

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Closing Dialogue

By Tasha TAN

The [closing dialogue](#) of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, held in front of both an in-person and online audience, featured Minister Lawrence Wong, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Finance. The question-and-answer portion of the session was moderated by Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief for *The Straits Times*.



Caption for photo: Minister Lawrence Wong giving his opening remarks.

Three Resets

Minister Wong urged the audience to be prepared to live in a changed world of mask-wearing and social-distancing. There is still uncertainty on how long the pandemic will last, possibly four to five years, he said. There is also uncertainty over how much time is needed before global travel can restart, how long the development and distribution of vaccines will take, and how much immunity those vaccines provide. In reference to past pandemics, he said societies

had shown themselves to be able to adapt and adjust to new situations, and to bounce back from adversity. This pandemic is a way for Singapore to have a reset, he added.

He listed three forms of resets: social compact, managing climate change, and strengthening the sense of social solidarity.

The first reset relates to a social compact. COVID-19 has widened the gap between the low- and high-income groups, showing the need to create a fairer and more equal society. Minister Wong said there was a need for some state intervention for the economic market, and for schemes to help ease inequality. He also said that meritocracy in Singapore must not ossify into a hereditary system where the condition of your birth determines the outcome of your life. Hence, the state was intervening by providing education and early intervention, especially for disadvantaged students. The state was also changing the mindset towards education, from frontloading learning to lifelong learning. He shared that merit had previously been narrowly defined by cognitive abilities, and the pandemic has shown how essential other types of work are.

The second reset was about managing climate change. When most of human activity stalled due to lockdowns, carbon emissions dropped, and the earth started to heal. This shows that we have to find new and green ways to generate energy in a sustainable way for the economy. He pointed to the phasing out of engines with internal combustion, and the goals of achieving net zero emissions and being a carbon-trading and services hub. Sustainability is important for the future generations, he said.

The third reset was to strengthen the sense of social solidarity. In the present age of misinformation, some think that the pandemic is a hoax, and polarisation of views has also intensified. Experts are also seen as being out of touch with the ground, perpetuating ideologies of the elite. On the other hand, the pandemic will also form a shared memory that can strengthen social solidarity. He raised the question about which path Singapore might take moving forward. He also argued for the need to co-create with the public for the creation of policies, and that Singapore should have the gumption to move forward together.

Discussion and Q&A

Mr Fernandez raised the question of what 2021 would look like and if it would be different from 2020. How would Singapore reset? Minister Wong said that a major difference was the arrival of vaccines to help tackle the virus. On resetting, the pandemic accelerated existing trends of digitalisation, geopolitical tensions, and rising inequality. It was pointed out that there would be a change in working, to more remote working. There may be fears of Singapore being less relevant as a hub, he added.

A participant asked about finding a balance between keeping an open economy and controlling in the number of COVID-19 cases, referring to the recent surge in imported cases. Minister Wong said that rates have gone up due to the increased prevalence rate around the world. There were safeguards in place to prevent a spread of cases in the community, such as pre-departure tests before travellers enter Singapore.

Participants asked questions about diversifying the education system in Singapore to include other streams like commerce, or to also teach other soft skills beyond the hard skills of math

and science. Currently, there were only an arts or science streams in junior colleges with limited space for other interests like commerce. A comment was made that junior colleges were for gaining knowledge while polytechnics were for more applied skills and preparation for the job market. He repeated the point that education did not need to be front-loaded and other skills and knowledge could be learned later in life, on the job or through further education. He also emphasised the need to lift every child. Currently, schools do not have subjects explicitly on soft skills and critical thinking, but such skills are taught indirectly through assignments and other school activities.



Caption for photo: Minister Wong responding to a question during the Q&A session.

A participant asked about inequality in Singapore, describing how the pandemic has raised awareness of vulnerable groups such as foreign workers. Minister Wong commented that the state was already conducting reviews on strengthening social safety nets, building new dormitories and improving the living conditions of workers. He noted that it was also about changing people's mindsets towards foreign workers.

Another question was raised on increasing salaries and adding value to jobs. Minister Wong described how more time was needed for perceptions of jobs and stereotypes of certain professions to change. There was also a need to redesign jobs and upskill workers to help them remain relevant and earn higher salaries.

A participant asked if being multi-racial and multi-religious was an issue for Singapore and if we are equipped to handle the changes to come in the future. While racism still exists in Singapore, Minister Wong said the situation was better than it was 20 years ago. We still need to work to improve on existing policies to bring a stronger union of people, he said. Policies

should not be regarded as sacred cows that cannot be changed. It is also important to ensure identity politics does not take root, he added.

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