

## **Biggest opportunity for reinvention lies in post-COVID world; crisis is 'reset button': Ong Ye Kung**

**Grace Yeoh**

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SINGAPORE: The biggest opportunity for reinvention lies in the post COVID-19 world, with the pandemic akin to a reset button that has forced Singapore to rethink the way it does things, said Health Minister Ong Ye Kung on Thursday (Jan 13).

"In many ways, the crisis is like a reset button, forcing us to rethink the way we do things to be better, to be smarter."

Speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Ong highlighted several ways in which Singapore has evolved and reinvented itself due to the pandemic.

### **"WE HAD TO ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES"**

Going forward, a post-COVID-19 work environment should embrace a hybrid work arrangement, said Mr Ong, adding that this would be "more efficient" and "outcome focused" and allow people to "juggle their lives".

"We should rethink the concept of 'peak' commuting hours, which has so long dictated the planning and development of transport infrastructure. We can flatten the traffic curve too."

He also touched on how the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many brick-and-mortar establishments onto digital platforms, and changes in the education and healthcare sectors.

"Having gone through home-based learning, education is undergoing another renaissance, kicked off with every secondary school kid equipped with a personal device, embracing the digital medium for education, and encouraging self-directed learning," he said.

"In healthcare, we now have a much better appreciation of the importance of primary care, which includes things like good hygiene, vaccinations, and home recovery with the help and support of tele-medicine. This may be a new beginning for primary preventive care, which will be the most important component in a rapidly ageing country."

Mr Ong added that Singapore also positioned itself as a hub for vaccine manufacturing and distribution through the pandemic.

"The process of coping with the pandemic has tested our mettle as a city. We had to roll with the punches and adapt to all kinds of twists and turns," said Mr Ong.

He also spoke of how Singapore relied on people's personal responsibility and civic consciousness to ride the infection wave, and how those things helped society grow "as a people".

"I hope it is the start for a societal attitude that is more forgiving of imperfections, embracing setbacks and failures, appreciating resilience, ruggedness, enterprise and even being unconventional," he said.

## **SINGAPORE A GLOBAL ECONOMIC NODE**

Mr Ong's speech, which was centred around the theme of Cities, Countries and Resilience, drew parallels between Singapore and three "great cities": New York City, Chang An, and Jericho.

Singapore's future success depends on "recognising the importance and combining the essence of all (these) great cities - past and present", he said.

Illustrating the "New York City in us", Mr Ong said Singapore is a global economic node today - a key to our survival as a city.

"We achieved this ambition through decades of hard work and enterprise. We leveraged our geographical location. We built a trading hub first from there, other strategic industries - manufacturing, tourism, biomedical, finance, infocomm, aviation, research and development, and so on."

"We have become like a smart phone - with a good operating system and all kinds of apps."

The "great" task that lies ahead, however, is for Singapore to keep reinventing itself to stay relevant and competitive, added Mr Ong.

Singapore has made "good progress as a smart nation", and is "fast becoming" a centre for green finance in the world, he said.

Mr Ong also mentioned plans to reinvent Singapore's cityscape, such as redeveloping the land at Paya Lebar Air Base and reimagining our city centre to include the Greater Southern Waterfront.

## **"GET POLITICS RIGHT"**

Mr Ong then drew comparisons to Chang An, stating that "even though we are no empire ... we need to run an effective state".

"This city is all we got. Within these 730 sq km, lie all the possible choices for 5 million people," he said.

"The Government of Singapore therefore must defend our city, maintain law and order. (It) must ensure that all our infrastructure and services - from healthcare, education and transport to utilities and refuse collection, libraries and parks, they are all well provided for and working well."

However, the affairs of the state cannot run away from politics, said Mr Ong.

He acknowledged that while politics facilitates public discourse and puts the fate of the country into its people's hands, politics gone wrong can polarise the population and destabilise society.

A critical factor of good governance then, is to "get politics right", he said.

"Rather than endless bickering and stalemates, the political process must be constructive, and help bridge divides. The objective of politics must be to help the country find a way forward even if the decisions involve very difficult trade-offs. This is especially important to Singapore."

Mr Ong pointed out that the "biggest conflict" post industrial revolution, and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, have been "between the Right and Left, creation versus distribution of wealth, socialism versus capitalism".

But modern societies face "new contradictions", with the challenges and stresses of international competition turning some people against globalisation and foreigners.

As a result, inequality, protectionism and climate change are some of the biggest issues that many governments grapple with today, said Mr Ong.

"To reconcile the dilemmas of modern societies and deal with these issues, we need a strong state. Otherwise, it will not be possible to do difficult but necessary things, such as a carbon tax to reduce emission, or redistributive policies to help the low income, or reform education, health or other significant public programmes," he added.

"Our policies need to be consistent for the long term to make an impact and make a change, improve lives. Unlike bigger countries, we cannot afford to be caught in

fractious politics with frequent change of Governments and reorientation of policies that come with it."

That said, he noted that Singapore's success depends on our ability to achieve both the "value of healthy discourse that takes in diverse views" and the "proper functioning of checks and balances".

## **WHAT MAKES US SINGAPOREAN?**

Singapore is a global city, but its residents are also "members of a close-knit tribe, sharing a common fate and destiny", said Mr Ong, highlighting parallels to the city of Jericho.

"The litmus test of what it means to be a nation is in our pledge: 'One united people'. This makes nation building a long-term, subconscious process. A nation's people will need to have common experiences, and go through trials and tribulations together," he added.

"Over time, this togetherness will forge common ideals that transcend primordial tribal instincts, and overcome forces that deepen social fault lines.

"Then something mysterious emerges, beyond security, beyond making a living, beyond creature comforts – like the soul of a nation."

Mr Ong said we are all "working on what it means to be Singaporean, day by day".

Whether that is singing Majulah Singapura in daily school assemblies, having different communities living side by side in HDB estates, having cohorts of youngsters performing National Service together, or battling crises like the COVID-19 pandemic together, "these are all acts of nation building".

"Many of these come through deliberate policies and programmes implemented by the state," he said.

During the bicentennial commemoration in 2019, for instance, the Government sought public consultation for one word to describe the Singapore DNA: Openness, multiculturalism or self-determination.

By a "wide margin", the public chose self-determination, he said, and added that it was "not surprising".

"Cities don't need it; many states don't even think about it. But a young nation like us dreams of and cherishes self-determination."

To wrap up his speech, Mr Ong attempted to describe the "growing consciousness about ... what makes us Singaporean".

For starters, it is perhaps that Singapore isn't "just a key node of the globalised world, but one that connects East and West, and different parts of the vast continent of Asia", he said.

This creates "vast opportunities that surpass the limits of our borders, for our people and future generations".

He added that this Singaporean consciousness is also that "the consistent strengths of the institutions of state will always strive to ensure justice and fairness to all, uphold meritocracy, bring out the best in everyone, bridge our divides and put us on the right path for the long term".

And finally, that there is "a solemn commitment to give every community that calls Singapore home a place under the sun, where everyone also exercises a spirit of give and take rather than pushing for their own agenda at the expense of others", he said.

"And in doing so, provides the space for something that we collectively own as Singaporeans to evolve over time."