Singapore Perspectives 2026 "Fraternity"

Opening Address by Mr Janadas Devan, Director, Institute of Policy Studies

This year, 2026, is the 250th anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence. Many if not all of you would have read its preamble:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

Walter Isaacson, the American journalist, has called this "The Greatest Sentence Ever Written", in a book bearing those exact same words as the title. I'm not sure if it is indeed the greatest sentence every written – I can think of a few other candidates, including "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" – but I'd like to compare this to something else important to us, which is The Pledge. All of you would know how it goes. In particular, I'd draw your attention to how the word "happiness" occurs in it:

> We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.

Most Singaporeans would not have recited The Pledge as I did just now. They would have stressed the last three words almost equally --- "for our nation". That typically happens at school flag-raising ceremonies and NDPs. We seem to know instinctively that in our case "the pursuit of happiness" is not an "unalienable right" pertaining to individual men and women. Rather, we explicitly enjoin ourselves

> "to build a democratic society … so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress ***for our nation***."

Happiness, for us, from our beginning in 1965, has been a collective enterprise – "for our nation" – rather than an "unalienable" individual "Right", as it was for Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams 250 years ago in British America.

But in what way can a nation be said to be happy? Individuals might be happy; but an entire nation? What does that mean? We all smile together? Laugh, dance, make merry – as a collective? Perhaps it was a syntactical error – "happiness" being placed in a list including "prosperity and progress", leading to "for our nation"? Perhaps the real meaning here is

> "build a democratic society … so as to achieve happiness for ***oneself***, and hopefully, prosperity and progress ***for our nation***."

Actually, our founding leaders really did want to stress happiness as a condition to be achieved in relation to one another. Mr S Rajaratnam's draft of The Pledge is explicit on this score. His draft reads:

> We, as citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to forget differences of race, language or religion and become one united people; to build a democratic society where justice and equality will prevail and where we will ***seek happiness*** and progress ***by helping one another***.

Nothing here about a Creator endowing each of us with certain "unalienable Rights". I don't think Mr Rajaratnam or any of our founding leaders would have denied the possibility of an individual being happy. They, like others, would also have experienced happiness and sadness, joy as well as grief, in their private and public lives.

Still, I can't help feeling that what they were trying to feel their way towards here was something unique and special. I wouldn't go so far as to claim this to be the greatest insight in the annals of statecraft, but it is special – for us, at any rate.

Our founding leaders defined "citizenship", not solely in terms of rights, laws, constitutions – or even identity. All this would have been there in the mix, of course, as we emerged into sovereignty after Separation. But in addition to rights and laws, Mr Rajaratnam sought to define citizenship as each of us being subject to one another. We will become citizens – "of Singapore" – by virtue, he hoped, of each seeking our own well-being and happiness "by helping one another".

It is such a simple wish, it is breathtaking.

In this vision, citizens are not meant to be singularities – individual separate self-enclosed nodes within the space of a city-state. Each citizen is meant rather to exist in a relationship to other citizens: Subject to one another; serving each other; "helping one another"; and thereby forming a "nation". Citizenship in Singapore is meant to be a web of relationships, a network, among ourselves.

Mr Rajaratnam drafted his version of The Pledge on 16th February, 1966 – barely six months after the moment of anguish of 9th August, 1965. Here you see flashed on the screen the letter he sent to Mr Ong Pang Boon, then the Minister of Education, whose idea it was to have something school children could recite every morning at the flag-raising ceremony. Mr Ong and Mr Rajaratnam, like many others in Singapore's founding leadership then, initially didn't want to separate from Malaysia. They would have preferred if they had been allowed to say, "We, the citizens of Malaysia", as the recently declassified The Albatross File confirms. It was an act of faith – blind faith – that barely six months after this painful abortion they dared dream of another possible citizenship. And it is very poignant that they dreamt of this citizenship as being rooted, among other things, in each of us seeking our fulfilment and happiness in each other, by helping one another, and thereby forming a nation.

Think of that: Mr Rajaratnam didn't use the cliches that might have occurred to one – "working with one another", "cooperating with one another", "uniting with one another". Instead, he said "helping one another".

Simple. Poignant. Breathtaking.

All of you would remember another candidate for "the greatest sentence ever written":

> Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité

That's not quite a sentence, of course. It's the national motto of France, originating from the French Revolution of 1789 and enshrined still in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. The motto embodies the principles of individual rights or liberty, equality and solidarity.

Our Pledge too alludes to the ideas of liberty and equality. We find them in "democratic society" and "justice and equality", bolded here.

> We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a ***democratic society*** based on ***justice*** and ***equality*** so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.

But actually, what is stressed more in our Pledge is the final word in the French motto – *fraternité*, fraternity or solidarity. We find the idea of solidarity embedded in "united people", "regardless of race, language or religion", and achieving "happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation".

