new sources of growth.

We will also make a major push for sustainable growth. We will reimagine how we plan our city, redesign urban mobility and grow using less resources in a low-carbon future. We will push for green financing and sustainable infrastructure development across the region, to ride on Asia's growth while protecting the environment.

With creativity and resourcefulness, we can turn our aspirations for a greener Singapore into a competitive advantage.

BUILDING A FAIR AND JUST SOCIETY

While we pursue economic growth to create opportunities for Singaporeans, we must also share the benefits of progress widely with all citizens.

We started strengthening our social safety nets more than a decade ago. In this crisis, we have implemented many emergency measures to help Singaporeans cope. These are temporary relief measures, but we do expect a permanent shift to a new

normal after the crisis. We are entering an era of volatility, uncertainty and disruption in people's lives. Individuals will need greater social support than before.

We will have to consider carefully how to strengthen our safety nets, to give Singaporeans more assurance coping with life's uncertainties. And we will have to be careful to do so in a way that is financially sustainable for future generations.

As part of this shift in social policy, the Government will do more to support every Singaporean, at each stage of life, to build a stronger and more cohesive society.

We will support young families to own their homes, and to improve their own and their children's lives through quality education and training pathways. We will offer middle-aged Singaporeans more help to secure good jobs and greater assurance of retirement adequacy. We will take good care of our seniors to enable them to age well and with dignity.

But more redistribution cannot be the only way to level up those who are doing less well. We also have to continue strengthening social mobility and broadening our conception of merit.

Meritocracy has been a crucial pillar of our society. It has served us well over the past 55 years. However, just as our social norms and policies have evolved in tandem with Singapore's development, so too must our model of meritocracy.

We recognise that unfettered meritocracy can foster excessive competition. We also realise the need to level up families who are at a disadvantage, and give their children a fair start in life.

We want to keep our society open and socially mobile, and not allow it to stratify and ossify over time.

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That is why we have made a concerted effort to value a wide range of talent. Schools and institutes of higher learning admit students through yardsticks other than academic results. The Public Service Commission has widened its catchment of scholars.

Employers are encouraged to hire people based on skills, with the public service taking the lead. Political parties are fielding candidates who took different life paths and have diverse talents and strengths.

This is also why we must continue to invest heavily in education and training, from the earliest years of childhood through the schooling years. We are developing many pathways, so that young Singaporeans can achieve their fullest potential regardless of their starting point.

And through the next bound of SkillsFuture, we will enable every worker to upskill and progress throughout their career, beyond their initial qualifications. Employers must support lifelong learning as the new norm. Society must value people for what they contribute, in every job and every role.

Building a fair and just society goes beyond government actions. It requires the support and participation of all Singaporeans. It turns on how we look after our most vulnerable members, such as helping students from disadvantaged families through Uplift and KidStart, providing training and job opportunities for people with disabilities, and bridging the digital divide for our seniors.

We have made progress over the last decade, and we will do much more in this term of Government to see our people through this crisis and beyond. The more closely knit we are as a people, the further we can move ahead as a nation.

STRENGTHENING OUR SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY

In the longer term, the key to Singapore's success lies in our sense of shared identity. Singapore can endure and secure her place in history only if Singaporeans feel passionately about our country, and put our hearts and souls into making this a

better home.

Since independence, we have gradually built a distinctive Singaporean culture and identity. Regardless of race, language and religion, we all think of ourselves as Singaporeans. You can see this in our attitudes, memories and experiences; it is in our arts and heritage, and the way we cheer for Team Singapore together. You see it in the way we can gladly identify one another in an unfamiliar foreign land, and the way we have each other's backs in a crisis.

These are emotional ties that are strengthened over the years.

There is still much more to do to strengthen the sense of togetherness in our society. We must start young and shape the multicultural instincts in our children early in life; our approaches and methods must therefore evolve with the outlook and attitudes of the young. We must then sustain this mindset across our communities and workplaces.

We must also recognise that larger forces are at play that test our solidarity and pull us in different directions. The social media has amplified contending voices and views. We are more exposed than ever to causes, attitudes and values from other societies that may not be relevant to our social context, but will influence us nonetheless. Economic distress arising from Covid-19, or social inequality, can breed a sense of insecurity amongst different groups of Singaporeans.

Multiracialism will always be a core element of our Singaporean identity. Everyone, regardless of race, language, or religion, must have an equal place in our society. Here in Singapore, we embrace our plurality and diversity, even as we continue to develop a stronger Singaporean ethos and strive together to become more than the sum of our individual parts.

