

## Taking action today, while keeping an eye on tomorrow

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President S R Nathan's Address to Parliament on Monday and the policy statements by Cabinet ministers that followed this week threw up little that was entirely new. But they provided a clear blueprint of the Government's priorities for the immediate future - and beyond. What then does all this say about this Government and its continual focus on what lies beyond the horizon? What can Singaporeans expect in the next few years? Insight looks between the lines at the Government's agenda outlined this week.

### Philosophy

Academic Eugene Tan sees 'nothing ground-breaking or awe-inspiring, in some respects' about the directions and steps that the Government outlined this week when its agenda was presented via President SR Nathan's Address at the opening of a new session of Parliament.

However, Assistant Professor Tan found them to be 'comprehensive in outlining the Government's priorities, key challenges, and commitment to get things done'.

'In that sense, it was reassuring because substance in governance - getting things done effectively, efficiently and fairly - is far more important than form,' he tells Insight.

'It reaffirms the fundamental ethos of the Government and reiterates that there is no silver bullet in governance, which is always a work-in-progress.'

On Monday, President Nathan made clear that the Government's immediate priority is to see Singapore through the current economic crisis and help Singaporeans cope.

The Government will help companies stay viable to keep jobs, help workers train for new jobs, and ensure children from lower-income families get opportunities to reach their full potential in education, he stressed.

It will also seek new markets and develop new capabilities in growth sectors.

So while there may appear to be little by way of new or major policy announcements or shifts, the reality is that there are existing strategies which are being fine-tuned.

Over this past week, details were released of a review of existing help schemes to make sure that no one falls through the cracks; two new higher learning institutions; investments in health care and other sectors to prepare for a greying population; and even a review of censorship guidelines to stay in tune as society changes.

These show, at one level, the Government's preparedness to deal with short-term, urgent issues.

But on another level, there is a sophisticated gearing-up to groom Singapore and its people for the challenges ahead.

Dr Tan, who teaches law at the Singapore Management University (SMU), describes this as a 'necessary, bifocal perspective' to governance.

In other words, preparing for the upturn even while managing the severe impact of this recession.

Notes political observer Gillian Koh: 'The Government thinks long term on the demographic trends, on ensuring long-term social mobility, and yet has said enough in these addenda to suggest that the political will is there to help all who need that little extra to survive the current crisis and eventually ride the long-term wave.'

### **Looking beyond the downturn**

Even as President Nathan underlined the Government's priority of helping to mitigate the negative effects of the recession on Singaporeans, SMU economist Davin Chor finds it noteworthy that he also reiterated the need to focus on long-term strategic issues.

Such a focus aims to position Singapore to succeed in the changed global economic landscape that will emerge once the world economy starts to pick up again.

'One cannot assume for example that developed countries such as the United States will be vibrant growth engines, and that it will be business as usual once again,' says Assistant Professor Chor.

'This long-term perspective has been a trademark of the Singapore Government, and it was a timely reminder not to lose sight of this amid the current downturn,' he adds.

It must be noted that massive schemes to save jobs and help workers pick up skills - whether to hold on to existing jobs or to better find new ones - have been in place for some months now.

Last December, the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (Spur) began subsidising training for local workers and \$650 million has been allocated to it.

Measures have been expanded and refined in response to feedback.

Earlier this month, Spur-Jobs was introduced to give companies a grant of up to \$400,000 to hire and hang on to trained local workers by helping them cover costs of such items as job advertisements and recruitment services.

The Government is also spending \$4.5 billion on Jobs Credit, which subsidises employers' wage bill for local workers.

Government-backed loans have also seen a robust take-up rate, with \$2.5 billion given out since December last year.

Thus it is no surprise that Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang says in his ministry's addendum to the President's Address that the various economic agencies will continue to lend companies a hand so they can better compete globally.

The Government will also step up efforts to help businesses expand in key markets as well as new markets such as in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

And even as the Government uses its strong fiscal position to mitigate the impact of the downturn here, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam says it is stepping up investments 'to transform Singapore into a high-capability economy, and a global city that stands out for its liveability'.

These investments include an expanded transport network, waterways and parks, to improve the living environment.

### **Preparing people through education**

Mr Tharman also stressed that the Government will devote resources to building a cohesive, inclusive society.

It will keep fees in educational institutions and worker training schemes affordable, raise their standards, and ensure adequate social safety nets, including on health care.

Dr Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, says this focus on human development through education and health care is 'extremely consistent with the basic philosophy of the PAP Government'.

'Education has been the key to social mobility and progress at the individual and national level,' she notes.

'The investment is at all levels - our system of Institute of Technical Education and the polytechnics seek to enhance the prospects of all and not just those with high academic ability, allowing for multiple tracks for success.

'If we can upgrade early education, that would be a great boost in these efforts,' she adds.

