

10 years of bold moves... and babies

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From casinos in his first National Day Rally speech to softening 'tough love' economics, PM Lee is willing to embrace new ideas, an Insight analysis finds

August 20, 2004: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, dressed in a maroon shirt and wearing wire-framed glasses, takes to the rostrum in the hallowed halls of a venerable Singapore academic institution.

While observers have expected a cautious first speech, PM Lee surprises in his delivery at the National University of Singapore by broaching controversial topics like casinos, speaking assuredly with the air of a man in charge as he heralds a more open and inclusive Singapore.

"This is not just a change of the PMs. It's a generational change to the post-Independence generation," he says.

Ten years later, and PM Lee has made another bold decision - he will hold the rally for a second consecutive year tomorrow at the Institute of Technical Education.

It is a tertiary institution that has long been seen as the end of the line for less academically capable students. But PM Lee's government wants it to be at the vanguard of a new generation of workers in a restructured Singapore economy that does not just reward academic excellence.

In last year's speech, he declared that Singapore is at a turning point, with a more diverse and vocal populace and contested political landscape, and a maturing economy that must be less reliant on cheap labour as it tries to stay ahead in a fast-growing region.

Singapore needs a new way forward, he said, and the Government will take on more responsibility to strengthen social safety nets, provide affordable health care and housing and more opportunities from birth to death as it steers Singapore into uncharted waters.

From throwing down the gauntlet about casinos to last year's ground-breaking speech, PM Lee's National Day Rally (NDR) speeches have evolved over time, just as Singapore has.

Insight analysed all 10 of his rally speeches and found that from the economy to babies, some subjects and issues have changed, while others have remained the same.

Shift from economy

Over the last decade, one of the most noticeable changes has been the priority given to the economy in PM Lee's speeches.

Typically, they used to devote a large section to ideas to grow the economy, but since 2012, PM Lee's speeches have touched on economic growth much less.

This is borne out in Insight's analysis of the time he has dedicated to each broad subject over the years.

The length of time he has spent dwelling on the economy, which includes topics like jobs, research and development and productivity ideas, has waned.

From averaging about 10 to 12 per cent of the time of an NDR speech, it fell to just 4 per cent in 2011, then was barely mentioned in 2012 and not mentioned at all last year.

Indeed, it is the first thing many of the MPs and political observers pointed out when asked by Insight what the most significant change has been in PM Lee's NDR speeches.

"In terms of substance, the economy does not dominate the NDR speeches as it did in the 2000s," says Singapore Management University law don and former Nominated MP Eugene Tan.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh says that the focus has shifted to social programmes.

"The question of economic vibrancy, while fundamental to Singapore's interest, is arguably a second order consideration compared with the primary questions of how Singaporeans' lives can be better and our community life be strengthened," she says.

But Dr Koh argues that it does not mean that PM Lee no longer considers the economy important.

"While PAP leadership has always assumed that people know that Singapore can survive only if we can earn our way in the world, by the late noughties citizens were concerned that prosperity had preceded the other national goals of progress, happiness, justice and equality.

"That's never been the case, but the speeches now take as their starting point the question of what our nation is about and the issue of economic growth then feeds into it."

Indeed, where once how fast the economy grew, and how many new and exciting jobs were being created, would have been top of the agenda, nowadays PM Lee has made a conscious effort in the crafting of his NDR speech to steer away from the emphasis on economic growth.

This has been motivated by concerns over widening income inequality and slowing social mobility, and a yearning for a more inclusive society in recent years.

A look back to his NDR speeches in 2005 and 2006 shows that he kicked off by talking about the economy.

Indeed, he said that he had wanted to in his inaugural speech, too, because "that's the root of how we will

solve all our other problems".

As the global financial crisis began to unfold in 2007, he continued to lead off with the economy that year (although his focus was income inequality), and, as the world was thrown into a long, arduous recovery, from 2008 to 2011 as well.

There was a marked shift thereafter, though.

A year after the 2011 landmark General Election in which Aljunied GRC was won by the Workers' Party, PM Lee began by asking Singaporeans to look further ahead, with a simple question: "What is the next chapter of this story? Where do we want Singapore to be 20 years from now?"

Last year, after a year of engaging the population in the Our Singapore Conversation exercise, his government was ready to make "strategic shifts" in national policy to spend a lot more on social schemes across housing, health care and social security.

Prof Tan says these shifts reflect "deep social policy restructuring" in Singapore.

"We have become more of a social investment state. There is increasing recognition that social spending for some purposes is not only necessary, but can contribute to both economic growth and social development."

Emotion, urban redesign

People who watch the rallies closely point to a prime minister who has become more comfortable and personally engaging on the stage over the years.

Several MPs recall watching tears well up in PM Lee's eyes as he shared personal memories of growing up in Singapore.

Seeing a red-eyed PM Lee recall participating in a rainy National Day parade in 1968 - Singapore's second under wet skies, two years after rain fell during the first official parade - was a poignant moment for Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng.

"The whole flow of it felt like a very personal and sincere account of something that he was sharing with us," he says. "I was watching that on TV. It resonated with me. It signalled that he would approach NDR differently from his predecessors."