But our multiracialism is still a work in progress. Each successive generation will bring different life experiences and perspectives. In each generation, some will want to discuss sensitive issues afresh. Younger Singaporeans prefer talking about these issues more candidly and openly, which is a positive development. But the conversation needs to be conducted with restraint and mutual respect, because race, language and religion will always be visceral subjects. If each group pushes its own agenda to the extreme, we risk eroding the common space and fracturing our social cohesion.

Another potentially divisive issue closely connected to our Singaporean identity is the sense of competition for jobs from work pass holders. This has become a major source of anxiety, especially among mid-career Singaporeans. We understand these concerns. They not only touch on matters of livelihood, but also on our sense of identity and belonging. They will be addressed.

As masters of our own land, Singaporeans must have confidence in the rights and privileges of citizenship. Our strong education system and training pathways have produced a workforce that can compete against the best in the world. We will work with employers to further strengthen the capabilities of our workforce in every field, and ensure that firms treat Singaporeans fairly when they recruit or retrench workers. In all that we do, the interests of Singaporeans are always paramount.

At the same time, we must not turn inwards, away from the world. We must keep our hearts open to those who come from beyond our shores. We should continue to welcome and integrate those who can contribute to Singapore, and improve our lives and our children's future.

Our Singaporean identity has been formed and strengthened not by excluding those who arrive later, but by successive arrivals adding to the richness of our society. These are emotive issues that can evoke strong reactions. Debates on such sensitive matters can easily become polarised. So as we open up more areas for meaningful discussion, Singaporeans must work even harder to listen to and understand one another.

We must break out of the echo chambers that form so easily online, and make genuine attempts to bridge the gap with those who think differently from us. We must strive to obtain greater insight, build shared understanding and use our diverse perspectives and ideas to achieve better outcomes for all.

EVOLVING OUR POLITICS

These must also be the guiding principles of our politics.

Parliament is the central platform to debate national policies and set the tone for our political discourse.

One significant change in this term is the designation of a Leader of the Opposition, reflecting the larger number of Opposition MPs in Parliament. The Government and the Opposition both have roles to play to build trust in our public institutions,

and achieve good outcomes for Singapore.

Given the magnitude of the challenges and uncertainties, we must expect to encounter more differences in views and interests among Singaporeans. We must learn to handle these differences constructively. On some issues, we can agree to disagree. But on issues core to Singapore and our survival and future, we must do our best to find common ground and build a broad consensus.

The Government will be open to constructive criticism and rational debate, and to new ways of doing things. But the Government, having been elected by the people, must also govern for all our people. It cannot shy away from taking difficult and tough decisions in the national interest, or shirk the duty of winning support for such decisions.

The Opposition too has its part to play. In Parliament, besides raising questions and criticisms, the Opposition should also propose policy alternatives to be scrutinised and debated. And when the situation demands, both the Government and Opposition should set aside differences and work together to secure the safety and future of our nation.

Singaporeans' expectations and choices will determine what kind of politics Singapore will have. The key question is how to forge a common cause together, regardless of our own political inclinations. We need to base our rhetoric on a responsible sense of the realities, and come to a shared understanding about our goals and constraints.

Our public debates should be honest and open about the trade-offs of different options and what they will cost society. Only in this way will our system continue to encourage able and committed individuals to step forward to serve.

SINGAPORE TOGETHER - THE NEXT PHASE OF NATION BUILDING

Ultimately, we want Singapore to evolve in a way that engages the aspirations and creative energies of all our people.

Singaporeans aspire to make this a better place, and have interesting and diverse ideas to pursue. Such a diversity of views and ideas can be a source of strength for us to navigate the challenges and possibilities ahead.

To realise this strength, we need a sense of common purpose, and a readiness to act to make a difference to causes we care about. Singaporeans must come together, in partnership, to pursue the greater good, united by a belief in Singapore and a desire to turn our vision into reality. This is the spirit of Singapore Together.

We invite all Singaporeans to partner each other and the Government in this journey.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, we will confront major changes in the world. But we can face the future with confidence, having built up deep strengths since our independence. Our pioneers prevailed against great odds to build Singapore, and it is now our turn to tackle this crisis of a generation.

How we respond to the pandemic and economic crisis will define Singapore for many years to come. We must continue to command confidence and respect in the world, and emerge a stronger and more united nation.

So let us work in close partnership, as Singapore Together - one people uniting behind our elected Government - to save lives, protect livelihoods, and secure a brighter future for ourselves and our children.

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