Education Minister Ng Eng Hen, in his addendum, said expanded higher learning opportunities will boost the number of polytechnic places and help achieve a 30 per cent university participation rate for each cohort by 2015.

This expansion of the tertiary education base is very much in line with the Government's long-term philosophy, notes Dr Chor.

'It is very difficult to anticipate in a fast-changing economic environment which specific industries or countries will present growth opportunities,' he explains.

'What we can say with more certainty, though, is that enhancing and expanding our country's human capital is a more robust strategy for ensuring that Singapore will continue to have the talent and skills to identify and leverage on these opportunities as and when they come by.

'This is also consistent with the vision of developing Singapore into a global city, as a strong educated workforce will help to enhance Singapore's attractiveness as a hub of business and inventive activity,' he adds.

But a higher pool of graduates carries with it higher demands for secure jobs and career progression.

Dr Tan observes that one sociological implication of having more graduates is that a larger cohort of Singaporeans would have higher expectations in terms of their professional careers.

Also of concern is the fact that a disproportionate number of those who are unprepared should they lose their jobs are tertiary-educated, a recent IPS survey found.

Some of them are in the middle-income band and would collapse if they were to lose their main source of income.

However, the new Singapore Institute of Applied Technology - which will manage joint degree programmes for polytechnic graduates - and the fourth university will focus on areas like the applied sciences, engineering and health sciences where jobs are expected to be in supply.

Dr Koh notes that the Government is responding to demands to widen access to tertiary studies, but has to ensure Singapore gets quality graduates in fields that will be relevant and that lead to well-paying jobs.

'There is no guarantee of that in an uncertain world and we do not want disillusionment at the end of it,' she says.

'The challenge is to cultivate graduates who can be wealth generators themselves - people ready to create opportunities for themselves - not just salaried men and women.'

### **Preventing future problems now**

Likewise, the setting up of a third medical school and more training places for allied health professionals in the light of the ageing population.

This pre-emptive move has parallels in the Government's strategy for dealing with health issues.

As Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan puts it: 'Effective health care starts with prevention.'

Hence the priority placed on health screening and corrective programmes, such as those tackling smoking and obesity - conditions which are likely to give rise to other health problems.

This does not mean cures will be neglected, as resources are being devoted to educate people on making more informed decisions about end-of-life care, and building new capabilities in geriatrics and rehabilitation, as part of an overall approach to preparing for an ageing society.

This thinking that prevention is better than cure, that it is better to pre-empt problems now, is not confined to health.

'The Singapore style of governance is inherently driven by the innate sense of perpetual vulnerability, and the objective of pre-emptive intervention where necessary so that the problems do not manifest more dangerously,' says Dr Tan. This often means a holistic, integrated inter-agency - or whole-of-government - approach is applied to issues, as they are deemed most effective 'if we are to tackle the causes, and not just symptoms, of problems', he adds.

However, Dr Tan feels a whole-of-society approach should also be embraced if people are to feel they have a stake here.

### **And on the social side**

The Government has not neglected underlying, broader, social concerns, that may be aggravated by the current slump, in its addenda to the President's Address.

Running through the various ministries' programmes is a commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity, and a fair and just society, which the ruling People's Action Party set out to achieve when it formed the Government 50 years ago in June 1959.

The headings in the various ministers' addenda bear this out: 'Providing hope and assurance for the needy' (Community Development, Youth and Sports); 'Preparing our children for life' (Education); 'Enhancing income security and lifelong employability' (Manpower); and 'Providing holistic and affordable health care and elder care' (Ageing Issues).

Public housing will also remain a key pillar of Singapore's social security system, with the National Development Ministry increasing the supply of new two-room and three-room flats, and rental flats, for lower-income families.

At the same time, much is being done to cater to a more vocal, informed citizenry.

On the media front, the Government is reconvening the Censorship Review Committee to make recommendations on updating content regulations and policies to allow for more choices in content 'without compromising racial harmony, social cohesion, and strong family values'.

While the programmes may seem underwhelming to some, the call is being made for citizens to aspire to higher standards and to chip in to contribute to shaping how Singapore turns out in the future.

After all, Singapore remains a work-in-progress.

President Nathan highlighted the need to match a First World infrastructure and environment with gracious behaviour so Singapore becomes a more pleasant society to live in.

And as Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng noted in his comments on population policy, Singaporeans have contributed much to Singapore's transformation over the past 40 years.

Calling on citizens - old and new - to chip in, he said: 'Our forefathers and, more recently, the new immigrants have come here because of the promise and potential of Singapore: the

promise that any individual who has made Singapore home could realise his or her aspirations, and the promise that Singapore will be a good home for them.'

The ball, it seems, is also in Singaporeans' court to make sure that this promise and potential exists for the next generation.