

**CO-CREATING A GREAT HOME AND A CARING COMMUNITY
SPEECH BY MINISTER LIM BOON HENG, DEPUTY CHAIRMAN,
PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION AT THE IPS "SINGAPORE
PERSPECTIVES 2011" ON MONDAY, 17 JANUARY 2011 AT
4.15PM AT THE FAIRMONT BALLROOM, RAFFLES CITY
CONVENTION CENTRE**

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong
Director of the Institute of Policy Studies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon!

Thank you for inviting me to share with you the work of the People's Association (PA) and its grassroots organizations (GROs) on building social capital in Singapore.

2 PA turned 50 last year. The fundamental role of the PA in promoting racial harmony and fostering social cohesion in Singapore has not changed, although the mission statement - "To build and bridge communities to achieve One People, One Singapore" - has been refreshed recently.

3 Singapore of the past is very different from today. Attracting people to come to a community centre or club was very much easier then. In the 1960s, all that was needed was to set up a black-and-white TV set, and the kampung folks would flock to the community centre (CC). As each of the 2 channels broadcast English and Malay, and Chinese and Tamil, Singaporeans watched most programs in common, strengthening the message that we are a multi-racial society. No one has done a sociological study as far as I know, so we do not know how watching common programs broke down racial barriers. As most people had lived in the same neighbourhood for a long time, the opportunities for coming together at CCs helped strengthen mutual trust and deepen bonds of friendship.

4 30 years ago, when I was first elected to Parliament, the Residents' Committees (RCs) were just newly formed. Singaporeans were being uprooted from the kampongs and settled into HDB new towns. Old ties were disrupted. RCs were set up to build new communities. Block parties organized by RCs were a novelty and attracted many residents. Children's parties in particular were a hit, and at the start, a sure way to bring the parents down and together. Over time, however, the parents felt

very secure to leave their children to the RC members, and they stayed home to do their housework! This challenged RC members to try new activities to draw them out.

5 As a rookie MP in the 1980s, I was grateful for the advice that seasoned MPs gave. I remember what the late Mr Fong Sip Chee said to some of us: "You must remember what grassroots events are for. These events are not for their own sake, but to bring people together, to become friends and good neighbours. And at these functions, you should take the opportunity to address issues of the day, and explain policies."

6 The world has changed. The speakers before me spoke about the challenges of a global city, of an aging population, of how rapid growth has brought about increasing disparities, or create divides, like the influx of foreign talents. They spoke about the need to strike a balance between globalization and yet not lose our local identity, about the need to nurture a caring society, and the need to build the Singapore spirit where there are shared values and experiences, with a commitment to the nation, and the common dreams and aspirations of citizens.

7 Indeed the CCs and RCs have also evolved to meet the changing needs and aspirations of residents. CCs evolved both in terms of offerings and in infrastructure. Sports popular in the 1960s such as boxing or weightlifting were replaced by tai chi, taekwondo and yoga; and children's art, restaurant cooking, cake-making, Japanese language classes and flower arrangement were the most popular in the 1980s, drawing many residents to the CCs. Then in the 1990s, the most popular courses became aerobics, international folk dance, choral singing, ballet and piano. Language and culinary skills continued to be an attraction. As the demand and needs of CC courses changed, so have the infrastructure. In the 1990s, the CCs began to co-locate with major community agencies such as the library, neighbourhood police posts, post office and polyclinic. In recent times, CCs co-locate with swimming pools and sports facilities. These changes reflect the struggle of the grassroots to bring people together, as their attention was drawn to multiple TV channels and the internet in their own homes, or attractions elsewhere. It is a struggle against social drift, as described by Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone".

8 Slowly, the attention of grassroots leaders turned to activities that will attract residents. The focus turned to the

activities themselves, and GROs developed an over-reliance on lucky draws. While the numbers of attendees at grassroots activities stayed high, MPs observed that they tend to see the same familiar faces at these events.

9 When I was appointed PA Deputy Chairman in 2007, I looked at the performance, and, frankly speaking, saw more output rather than outcome. Grassroots leaders and PA staff were all working extremely hard. But were we satisfied with the outcome? How well were we progressing to develop our common identity and sense of belonging, against the social forces at work? Should we attempt a review of PA and the work of grassroots organizations under its umbrella? We took the plunge, and went through a 2-year exercise involving the PA Board, MCYS, Advisors and grassroots representatives.

10 The result was the co-creation of one common vision for the community, that of "A Great Home and A Caring Community where we share our values, pursue our passions, fulfill our hopes, and treasure our memories." Our vision tagline is "Our Community, My Responsibility".

11 With this common vision, we asked grassroots leaders to envision what they want their community to be in 5 years' time, and to do their work plan so that each year's effort contribute towards that community. In other words, all their efforts should lead to the accumulation of social capital. This they have done, and compiled in the publications "Community 2015 Master Plan and Work Plan".

12 The key components of social capital are: trust and reciprocity amongst people, informal networks, and confidence in the government and the public institutions. Robert Putnam's definition of social capital brought back to my mind the advice of the late Mr Fong Sip Chee. He defined the work of MPs and their grassroots leaders in his own way, but they add up to accumulating social capital!

13 In this light, the role of grassroots leaders is not that of event organizers, as some of them had thought, but that of Community Facilitators. High social capital must involve most, if not all residents, and not a minority. So how do grassroots leaders get more residents to participate, to take ownership? Getting thousands of residents to attend an event is not difficult, but when

they come, do they participate and interact? There is more interaction and deeper engagement when people gather in small interest groups. When the group is large, many are passengers. When groups are small, everybody plays a part. Likewise grassroots leaders observe greater sense of ownership when residents organize pot-luck floor parties, as against RC organised block parties. Here, we can learn from what other organizations have done: give everyone a role. When there's a sense of ownership, there's a sense of belonging. It does not mean that large-scale events do not build social capital - they do. Such as when these events allow people to participate, such as in groups where they identify with one another, e.g. national day parade. Such as when the event give everyone a common high, and feel a sense of common identity with one another, e.g. when in sports, Singapore wins a trophy. But large scale events must be complemented by many many small scale ones, such as in interest groups.

14 How do we know when grassroots leaders have succeeded? When small interest groups are self-sustaining, and do not rely on the RCs or CCMC to organize activities for them. When residents have become good friends, and look out for one

another in what Dr Maliki calls "micro-communities", where a nurse and a taxi driver are community resources who will help a diabetic neighbour improve his quality of life. When local problems are solved by residents stepping forward and working with one another. E.g. when some people made use of void deck, became a nuisance and the block residents get together to regulate things and make sure they do not make noise at odd hours. These are scenarios that we will see, when our grassroots leaders, as Community Facilitators, put the resident - not the activity - at the centre of what they do.

15 There will be no end to this work. There will be changes in society as we witness in recent years, such as influx of new immigrants, and each new decade will bring new issues and challenges. Some old trends, however, will continue too, such as the frequency at which Singaporeans change homes, at least in the immediate and medium term future. And we must never take racial and religious harmony for granted.

16 There is a renewed sense of purpose among grassroots leaders today. They know what their role is: to harness their residents in a common effort to co-create A Great Home and a

Caring Community. There is a new buzz and sense of excitement too, among the PA staff, as they now see clearly their role in supporting grassroots leaders bridge divides and communities, to forge a common identity and become more rooted to this, Our Home.
