

Parliament: Marathon 52 hours as MPs debate budgets for longest time in five years

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SINGAPORE - As the eight-day Budget debate drew to a close, history of sorts was made.

The 530 questions prepared by MPs were allocated a total of 52 hours, the longest time over the past five years.

The achievement underscores the "breadth and gravity" of the issues Singapore faces, said Leader of the House Grace Fu on Thursday (March 8), in her speech wrapping up the marathon session.

Job security remained a hot topic even as economic growth made a recovery last year, but the debates this year also saw a keen focus on social inequality and fostering a more caring society.

For instance, a recent Institute of Policy Studies survey, which showed a concentration of social networks around class differentiators like housing type and schools attended, as well as sociologist Teo You Yenn's book on inequality, were cited several times.

"As we embrace globalisation and technology to expand opportunities for our businesses, to transform industries and build deep capabilities, how do we ensure that we move forward together and leave no one behind?" said Ms Fu, who is also Minister for Culture, Community and Youth.

She noted that a lot of time was spent debating the budgets of the Manpower Ministry, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

Questions raised included how to support more vulnerable segments of the workforce, how to support enterprises to remain competitive and create good jobs for locals, and how to strengthen social cohesion across race, religion and class lines.

MPs also asked about dealing with external threats, such as extremism and cyber-security issues, as well as domestic challenges, such as housing young couples and regulating personal mobility devices, said Ms Fu.

She also highlighted how Nominated MP Kuik Shiao-Yin and Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok) had spoken about the need for both pragmatism and ideals to bring Singapore forward.

Agreeing, she said: "To tackle the problems of today and prepare ourselves for tomorrow, we must be bold and embrace change. We must have that grit and bias for action that makes us an exceptional nation.

"This would not be the case if we had no ideals."

Calling on Singaporeans to participate in building the "ideal Singapore", Ms Fu said that while the Government plays the role of an enabler through the Budget, success depends more on individuals taking ownership of the nation's future amid the challenges of income inequality, disruptive technology and an ageing society.

The support of Singaporeans of all ages will be needed to nurture a strong society which dares to be entrepreneurial - "a smart nation with a heart", she said.