



THE theme of Singapore Perspectives 2020, exactly five years ago today (January 20), was “Politics”. We landed on that theme because 2020 was bound to be an election year – like 2025 now. Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat gave the opening address and Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing did the concluding ministerial dialogue.

We already knew before SP 2020 that there was a strange new ailment abroad, originating in China and spreading across Asia – coronavirus 2019 (or Covid-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (or SARS-CoV-2).

Two days after SP 2020, on January 22, the government announced the formation of a Multi-Ministry Task Force to deal with Covid-19, co-chaired by Mr Gan Kim Yong and Mr Lawrence Wong – now, respectively, Deputy Prime

Minister and Prime Minister. The next day, January 23, Singapore announced its first case of Covid-19.

What a whirl the last five years have been – five budgets within a year in 2020/21; one GE, in July 2020, which saw the ruling party returned to office but with a somewhat reduced majority; a brand new Leader of the Opposition; one change in the designated political succession; a new President and a new Prime Minister; not to mention, circuit breakers, vaccine certificates, masks galore, swabs, PCR and serology tests, antigen rapid test kits, contact tracings, SafeEntrys and Trace Together, work-from-homes, magic cups, countless billions of dollars of expenditure from the reserves, and so much more.

About half the current term of government was consumed by the pandemic. 96% of the eligible population completed their vaccination regime by June 2022. By June 2023, we had recorded about 2.5 million confirmed Covid-19 cases, and 1,727 deaths – a case fatality rate of 0.07%, one of the lowest in the world.

I want to talk today about one aspect of the crisis still of relevance today and to the theme of SP 2025 – “Community”. As has been noted by former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the crisis saw our social capital strengthen and

deepen. I had a ring side seat as Chief of Government Communications during the period seeing how that happened.

One of the most important decision the government made early in the crisis was to be fully transparent with the public. I call it a “decision”, but in truth I don’t recall any deliberation on the matter. Automatically almost – tacitly as well as explicitly -- the whole of government knew that it wasn’t possible to deal with such a dire public health crisis if people did not trust the information the authorities were putting out.

The Prime Minister, aided by his magic cup, spoke directly to the people on numerous occasions – seven times in 2020 and twice in 2021. The MTF (the Multi-Ministerial Task Force) held repeated press conferences -- 48 in 2020 and 28 in 2021. At the height of the crisis, Mr Gan and Mr Wong (and later Mr Ong Ye Kung) held as many four press conferences a week – so many, the press begged us not to call them so often. All accredited media, foreign and domestic, were free to attend, or later zoom-in, into the press conferences.

We put out masses of information – including, in the early months, details of the contact tracings. We even revealed the serology test results – records not of current cases but of people who carried antibodies indicating they had been exposed to the pathogen before. We were the only country in the world to disclose so copiously serology test results.

We created a special WhatsApp channel for Covid. The Prime Minister himself personally breathed down our necks about this channel, complaining the messages were taking too long to be pushed out. More than 1.3 million people subscribed to the channel. At the height of the crisis, we pushed out as many as three to five messages a day. People would stay up late at night to read the latest updates.

We tracked obsessively the public mood – among other instruments, with two online polls a week. In every poll, we asked if people thought the information they were receiving from the government was sufficient. Our comms rating hardly went below 75% in 2020 and 2021. When we were surprised by the Delta variant in late 2021, just when people assumed the crisis was abating, and Covid cases spiked suddenly, the rating sank below 65%. At that point, in addition to the 5,000 print ads, over 800 TV interstitials (including famous ones featuring Phua Chu Kang) and thousands more online ads – all in four languages -- we decided to send in trucks equipped with loudspeakers into the heartland to urge people to come down now to be vaccinated. That elicited some complaints about noise, but by March 2022, more than eight in ten were satisfied with the information the government was providing.

We made many mistakes – most embarrassingly, about masks early in the crisis. Based on WHO advice – erroneous, as it turned out -- that masks were unnecessary, and worried that we had to reserve the limited number of masks we had for healthcare personnel risking their lives at the frontline, we elected to tell people, emphatically, “Do Not Wear Masks.” We soon realised our mistake; admitted it; and reversed course – *go-stan*. Later we made a more serious mistake about the data collected by Trace Together and had to pass legislation to make things straight.