> We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as ***one united people***, ***regardless of race, language or religion***, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to ***achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.***

Indeed, in our case, I'd argue even "equality" in our Pledge has as much to do with *fraternité* as it does with *égalité*. For equality meant to our founding generation – and still does I hope – not only equality before the law but also equal opportunity: That socialist conviction that though we might be differently endowed and come from different social backgrounds, we should strive to give everyone an equal chance at success, an equal opportunity to achieve our fullest potential.

Solidarity, I would argue, is the foundation of our nationhood. Thus the title of this year's Singapore Perspective: Fraternity – in all four of our official languages.

Singapore has always been a diverse country – many races, many religions, many languages, as The Pledge acknowledges. And not forgetting what it doesn't acknowledge, many social and economic classes too, different political beliefs, as well as people of many nationalities, for we began and remained for much of our existence primarily a nation of immigrants.

From this multiplicity, we created "one united people" – not wholly or fully, let alone perfectly, but substantially. And we did so without suppressing any racial, religious or linguistic identity. This has been the genius of Singapore: From many, one – but without erasing multiplicity.

If solidarity is the foundation of our nationhood, whatever threatens that solidarity must by definition undermine that nationhood. This year's Singapore Perspectives on Fraternity, like last year's on Community, focusses on what might fracture our solidarity; what might weaken or diminish our social capital.

I will not rehearse in detail what these might be – you will hear from 14 speakers in the course of the day on this topic, including Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong as well as three of the emerging 5G leadership, Acting Ministers Jeffrey Seow and David Neo, as well as Minister of State Jasmine Lau. Their presence as well as that of our other distinguished speakers – and all of you here, the most heavily over-subscribed Singapore Perspectives in the 15 years I've been in IPS -- attests to how seriously we in Singapore take threats to our solidarity.

These include the challenges posed by the siloing effect of the online space, growing income inequality and immigration – in addition to the familiar faultlines of race, language and religion. The recent Edelman Trust Barometer was most insightful in defining the challenges we in Singapore as well as elsewhere face. It spoke evocatively of "the retreat into insularity" everywhere – the reluctance to trust or treat or interact with anyone who's different from you. We are witnessing that retreat in its most vicious form in the United States today, tragically coinciding with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Our own IPS surveys have thrown up evidence of this retreat into insularity in Singapore too. One recent survey showed that young Singaporeans aged 21-35 tend to have fewer close friends than older Singaporeans aged 36-50. We see the same phenomena elsewhere – the effect perhaps of the young becoming increasingly imprisoned in their siloed virtual worlds. Robert Putnam spoke of people "bowling alone". The young everywhere seem now to be surfing the Internet alone, living alone, entertaining themselves alone. There is evidence the young are increasingly losing interest even in dating. Another survey reveals that social networks based on housing types among Singaporeans have become insular. For example, among condo and landed property dwellers, only 2 in 10 of their close friends live in HDB 4-room and smaller. This is quite a feat, considering that 80 per cent of us live in public housing. And of course, we know local born Singaporeans tend to worry about the effect the foreign born, whether they be citizens or not, have on our social solidarity. The IPS-CNA survey on national identity released last year revealed that 72% of local born citizens felt that one's country of birth may conflict with national identity. And nearly 5 in 10 (around 45%) of local born citizens felt that new citizens or foreigners have negatively impacted our national identity.

What the Prime Minister has invoked as the "We First" society is our attempt to deal with all these different challenges.

I WOULD LIKE to go back to the wisdom embedded in our Pledge for guidance. Recall it defined "happiness" as a condition to be achieved in a web of relationships – enjoining us "to achieve happiness … ***for our nation***". Recall too how Mr Rajaratnam sought to define citizenship as

each of us being subject to one another – enjoining us to "seek happiness … ***by helping one another***."

What the Pledge says about "happiness" expresses a simple, profound, perennial ethical insight that is to be found in every religion. It is found in the Golden Rule, versions of which exists in almost every tradition: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" in Christianity; "Do not hurt others in ways you yourself would find hurtful" in Buddhism; "Wish for your brother what you wish for yourself" in Islam; and so on.

At bottom the "retreat into insularity" that we are suffering everywhere is the result of individuals, groups, tribes, nations all feeling they are all that exists in the universe, all that matters, the only realities they need to be concerned about.

That's what I, me, mine means. That's what racial chauvinism or religious bigotry means. That's what America First, Russia First or Timbukto First means. The rest of society – all the people beyond yourself; the 80% who don't live in a landed property, say; the 40% who weren't born here; all that is not mine or mine own or like me – is of no significance.

When our Pledge enjoins us to seek happiness not for ourselves but for our nation; when we are urged to seek fulfilment by helping others; when our citizenship is not just a matter of individual rights but also of subjecting oneself to one another; what we are being urged to do is recognise that no person, no group, no nation even, can exist other than in a web of relationships.

What should "We First" mean?

Judging from the wisdom embedded in our Pledge, I think it must mean: Let's try to be a little kinder to each other.