

Ong Ye Kung: S'pore has become like a 'smartphone' & this is what we must keep offering the world

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Mothership, 13 January 2022

Singapore has become akin to a smartphone with "a good operating system and all kinds of apps" with one's contacts, schedule, group chats, music and photos all personalised and "stored here", Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said on Jan. 13.

This has largely been the result of Singapore leveraging its geographical location to first build a trading hub, followed by other strategic industries such as manufacturing, tourism, biomedical, financial and infocomm services, aviation, research and development, he added.

"So this is the value proposition we want to keep offering to the world. Strong enough so that it is not easy, though not impossible, to switch out of Singapore," Ong elaborated.

Analogy given at second day of Singapore Perspectives conference

The minister gave his analogy at the opening of the second day of the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank.

In his speech, Ong spoke at length about how being a global economic node is "central" to the country's survival and the future strategies that Singapore had to take to constantly reinvent itself so as to stay relevant.

The minister divided the strategies broadly along the following three areas: labour, political and social.

Labour: Post Covid-19 world offers the biggest opportunity for reinvention

For labour, Ong said that the Covid-19 crisis provided the greatest opportunity for reinvention as the pandemic had been essentially been a reset button, forcing Singapore to rethink the way things are done, to be better and smarter.

The minister cited the following areas as examples of his point.

"For example, the post-Covid working world should embrace a combination of working in office and at home as a more efficient arrangement, to be outcome-focused and help people juggle their lives.

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

In addition, many brick-and-mortar establishments have been pushed onto digital platforms while the education sector is undergoing another "renaissance", driven by the equipping of every secondary school child with a personal device, the embrace of the digital medium for education, and the encouragement of self-directed learning.

Within the healthcare sector, Ong added that there is now a much better appreciation of primary care such as good hygiene, vaccinations and home recovery, with the help of tele-medicine.

"This may be a new beginning for primary preventive care, which will be actually the most important component in a rapidly aging country," he said.

The minister also noted that Singapore had positioned itself as a hub for vaccine manufacture and distribution.

"The process of coping with the pandemic has tested our mettle as a city. We had to roll with the punches and adapt to many twists and turns. We didn't try to shut down every infection cluster, but we tried to brave through, and ride the infection wave.

And to do this, we have had to rely on people's personal responsibility and civic consciousness. We had to trust that people will do the right thing in testing themselves and isolating themselves if they tested positive."

Political process must be constructive and bridge divides

On the political aspect, Ong stressed that it was imperative for Singapore's government to defend the city, maintain law and order, and ensure that infrastructure and services continue to work well.

"What Singapore has been blessed with is a founding generation that has built up good governance with a capital G," he said.

This includes the different arms of the state, which Ong defined as an executive branch that could get things done, a non-politicised civil service, a judicial system that upholds the rule of law "without fear or favour", and democratic institutions such as Parliament formed through free and fair elections.

Ong then said that while politics facilitates public discourse, puts the fate of the country ultimately in the hands of people, keeps powers in check and maintains accountability

of the executive branch, it could also polarise the population and destabilise societies if it went wrong.

"So a critical factor for good governance, is to get politics right. 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," Ong explained.

This is especially important to Singapore as its nimbleness, unity of action and purpose is how it overcomes its lack of resources and strategic mass, he added.

In addition, a strong state is key to addressing the issues of inequality, protectionism and climate change, according to the minister.

Without it, 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 policies and programmes.

"Our policies need to be consistent for the long term in order to make an impact and make a change, improve lives. Unlike bigger countries, Singapore cannot afford to be caught in fractious politics with frequent change of governance and reorientation of policies come with it.

This does not preclude the value of healthy discourse that take in diverse views, and the proper functioning of checks and balances, both of which can strengthen our health and functioning as a state. The success of Singapore state depends on our ability to achieve both aims."

Social: There is a growing consciousness about what makes us Singaporean

Ong then turned to what he called the most crucial aspect of being Singaporean which he explained as "the sense that despite being in a global city, we are members of a close-knit tribe, sharing a common fate and destiny."

In elaborating that nation-building was a "long-term, subconscious process," he said that the people of a nation had to have common experiences and endure trials and tribulations together.

"Over time, that togetherness togetherness will forge common ideas that transcend primordial tribal instincts and overcome forces that deepen social formations," he added.

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

In the case of Singapore, this is done every day, through students singing the national anthem, different communities living side-by-side in the HDB, "cohorts of youngsters" undergoing NS together and strangers instinctively connecting overseas through a single Singlish phrase, he said.

These acts of nation building are the result of "deliberate policies and programmes implemented by the state," according to Ong.

As such, there is a growing consciousness about what it means to be Singaporean, one which Ong defined as:

"That we are not just a keynote of the globalised world, but one that connects the East and West in different parts of Asia, creating vast opportunities that surpass the limits of our borders, for our people and our future generations.

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 of people, bridge our devices and put us on the right path for the long term.

That therefore in this nation, 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 their own agendas at the expense of others."