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin says of another speech in 2009, in which PM Lee spoke emotionally as he warned of potential religious fault lines that could tear the country apart: "That sticks out until today. It's not just him talking through his brain, he's engaging emotionally."

In comparison, the speeches of the PM's father, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, were "high-octane ideological, political talk", says Mr Zulkifli, as the elder Mr Lee sought to rally people around a certain ideology.

And while PM Lee's predecessor, Mr Goh Chok Tong, spoke of a kinder, gentler society, "the emotion didn't come out as strong", he adds.

PM Lee also left his personal stamp on the NDR with his love for new technology and eye for urban planning.

In 2005, he unveiled never-before-seen plans to remake the Singapore skyline, from renewing HDB estates to rejuvenating Orchard Road, speaking in remarkable detail.

The centrepiece and the one that created the most sparkle in his eye was Marina Bay. He promised gardens in the city centre, an integrated resort and a bustling commercial district all together.

"We are embarking on the journey now. It will take many years to complete but in five to 10 years' time, you can see it taking shape. And the Bayfront will be the signature image of Singapore," he said then.

"And on 9 August 2015, our 50th birthday, it will look like this," he said, revealing a final slide, with fireworks shooting into the sky over the Marina Bay.

And he has delivered. These urban creations have been a hallmark of many of PM Lee's NDRs, from the Punggol waterways to last year's Project Jewel - a design that will link up Terminals 1 to 3 that is expected to leave an iconic imprint on Changi Airport.

As such, Mr Baey says that NDRs under PM Lee have become "more of a spectacle because of the images and technology".

Over the 10 years, PM Lee explored the use of videos and other media to reach out to more Singaporeans, often to showcase the urban developments he has pushed hard for in order to transform Singapore's living environment into that of a vibrant, global city.

From first using Powerpoint slides with pictures, he progressed to videos, and then 3D modelling of future developments like Changi airport.

As Mr Zulkifli puts it: "The first thing I noticed immediately when he took over from Goh Chok Tong was the comprehensive and detailed way he communicated, not just his policies, but what's going to happen in Punggol, the waterways, Marina Bay - it was very detailed.

"It was like a briefing by the chief architect of HDB, but instead it was given by PM."

Foreigners and babies

Seemingly perennial NDR topics are immigrants and babies.

Though the subject matter of each sits at opposite sides of the population spectrum, they are equally important to Singapore's future.

PM Lee's approach to immigration has changed quite drastically.

In the 2006 NDR, he set up a unit to look at attracting talent to Singapore, urging for Singapore to "look for all kinds of talent".

But by 2010, he was assuring Singaporeans that they come first, after concerns that the mass inflow of foreigners across all levels was putting a strain on infrastructure and increasing competition for jobs.

While immigration has in a way, come full circle, what has been consistent, however, is his call for more babies.

In his first NDR, PM Lee brought up the subject as he wrapped up his nearly three-hour-long speech.

He noted that his predecessors waited longer than that before broaching the sensitive topic.

"My people tell me, Mr Lee (Kuan Yew) raised it in his 18th National Day Rally. What about Goh Chok Tong? He waited for his 10th National Day Rally. This is my first one. So, new baby, please be understanding," he said to laughter.

It would be a topic he returned to in a big way in 2008, when he unveiled a raft of measures to encourage baby-making.

That year, he spent a whole 37 minutes - more than on any other topic - talking about babies as he played family planner, armed with slides packed full of graphs and charts explaining Singapore's declining total fertility rate, and the different policies the Government has tried to induce people to procreate.

Like a concerned uncle, he said to those still unmarried: "Young people themselves should take the first step. Don't leave it to too late. Make time, go out, meet new friends, join a dating agency... You may find someone you are attracted to, then you can marry the person you love and then you can love the person you marry."

Technological revolution

One topic that has never failed to excite him is the Internet and technology. From often celebrating students' wins in robotics competitions overseas to remarking on Singaporeans' seemingly natural inclination towards IT, PM Lee's views grew over the years to include exhorting the Government to engage citizens more online.

While he vowed in 2006 that Singapore would become a wired - and wireless - city, with schemes to ensure that neither the poor nor the old would be left behind, he also recognised the pitfalls that unfettered communications would wrought and urged Singaporeans to be sceptical online.

"You must learn how to be savvy cyber-citizens. Don't get taken in, be discerning about what you see on the Internet," he said in 2008.

But behind his marvelling of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) and 3D printers that could print bone tissue was the parable that Singaporeans had to stay on top of technology and how to harness it, or face obsolescence.

The Singapore spirit

Beyond the frequent mention of hongbao - an Insight word-count found this to be a pet term of his over the years to refer to policy goodies - and the socio-economic shift leftwards, one dominant theme in his speeches was always of self-reliance and personal responsibility.

Whether it was having a social conscience and giving back to society with one's energy, a push for greater service excellence or even simply taking charge of one's own health, he has never failed to encourage the growth of what he calls "heartware" and the Singapore Spirit.

The overarching message was that in place of natural resources, Singapore only has its people and they make or break the island. And also, one must give back to society.