WHY did the United States have 545 coronavirus cases per 1,000 residents over the first 21 months of the pandemic, Britain 374, Germany 188, Switzerland 164, but Japan only 67 cases per 1,000, Singapore 59, South Korea 28 and Taiwan seven?

More pertinently, when you look at the ratio of cases that led to death over the same 21-month period, why was Germany’s infection fatality rate 6.34 per 1,000 cases, Switzerland 5.56, the United States 4.55, but South Korea only 3.24 and Singapore lower still at 0.68 – or less than one death per 1,000 cases, about the lowest in the world?

A study of 177 countries published in *The Lancet* in April 2022, found that the factors that explained the most variation in the infection's fatality rates were the age profile of the country (the more elderly, the more deaths); GDP per capita (the poorer, the more deaths), and national mean BMI (the more obese, the more deaths). But the most significant factor associated with infection rates, as well as vaccine coverage, were high levels of trust in government and high levels of interpersonal trust – in other words, social capital. A study by Professor Stella Quah of Duke-NUS Medical School, published in the *International Encyclopaedia of Public Health*, found similar correlations. Public health, it turns out, is rooted best in the soil of trust.

We didn't have vaccine doubters in Parliament – neither from the ruling party nor the opposition. No political leader peddled hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug, as a cure for Covid-19, as did President Donald Trump. One study found that 17,000 Covid-19 patients in the US, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Turkey died as a result of taking this drug.

The overwhelming majority of our population believed the information the authorities put out. The government was criticised for many things – for the outbreaks in the foreign-worker dormitories, for instance – but never on the science it based its policies on. We had few peddling alternative facts; and fewer still believing in them. We willingly adopted safe distancing measures;

obeyed the rules; looked out for each other. The young cared for the old – shopped for them, brought them food, checked on them; and the government spent billions from the reserves to safeguard lives as well as livelihoods.

We routinely cite social cohesion, solidarity, as one of the factors in Singapore's success. This nostrum may sound like a cliché to some, even propaganda. But as we saw in the pandemic, social cohesion literally saves lives.

Because we had high social capital – not only high bonding social capital (meaning close ties within different groups, like races or clans) but more importantly high bridging social capital (meaning close ties across different groups) – people readily helped and looked out for one another during the pandemic: across races and religions; across ages; across socio-economic classes. We learnt during the crisis that “essential workers” didn't refer to high-level public or private sector grandees, but rather to nurses and cleaners, delivery riders and cooks, sanitation workers and swabbers. There was new respect for lowly-paid people doing such important work. And as we witnessed the beneficial outcomes of our high social capital, so grew our appreciation for our social cohesion. It was a virtual circle.

I remember feeling during the darkest periods of the pandemic that I finally knew for sure the answer to the question my generation used to ask as we grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. National Service had been instituted in 1967, and many among us then in secondary school and pre-university wondered if Singaporeans would indeed fight if the fledgling island-republic were invaded. I felt during the Covid-19 pandemic that the answer was an emphatic yes.

DOES that mean we have nothing to worry about – that the social and political fractures we see elsewhere in the world would never surface here? Around midnight tonight, our time, Mr Donald Trump will be sworn in again as President of the United States, an outcome dreaded by almost half of the country and fervently welcomed by slightly more than half. The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has described the political divisions in America today as deep sociological and psychological antipathies that the country has not witnessed since its Civil War over slavery. The sociologist Robert Putnam has written that social connectedness in America today, political polarisation and income inequality are the worst they have been in 125 years.

He said plaintively in a recent interview with The New York Times: “What stands upstream of all these ... trends is morality, a sense that we’re all in



this together and that we have obligations to other people.... [We're] not going to fix polarisation, inequality, social isolation until ... we start feeling we have an obligation to care for other people.”

