

Heng Swee Keat: S'pore Together movement, like home ownership previously, to be 4G leaders' new cornerstone

This is the fourth time Heng attended the thinktank's flagship annual conference.

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As a frequent guest speaker, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat reiterated familiar national themes during his keynote speech at think tank Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives Conference 2020.

Referring to his previous three appearances at the event in 2014, 2016 and 2018, Heng said that all three themes, namely "Differences", "We", and "Together" were still relevant in 2020.

Despite Director of the Institute of Policy Studies Janadas Devan's comment that it was not a "GE (general election) forum", Heng hit on likely talking points in the run-up to the GE, including the importance of rejecting extremist views, reducing income inequality, and adapting to technological disruption.

Heng also expressed confidence in the new Singapore Together movement, a movement that he launched six months ago.

He said that the government's partnership efforts with Singaporeans will be "our new cornerstone of nation building", just like how home ownership was the cornerstone policy for the pioneer generation.

People have become pessimistic about the future

Firstly, Heng said that the past decade has seen political consensus "fracture" in many countries, as not all countries have kept up with the changes arising from the spread of globalisation and economic growth after World War II.

He noted that workers face greater competition, while technological advancement has disrupted jobs, and the problems of growing wealth and income inequality and ageing population added to the strain.

Heng said:

"The ripple effects of these changes have resulted in many people becoming anxious and resentful. They have become increasingly pessimistic about their future, and upset about the lack of progress in life."

Era of "anti-politics"

He added that "more worryingly", people have come to view governments and institutions with distrust, starting an era of "anti-politics", citing the "mass rallies and violent protests" in Hong Kong as an example.

Heng said that widespread distrust has been exploited by "insurgent political parties", who run on nativist and protectionist lines, leading to a greater divide within society.

Singapore is not immune

While Singapore has fared better than most other countries, it is not immune to these divisive forces. Heng said:

"In fact, we have already seen some semblances of nativist tendencies here in Singapore, such as some of the public discourse around foreigners."

Heng said that if decisive action is not taken, “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.”

As the decade ends and a new one begins, Heng said it was important not to let differences become entrenched, and warned against the danger of political parties using divisive tactics to gain support.

Heng said: “We cannot assume we will be immune.”

Building a “virtuous circle” of trust

Secondly, Heng described a strong sense of “we” as the reason for Singapore’s success in its short history, despite the fact that the idea of “we” as citizens being relatively new to Singapore.

He posed two questions:

“How did our forefathers beat the odds, and turn an island of mudflats into a multicultural metropolis?”

And, “What must we do to keep our nation successful and sovereign?”

Answering his first question, he pointed to the policies implemented by Singapore’s “founding fathers” in order to give people a stake in Singapore and foster a sense of nationhood.

These policies included opening Singapore up to foreign investment and rapid industrialisation by creating jobs, investing in education and opening up opportunities for Singaporeans, and housing policies that “turned a city of squatters and slums into a nation of home-owners in just a few decades”.

Thus, Heng said, the founding generation of Singaporeans had a shared experience of progress which united them and built a “virtuous circle” of trust between the government and the people.

Heng attributed this built trust to being the formula behind Singapore’s success.

Maintaining the trust in the future

Looking toward the future, Heng spoke about other longer-term issues that Singapore faces: inequality, skills-building, public housing, and the ageing population.

Addressing inequality, Heng reinforced the importance of “ensur[ing] no Singaporean is shut out of opportunities because of their family circumstances”, and gave examples of the government increasing investments in pre-school education and providing more resources for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The government is currently developing the next edition of SkillsFuture in order to encourage upskilling in Singaporeans, said Heng.

He also spoke of the importance of ensuring that public housing remains accessible and affordable for all Singaporeans, saying, “In a period of widening generational divides, we must continue to give hope to our young.”

Heng said that the elderly in Singapore should not only have housing, but also have enough money for retirement and healthcare.

He added that the government is studying how to better support lower-middle income Singaporeans, and that he would give more details in the upcoming Budget.

Charting Singapore’s way forward

As Singapore looks toward the future, Heng said, it is important that Singapore not turn inward and close ourselves off from the world but instead stay open and connected, and “be creative and agile in charting our way forward”.

He spoke of Singapore as having the opportunity to be the “node between Asia and the world” as Southeast Asia grows rapidly, and using the traits of being “small” and “non-threatening” to maintain good relationships with everyone, even in a turbulent world.

Heng shared his commitment, and that of the 4G leadership, toward a future of progress for Singaporeans:

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

A future where we can continue to prosper as a nation, where all Singaporeans have opportunities to succeed.

A future where the benefits of progress will be shared with all, where no one will be left behind if they give their best.

A future where we pull together as one, turning our differences and diversity into our strength.”

S'pore Together movement

Lastly, Heng spoke about how in the face of a proliferation of diverse perspectives online and demographic changes, it is crucial to work “Together” to build a shared future for Singapore.

Heng said that Singapore must “first make sure that we continue to have strong political leadership”.

Heng added that Singapore’s political leadership must have the trust and support of Singaporeans, the ability to craft strategies for the future, and the moral courage to do what is right for the people.

Most importantly, he said that the Singapore leaders “must find new ways to come together, reaffirm what we hold in common, and work collectively towards a shared future”.

Heng said that this is the reason why he launched the Singapore Together movement in June 2019, a partnership that has “gained momentum over the last six months”.

He added that he and his 4G colleagues “are committed to go beyond just working for you, to working with you, to build our future Singapore”.

Singaporeans having direct impact

He cited examples such as the creation of the Citizens’ Panel and Citizens’ Workgroup to get Singaporeans involved in designing policies, and putting them into action, and the Singaporeans’ involvement in directly shaping Singapore’s physical environment such as the Somerset Belt and the Geylang Serai cultural precinct.

Heng concluded his speech by expressing optimism over “our Singapore Together movement”.

He noticed the movement as the formation of a new model of partnership, between government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on Singapore’s future.

He is also confident that the government’s partnership efforts to date will set the foundations for the work of a generation. He said,

“Just as our founding leaders made home ownership their cornerstone policy to give Singaporeans a stake in Singapore and a share in our progress, Singapore Together will be our new cornerstone of nation building”.