"We may be a small island (but) we cannot be small-minded. We cannot just be a prosperous and successful country," he said in 2011. "We have also got to be a caring, a generous, a decent people."

And it is this same spirit he has sought to imbue in how he conducts his rallies.

From first inviting along ordinary folk, then opposition MPs, and now his Facebook friends and Twitter followers, the man who has transformed Singapore's skyline over 10 years has stayed true to his intention expressed in his very first speech, of trying to draw everyone forward, together.

AUG 22, 2004

FRESH, BOLD IDEAS NEEDED

- * Civil service to get a five-day work week
- * Speakers' Corner to allow performances and exhibitions, and not just speeches
- * Proposed idea of casinos

DID YOU KNOW?

This was PM's first NDR

HE SAID

"I can't promise air-con coaches to take us to the destination in comfort. But we can provide everyone with good coaching, running shoes, water to drink, and first-aid stations along the way."

AUG 21, 2005

BUILDING A GLOBAL CITY

- * Set up a Research, Innovation and Enterprise Council to steer future research and development strategies
- * Announced plans to build a new downtown at Marina Bay

DID YOU KNOW?

NDR start time was moved to 6.45pm from 8pm, to give viewers a break in between the Chinese and English speeches

HE SAID:

"We are aiming for a mountain range, not a pinnacle. We want many routes up, many ways to succeed."

AUG 20, 2006

WOONG TALENT, BOOSTING GROWTH

- * To encourage more immigration, set up a new Citizenship and Population Unit under the Prime Minister's Office

* Emphasised the need to catch the winds of economic growth

DID YOU KNOW?

In using more videos to accompany his speech, PM Lee showed two video clips produced by students from CHIJ St Joseph's Convent to document social cohesion in Singapore

HE SAID:

"Countries know, people know Singapore. They no longer think that Singapore is somewhere in China."

AUG 19, 2007

TACKLING AGEING AND THE INCOME GAP

* Raised CPF returns by one percentage point and pushed back Minimum Sum drawdown age to 63, while re-employment age was raised to 65

* More housing grants for the poor

* Expand number of universities to four or more

DID YOU KNOW?

Opposition MPs were invited to attend the NDR for the first time

HE SAID:

"The wind is filling our sails, let's catch the wind, set the course ahead and go for it."

AUG 17, 2008

GROWING THE FAMILY

* Announced a raft of measures to promote marriage and parenthood such as more maternity leave for mothers and more subsidies for childcare

* Opened up Speakers' Corner for demonstrations

DID YOU KNOW?

PM interrupted his National Day Rally to update the audience on the results of the women's table-tennis final in the Olympics. Singapore lost 0-3 to the Chinese

HE SAID:

"Please put emphasis on marriage, on family: Make these your priorities, have a full and happy life."

AUG 16, 2009

WATCHING RELIGIOUS FAULT-LINES

* Against a rising global tide of religious fervour, PM Lee devoted a large part of his speech to addressing the issue. He reminded Singaporeans to keep race and religion out of politics, and offered up basic rules to maintain religious harmony

DID YOU KNOW?

For the first time, the NDR was shared on new media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook

HE SAID:

"People may assume that we do not have a problem since we have lived in harmony for so long."

AUG 29, 2010

CITIZENS COME FIRST

* Measures to ensure public housing remains affordable and to cool the red-hot private property market

* Gave a National Service Recognition Award of \$9,000 for every national serviceman

DID YOU KNOW?

The National Day Rally was streamed live on smartphones for the first time

HE SAID:

"Now I think we should consolidate, slow down the pace. We can't continue going like this and increasing our population 100,000 to 150,000 a year indefinitely."

AUG 14, 2011

STRENGTHENING SAFETY NETS

* Strengthen social safety nets by making medication more affordable (above) to lower-income, older

Singaporeans and providing more school places for children with special education needs

* Income ceiling for HDB flats raised

DID YOU KNOW?

This was the first rally after GE2011 in May, when the PAP lost Aljunied GRC, recording its lowest share of the vote

HE SAID:

"As we keep up our effort to help the poor and make sure that nobody is left behind, we have to be very careful we don't become a welfare state."

AUG 26, 2012

STARTING A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

- * Government to hold a national conversation led by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat
- * To have six universities offering full-time degree programmes by 2020

DID YOU KNOW?

The rally took on a new format with three ministers speaking before PM Lee did. They were Mr Heng Swee Keat, Mr Lawrence Wong and Madam Halimah Yacob

HE SAID

"We may be a small island but we cannot be small minded... We must also be a caring, generous and decent people."

AUG 18, 2013

A NEW WAY FORWARD

- * Announced sweeping changes to expand social safety nets and make society more equitable
- * These included the introduction of the new, universal medical insurance MediShield Life, extending more

HDB grants to the middle-income, and replacing the PSLE T-score with grades

DID YOU KNOW?

The NDR was held at ITE College Central campus for the first time, after nine years at the NUS University Cultural Centre

HE SAID:

"I brought the Rally to ITE for a serious purpose - to underscore my longstanding commitment to investing in every person, every Singaporean, to his full potential. And also to signal a change, to emphasise that this is not the usual NDR. Singapore is at a turning point."