We are not in such dire straits in Singapore. But social capital is not something you can bank for good and draw upon freely without also working tirelessly to replenish the account. We are already seeing signs of our social cohesion coming under strain for at least three reasons: One, income inequality; two, social media; and three, immigration. This is why we decided on the theme for Singapore Perspectives 2025 – “Community”.

Let me cite the recent findings of IPS’s Principal Research Fellow Dr Mathew Mathews and his colleagues in Social Lab. The full findings will be released soon:

- The average number of close friends Singaporeans have has dropped substantially – from 10.67 in 2018 to 6.49 in 2024.
- The younger age cohort (18-35), regardless of SES, were more likely to have fewer close friends compared to their older peers.
- And regardless of age, respondents with lower monthly personal income (below \$4,000) were also likelier to have fewer close friends.
- Younger respondents compared to their older peers were more likely to prefer interacting with people of similar income levels.

- Indeed, regardless of age or SES, respondents in 2024 were significantly more likely to prefer interacting with people of similar income levels, compared to 2018.
- Among those with less than \$2,000 a month, the proportion preferring same-SES interactions grew from 45% in 2018 to 52% in 2024. And among those earning more than \$10,000 a month, the proportion preferring mixing with people like themselves grew from 29% in 2018 to 36% in 2024.
- Generally, people across age groups and income levels reported difficulty mixing with people of different income brackets.

A young researcher, Nicole Chan, wrote recently in *The Straits Times* that there is a loneliness epidemic among the younger generation here, in large part due to the increasingly siloed virtual existence many of them lead. There was an excellent piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* recently, “The Anti-Social Century” by Derek Thompson, that described the same phenomenon in the US. Americans are now spending more time alone than ever, Thompson writes, and this is changing their personalities, the country’s politics and even their relationship to reality. “Self-imposed solitude,” Thomson declares, “might just be the most important social fact of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in America.” Indeed, the WHO has declared loneliness a “pressing health threat” globally,

and has launched a commission to foster more social connection. A recent IPS survey found that younger people here, aged between 21 to 34, were more likely to report higher levels of social isolation and loneliness.

I'm reminded of these lines in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. He wrote the poem more than a hundred year ago, but the lines are nevertheless evocative of our siloed existence in the digitalised waste land:

I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

As for immigration, I don't need to say much. We all know how neuralgic an issue it has become everywhere, including in Singapore. I don't think we are likely to see here the kind of ugly nativist xenophobia that we see elsewhere.

At any rate, I pray we don't.

Still, we occasionally hear the odd politician speak of "pure Singaporeans" as opposed to "new citizens"; and bemoan the lack of native-born Singaporean CEOs as opposed to naturalised Singaporean CEOs. Nobody would make such insinuations if there were no political percentage in doing

so. You will remember the ugly comments online when Dilhan Pillay Sandrasegara was appointed CEO of Temasek Holdings. They asked if he was an Indian national or a newly-minted SC. There should have been no need to do so, but assurances had to be made that he was born in Singapore – and is as Singaporean as S Rajaratnam was, though Rajaratnam himself wasn't born here. And neither, I might add, was Dr Goh Keng Swee nor Dr Toh Chin Chye.

We confer Singapore Citizenship on about 25,000 Permanent Residents each year. Their integration into the rest of Singapore society – a two-way process -- is as vital to our social cohesion as inter-religious and inter-racial integration were at our founding as a nation six decades ago.

AS ALL of you know, Mr Rajaratnam famously said once: “Being a Singaporean is not a matter of ancestry. It is conviction and choice.”

Less well known is what Mr Lee Hsien Loong said eight years ago: “Being Singaporean has never been a matter of subtraction, but of addition; not of becoming less, but more; not of limitation and contraction, but of openness and expansion.”

As we saw during the pandemic, the Singaporean has indeed become a substantial identity. We survived the pandemic better than most and emerged stronger because we had come to realise we're all in this together and that we had obligations to each other.

Ultimately, being Singaporean, becoming one, is a moral project. But we should remind ourselves, it remains a work in process.

I look forward to the variety of views we will hear today.

Welcome to SP 2025.