

# Lawrence Wong outlines 'resetting' for a fairer, greener, more united Singapore

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The Covid-19 pandemic has set the stage for Singapore to "reset" itself, emerging from the crisis a fairer, greener and more united country.

This means combating inequality and ensuring social mobility, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong on Monday (Jan 25). It also means building a greener economy that is more environmentally sustainable, and fostering a renewed sense of solidarity, he added.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference which is themed "Reset", the minister detailed each of the three resets that should take place.

## **Inequality and meritocracy**

First, Singapore has to reset its social compact by tackling inequality and keeping society fluid and mobile.

Mr Wong noted that the pandemic has widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, with poorer segments of society paying a higher price all over the world.

In Singapore, a balance has been struck between free markets and state intervention, with policies tilted towards the lower-income households.

When the pandemic hit, the country drew on its reserves to save jobs and tide over those who were hardest hit.

These temporary measures will taper down this year as the economy improves. But the pandemic has created added impetus to strengthen the social support system, Mr Wong said.

"There will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets in Singapore to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable. And we will have to work out how this can be done in a sustainable manner, over the long term."

Mr Wong also highlighted the importance of uplifting children from birth, pointing out that Singapore is making substantial investments in pre-school education to ensure that children of all income groups can benefit from quality programmes.

Schools with a larger proportion of children from lower-income families are getting more resources, so that these children get more support.

"Meritocracy in Singapore must not ossify into a hereditary system, where the outcome of your birth determines the outcome of your life," he said.

In Singapore, merit has become narrowly defined by one's academic and cognitive abilities. But societies require a wide range of abilities to thrive, Mr Wong added.

He noted that the pandemic has again thrown the spotlight on essential workers, and that the country must ensure that remuneration is fair for people in these roles.

"If we attach more value in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields and not just cognitively, incomes will naturally spread out more evenly across society," he said. "And we will go a long way in advancing our cause towards a fairer and more equal society."

### **A greener Singapore**

When the pandemic hit, carbon emissions dropped significantly all over the world and pollution fell. Now that economic activities are beginning to pick up, Singapore cannot return to how things used to be, Mr Wong said.

Already, the country is one of the greenest cities in the world, he added. It is also the only one to completely freeze the growth of its vehicle population, and one of the few to have closed its water loop.

"But we must go further and build on what we have done to achieve cleaner growth and greener mindsets," he said.

This includes deploying more renewable energy, as well as researching new technologies that are energy and resource-efficient. It also means having vehicles run on cleaner energy and making sustainable living a key feature in Housing Board estates.

Sustainability can also be a source of competitive advantage for Singapore globally, he added.

"The greatest promise of going green, however, is not about what it will mean for us today," he said. "It's about building for the future - for our children, and the next generation."

### **Strengthening solidarity**

The pandemic has intensified divisions in many countries, with falsehoods and conspiracy theories gaining circulation over facts, Mr Wong said.

He added that there has been a downgrading of expertise, with expert knowledge sometimes portrayed as a conspiracy by the elites to perpetuate their dominance.

While easy access to information has contributed to healthy questioning of expert advice at times, it has also led to people viewing expert advice from the "narrow prism" of their own social and political tribes, he said.

"We end up self-selecting information to support and reinforce our own points of view... As a result, it's very hard to find consensus; you see in many places a hollowing-out of the centre as extreme views gain ground, and it makes societies very hard to govern."

Yet, societies can also gain renewed strength from the pandemic by forging a sense of solidarity and cohesion in the face of difficulty, Mr Wong said.

"I am confident that we will prevail and emerge stronger from this crucible. And I do not say this lightly," he added.

"I speak from my own conviction of seeing the best of Singaporeans over the past year, in the face of adversity and very tough conditions."

Front-line workers have given their all, with many ground-up initiatives emerging to help the vulnerable and those in need.

This renewed sense of solidarity is critical as Singapore recovers, Mr Wong said, adding that this is why the Government is intentionally creating more opportunities for Singaporeans to take part in the decision-making process.

In the Emerging Stronger Conversations, for instance, Singaporeans have shared their hopes for a post-coronavirus society, while the industry-led Alliances for Action have been set up to move quickly for Singapore's economic recovery.

Mr Wong was also asked how the Government reconciles greater diversity with greater unity.

The key is to build consensus around the common good - regardless of one's own political or individual differences, he replied. This strong sense of consensus is especially important for Singapore, given its small size. It cannot have individuals or groups lobbying only for their own interests and neglecting what is at stake, he said.

"I think that gives us purpose. It gives us that sense of a common destiny for the future, and it will enable Singapore to continue thriving and doing well in the future."