

In societies everywhere, merit has become narrowly defined by academic abilities: Lawrence Wong

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PERSPECTIVE: What does the pandemic mean for Singapore and where do we go from here?

At the 2021 Singapore Perspectives IPS conference, Minister for Education Lawrence Wong gave a speech on Jan. 25 talking about three "resets" that we must make in our lifestyles, mindsets, and policy thinking. This includes:

- 1) Resetting our social compact for a fairer and more equal society, and to ensure that there is a meritocratic system in place that "works for the good of all".
- 2) Pushing for a greener Singapore even as economic activities start to pick up.
- 3) Strengthen our sense of social solidarity, seeing as how the pandemic has intensified divisions.

We have reproduced a portion of his speech on the first "reset".

As delivered by Lawrence Wong

Throughout history, pandemics have not dampened the waves of urbanisation nor the flourishing of innovation taking place in cities everywhere.

When the Bubonic Plague hit the city-state Florence in the 14th century, it was ravaged, and many fled. By some estimates, more than half the population died. But then, Florence bounced back and launched the Renaissance, a period of great flourishing, learning and discovery.

When the yellow fever pandemic hit Philadelphia in 1793, Thomas Jefferson said this will "discourage the growth of great cities in our nation." Now look what happened after that.

And after the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, we saw the roaring 20s and a boom in major cities like Chicago and New York City.

If history is a guide, it has shown that cities can bounce back from catastrophe, and emerge stronger than before.

And the reason this happens is cities are not just buildings and monuments, they are fundamentally about the people who dwell in them. Humans are by nature social animals.

Adaptation

We are naturally drawn to participation, collaboration and social interactions. We are also adaptable and capable of adjusting to new situations. We must never under-estimate this human capacity for innovation and learning.

So we have the ability to shape what our future looks like, and as suggested by the theme of the conference, let us think of this crisis as setting the stage for a software update – a “reboot” of sorts after the tremendous damage inflicted by the virus.

Beyond the immediate task of protecting lives and livelihoods, I would like to highlight three “resets” that we must make in our policy thinking, our lifestyles and our mindsets, even as we tide over the immediate season.

Pandemic affects all, but its impact isn't equal

First, we must “reset” our social compact to emerge as a fairer and more equal society.

The pandemic may be indiscriminate about who it infects. But its impact is anything but equal. It has in fact widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots.

Globally, we see poorer segments of society paying a heavier price – be it in terms of economic impact or access to healthcare. That’s why Governments all over the world have had to spend huge sums to help their people cope.

In Singapore, it’s always been at the top of the Government’s agenda to reduce inequality and to ensure a meritocratic system that works for the good of all.

We recognise that markets are incredibly powerful – they inject dynamism, transform societies, and give people from all backgrounds a chance to better their lives. But free markets have their flaws. It creates anxieties and stresses about technological change and foreign competition, and we see a continued stretching of incomes and wealth.

So we need a combination of open markets and effective state intervention – to level the playing field at the starting point, provide support and buffers for every citizen to help them bounce back from setbacks, and to equip them to excel in an uncertain environment of global competition and technological change.

More support for lower-income group in Singapore

We started this journey more than a decade ago when we tilted social policies actively in favour of the lower-income group, for example through Workfare, and through a whole range of support programmes in education, housing and healthcare, and more recently by providing more retirement assurance through the Silver Support scheme.

Income inequality in Singapore as measured by Gini Coefficient has in fact been trending downward.

Last year, we rolled out a significant package of emergency measures. We are luckier than most countries in that we do not have to borrow to fund these measures. We were able to draw on our reserves to save jobs and tide over Singaporeans who are hardest hit. These temporary measures will have to be tapered down this year as the economy improves, and to ensure our finances remain sustainable.

But the impact of the pandemic has created added impetus to strengthen our social support system. So there will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets, to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and we will have to work out how this will be sustainable over the longer-term.

The bottom line is that we aim to give Singaporeans more assurance in an uncertain post-COVID world.

Uplifting through education and keeping our society mobile

Beyond tackling inequality, we must keep our society fluid and mobile.

Meritocracy in Singapore must not ossify into a hereditary system where the condition of your birth determines the outcome of your life. How do we achieve this?

We start by intervening early and uplifting our children from birth. That's a key focus and priority for me in the Ministry of Education.

That's why we're making significant investments in pre-school. We want to make sure you don't need expensive private enrichment classes. Instead, all can benefit from quality programmes in MOE Kindergartens and across our Anchor and Partner Operators, where fees are kept affordable and regulated.

We're now looking at the earliest years of childhood, even at the pre-natal stage, where the wellbeing of a pregnant mother can have lasting effects on a child's development. Early intervention is effective and we are going all out to do more on this front.

We are continuing this strong support in schools. Since joining MOE, I've made it a point to visit schools with a higher proportion of students from lower-income and disadvantaged family backgrounds. Some of our most committed and dedicated Principals and teachers serve in these schools.

We are giving them more resources, so they are able to provide additional support for their students. For example, learning support in smaller pull-out classes. And beyond academic support, exposure to a whole range of different activities and programmes, so that it's not just about improving their academic results but also nurturing soft skills, for example through public speaking, through learning journeys, through overseas trips.

And we are also deploying more allied educators, counselors and welfare officers to support students, especially those with special needs. We want to ensure we continue to uplift these students, and help them achieve their full potential.

We are also making fundamental shifts in our model of education. We don't want to frontload learning when someone is young, or treat education as a conveyor belt for the job market.

Instead, we want to have a system of education for life which is what we are doing through our national movement, SkillsFuture. We want to have multiple entry points across the age

distribution and across the entire skills spectrum. And thereby enable everyone to reskill, upgrade, and continuously improve to be the best possible version of themselves.

Merit has become narrowly defined. How can we value those engaging in other forms of work?

Besides intervention in education, a broader mindset change is required.

Societies everywhere today place too much of a premium on cognitive abilities, and do not value sufficiently those engaging in other forms of work. As a result, merit has become narrowly defined by academic and cognitive abilities.

But in fact, there's a wide range of abilities and aptitudes needed for societies to thrive – we need the craft skills of artisans and technicians; the creativity and imagination of artists; and the human touch of those doing care jobs.

And the pandemic has thrown a spotlight on this imbalance.

We've come to better appreciate the contributions of our essential workers, who help to keep our lives going – our allied health workers, contractors, security guards, F&B operators, transport workers, just to name a few . We must honour them for their work and accord them the dignity and respect they deserve.

We must ensure they receive fair remuneration for the important work they do. And that's why we are pushing on moves across different jobs through our Progressive Wage Model (PWM).

We are also reviewing ITE and Polytechnic pathways to ensure graduates from these institutions get better jobs with higher pay, good career progression, and a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

If we attach more value in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields and not just cognitively, incomes would naturally spread out more evenly across society, and we will go a long way in advancing our cause towards a fairer and more equal society.