

4G leaders to offer Singaporeans more say in shaping policy

Lim Yan Liang

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Plans are also afoot to give more help to lower-income citizens, says Heng Swee Keat. Amid challenges such as inequality and economic disruption, the fourth-generation leadership is determined to build a future of progress and prosperity for Singaporeans, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

Mr Heng, who is expected to take over as Singapore's next leader in the coming years, also painted a vision of how he and his colleagues intend to lead the country. Their approach hinges on going beyond working for Singaporeans to working with them in designing policies and implementing them.

He also hinted that plans are afoot to give more help to lower-income Singaporeans.

"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," said Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister.

More help will also be given to workers - like those in their 40s and 50s - to upskill, with the Government putting in place the next phase of SkillsFuture, he added.

"I will provide more details in the coming Budget."

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference, Mr Heng invited "all Singaporeans to work with us, and with each other" to tackle the challenges facing the nation.

Just as the founding leaders fostered a sense of nationhood through policies such as home ownership that gave the people a stake in Singapore, Mr Heng said the Singapore Together movement launched last year "will be our new cornerstone of nation building".

For instance, new platforms have already engaged Singaporeans on ways to improve work-life harmony and encourage household recycling, said Mr Heng.

Singaporeans are also being involved in the development of Singapore's landscape such as the Somerset Belt, the Geylang Serai cultural precinct as well as parks.

"What we see forming is a new model of partnership between the Government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on our future," he told an audience of students, academics and policymakers.

"In this process, government agencies are learning to develop and deliver policy solutions in a more collaborative manner."

This collaborative approach is Singapore's way forward in a world marked by differences and uncertainty, he said.

He noted that many countries have seen their political consensus fracture over the past decade, brought about by changes such as technological disruption, growing inequality and ageing populations.

Singapore is not immune to these divisive forces, and there were hints of this in some of the public discourse around foreigners, he added.

Amid these disruptive forces, a strong sense of unity is key to keeping Singapore successful, the same way the founding political leaders beat the long odds facing the Republic in the early days, said Mr Heng.

"Our improbable success was made possible by exceptional governance - capable leaders, working together with a united people."

People had a stake in the country and there was trust between them and the Government.

"This approach must remain core to the Government's mission, especially as we grapple with longer-term issues facing us," he said.

But in a society increasingly flooded by information and misinformation, it is critical to find ways to deepen understanding and relationships among people, he noted.

"We must reject extremist views that will fray our social fabric, and be discerning about falsehoods and irresponsible promises that cannot be fulfilled."

That is why giving Singaporeans a bigger role in shaping policy would help them appreciate the trade-offs involved and distinguish truth from falsehoods, he said.

Singaporeans have also shown they want to let their actions speak for themselves: Total volunteer hours have nearly trebled in the past 10 years, from 45 million hours in 2008 to 122 million hours in 2018, he noted.

At the same time, the Government will continue to exercise leadership in areas such as security and defence, and in planning for the long term, said Mr Heng.

"I am confident that our partnership efforts to date will set the foundations for the work of a generation," he said.