

## Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Summary

By Ysien LAU

The 2021 Singapore Perspectives Conference, titled “Reset”, explored various challenges brought on by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as pre-existing trends and issues in different domains: political, social, economic, technological, ethical and environmental. This iteration of the Singapore Perspectives conference formed a key element of the ongoing scenario-planning project, [Reimagining Singapore](#) which seeks to explore how Singapore and the world might change in the next decade, the challenges that might exist, and the strategies can and should be taken to build a better future.



*Caption for photo: The hybrid final day conference was conducted in accordance with Singapore’s safe-distancing regulations.*

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic led to most of the conference proceedings being conducted online. However, this shift also provided new opportunities, such as the ability to invite international thought leaders to participate in forum discussions, to reach out to wider

audiences beyond physical boundaries, and to host more forum sessions than in previous iterations of the conference.

This year's conference comprised nine live interactive online forums, along with a final hybrid conference day event featuring in-person plenary sessions that was attended by a small live audience and cast to a live online audience.



Caption for photo: IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan [opens the final day](#) of the conference.

## Online Forums

Divided across three days, the nine online forums were framed around the key values articulated in the Singapore pledge. The online sessions featured a wide range of local and global thought leaders, academics, policymakers and community leaders, who drew from their unique backgrounds and perspectives to produce engaging and robust discussions. Conference participants watched the forums live, asked questions and participated in discussions on the online conference platform.

The first day of the online sessions centred on the **economy**, exploring Singapore's goals of prosperity and progress. The sessions for the first day were "Jobs and Skills", "Environment and Sustainability", and "Global Economy".

The second day of the conference focused on **society**, keeping in mind the idea of achieving happiness and having a society based on justice and equality. This sparked discussions on the impact of COVID-19 on society, as well as ongoing social developments and trends that had already been set in motion before the pandemic. The topics for the second day of online forums were "Identities and Cohesion", "Technology and Liveability", and "Soul of the Nation".

The third day of online sessions took a closer look at **politics and governance**, inspired by the ambition of building a democratic society that was articulated in the Singapore pledge. The sessions for the third day included "Multilateralism and Global Cooperation", "The Values and Qualities of Leadership", and "Global Trends, Social Movements and Democracy".

The themes that arose throughout these online sessions were carried over to the final day of the conference, where business leaders and political representatives discussed trends and potential pathways for Singapore's development.

### Summary of Themes from Online Forums



*Caption for photo: Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at IPS, giving a summary of the conference proceedings*

On the final day of the conference, Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at IPS, [presented a summary](#) of the different themes that arose during the online forums. He highlighted three broad themes that he observed during the online forums, and which he believed are key to resolving future challenges: equality, diversity and leadership.

On equality, he noted how panellists in every session had discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing global trends, leading to sharper disparities in various domains, including employment opportunities, socio-economic status, and digital access. He described how education was repeatedly seen as a solution for inequalities in society and observed the call among many panellists for more skills development outside traditional classroom settings, such as critical thinking, digital and media literacy, and greater awareness of the region.

Moving to the theme of diversity, Mr Gee highlighted the topic of intersectionality that arose throughout the conference, identifying how having such a diversity of characteristics and identities in Singapore led to greater complexity. He raised the importance of not retreating into specific unique identities and becoming more atomised as a society, but instead promoting dialogue, referring to Ambassador Alami Musa's call for a "dialogical society" during the fourth forum. Tying the need for dialogue with the theme of inclusivity, Mr Gee also pointed to panellists, such as Mr Aaron Maniam from the ninth forum, who stressed the importance of

having inclusive politics, in which everyone would have the ability to actively participate and share their perspectives.

Finally, on leadership, Mr Gee identified how many panellists had discussed Singapore's role in the region, calling for Singapore to take on a greater leadership role, and perhaps even an "origin hub", for efforts in economic development, environmental sustainability, multilateralism and technological innovation. Mr Gee also described how the importance of trust appeared consistently throughout the forum discussions. He pointed to Minister Audrey Tang's presentation on Taiwan's open-source platforms for crowdsourcing information, which demonstrated the need for a culture of cooperation and trust among citizens and between citizens and institutions, as well as other speakers who emphasised the need for a culture of collaboration and discussion in order to foster trust. Describing the different characteristics of leaders brought up during the forum discussions, Mr Gee argued that leadership should be for all, not just for a select few, and described the importance of a communal form of leadership that involves collaboration, discussion and constantly learning from one another.

### **In-Person Plenary Sessions**

The final day of the conference featured three in-person plenary sessions, which drew from the deliberations and emergent themes from the nine online sessions prior to discuss current trends and future developments in Singapore.

The first session was **business in Singapore**, which was moderated by Mr Christopher Gee, and featured Ms Aw Kah Peng, Chairman of Shell Companies (Singapore); Mr Louis Lim, current Chief Operating Officer and incoming Chief Executive Officer of Keppel Land; and Mr Ang Yuit, Vice President of Strategies, Development and Digitalisation at the Association of Small & Medium Enterprises.

The second session of the day was **politics in Singapore**, moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. On the panel were representatives from three of Singapore's political parties: Dr Janil Puthuchery from the People's Action Party; Mr Gerald Giam from the Workers' Party; and Ms Hazel Poa from the Progress Singapore Party.

The conference rounded off with a dialogue session with Minister Lawrence Wong, Singapore's Minister for Education and Second Minister for Finance, which was moderated by Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief for *The Straits Times*.

*Ysien Lau is a Research Assistant at the IPS Governance and Economy Department.*

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