

Singapore must act decisively against nativist tendencies: Heng Swee Keat

Jalelah Abu Baker

Channel NewsAsia, 20 January 2020

SINGAPORE: Some of the public discourse around foreigners show that Singapore is not immune to the same divisive forces that have swept across the world, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said on Monday (Jan 20).

Such "nativistic tendencies" must be acted on decisively, he said.

"If we allow these forces to creep up on us, our hopes and concerns can be exploited to create fear and anger. Our diversity can be turned against us. Our unity can fray, and our society can wither," warned Mr Heng.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference, he said some lessons have to be kept in mind.

These include making sure that differences do not become entrenched and corrode social cohesion. Singapore should also guard against the danger of political parties using divisive rhetoric to gain support in a fractured landscape and falling prey to the pull of populism, he added.

SENSE OF "WE" IS KEY

Amid the disruptive forces, the need to work together as one united people has become more important, Mr Heng said.

Harking back to the past and how Singapore's forefathers had beaten the odds and turned an island of mudflats into a multicultural metropolis he said: "I believe a strong sense of 'we' was key to this. Our improbable success was made possible by exceptional governance - capable leaders, working together with a united people."

Singapore's founding fathers fostered a sense of nationhood by introducing policies that gave people a stake in Singapore. They saw their lives improve in real ways, they trusted the Government and were confident about making sacrifices for the greater good and for future generations, Mr Heng said.

"This is the formula behind our success, and it has kept Singapore exceptional," he said, adding that this approach must remain core to the Government's mission, especially as Singapore grapples with longer-term issues.

MORE TO BE DONE FOR LOWER-INCOME

In an era of rising inequality, the Government will strengthen its fundamentals and ensure no Singaporean is shut out of opportunities because of their family circumstances.

Mr Heng pointed to efforts such as increased investment in pre-school education, and doing more to level up children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"We are now studying how we can better help lower and lower-middle income Singaporeans, including current and future seniors, to meet their retirement needs in a sustainable way," he said, promising more details in his upcoming Budget speech.

While the way ahead will not be easy, he gave the "unwavering commitment" of the Government and the 4G leadership.

"My colleagues and I will make every effort to build a future of progress for Singaporeans in the coming decades," he said.

It will be a future where the benefits of progress will be shared, where no one will be left behind if they give their best, and where Singaporeans will pull together as one, said the deputy prime minister.

Amid a proliferation of more extreme opinions and a narrowing of views in echo chambers as well as a changing demographic profile, it is now even more crucial to maintain a sense of who Singaporeans are as a people, focus on what they have in common, and work together to build our shared future, he said.

Mr Heng said the way to do this is to continue to have strong political leadership.

The political leadership must have the trust and support of Singaporeans and partner Singaporeans to deliver outcomes, Mr Heng said.

"They (the leadership) must have the moral courage to do what is right for the people, and not just what is popular. We cannot be all things to all people."

TRUST BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE MUST BE STRONG

Trust between the Government and the people must continue to be strengthened, Mr Heng said.

"In a society increasingly flooded by information and misinformation, it is critical that we find ways to deepen understanding and relationships among our people, and to redouble our efforts to maintain a balanced perspective," he said.

Singapore must reject extremist views that will fray our social fabric, be discerning about falsehoods and irresponsible promises that cannot be fulfilled and importantly, must find new ways to come together, reaffirm what it holds in common, and work collectively towards a shared future, he said.

He brought up the Singapore Together movement he launched in June last year, an effort to work with Singaporeans on the future.

A new model of partnership is forming between the Government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on the future, he said.

Giving an example, Mr Heng said the Government has been making a more concerted effort to engage Singaporeans on the upcoming Budget.

"Just last weekend, I attended a session with youth leaders. We explored the challenges and opportunities for Singapore, and how we can partner one another to create a better future for all. It was a rich learning experience for everyone, and I certainly learnt a lot," he said.

Government agencies are learning to develop and deliver policy solutions in a more collaborative manner, and Singaporeans are gaining a deeper appreciation of the challenges and trade-offs in making national policy, Mr Heng said.

"I am confident that our partnership efforts to date will set the foundations for the work of a generation, just as our founding leaders made home ownership their cornerstone policy to give Singaporeans a stake in Singapore and a share in our progress," he said.