

## **A clarion call to keep S'pore special**

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Rallying Singaporeans to keep the country special for many years to come, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday delivered a National Rally speech quite unlike his previous eleven.

Urging Singaporeans to maintain a multi-racial, rugged and united society for future generations, he spoke at length on the country's journey from Third World to First, how it has turned its vulnerability into strength, and evoked the memory of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and other pioneers while calling on Singaporeans to emulate their spirit going ahead.

Speaking at the Institute of Technical Education's College Central campus, PM Lee also broke from tradition, joining in with the audience as singer Kit Chan belted out popular National Day song Home on stage — the first time such a segment was introduced.

Ms Chan, who got the audience to sing along, said she felt compelled to pay tribute to Mr Lee.

The format was not the only thing that was different. Compared to previous years, PM Lee's rally speech was lighter on policy announcements. Nevertheless, the housing and population policy initiatives unveiled would apply to broad swathes of society, with Singaporeans from various walks of life set to benefit from them.

The income ceiling to be eligible to buy new Housing and Development Board flats and Executive Condominiums will be raised by S\$2,000 from current thresholds, while a new scheme will help second-timer rental households to own a two-room flat.

To give an extra push for marriage and parenthood, the Baby Bonus will be increased and a more generous Medisave Grant will be given. Paternity leave will be doubled to two weeks with the Government also paying for the extra week of leave. All three initiatives will be backdated to Jan 1 this year to give all Jubilee babies a "little hongbao", said PM Lee.

With the Republic celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year, the speech took on even greater significance with the General Election around the corner. PM Lee, who became Prime Minister in 2004, also recapped how his Government has delivered on its promises over the past decade, such as transforming Punggol into an eco-friendly and green town, complete with waterfront residences. Social safety nets have also been strengthened over the past years, as pledged, and more hospitals have also been built.

### **A SHINING RED DOT**

Acknowledging that he has not spoken much about the external environment in previous rallies, PM Lee cautioned that Singapore might be overwhelmed by developments in the external environment if it does not stay on top of them. In particular, he spoke about neighbouring countries Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as major powers such as the United States, China and Japan.

Singapore may be faced with the difficult task of taking sides if relations among the powers sour or heat up through mishaps or misunderstanding, for instance. It must maintain a strong

defence force, a successful economy and continue defending its interests abroad to sail through the next 50 years safely, said PM Lee.

Stressing that Singapore has to stay special, he said: "Because if we are just a dull little spot on the map, a smudge, we are going to count for nothing." To maintain the Republic's standing as a "shining red dot", Singaporeans have to be tenacious and united. "If we are soft and flabby, we are going to be eaten up. We have to be rugged and have that steel in us."

PM Lee stoutly proclaimed that Singapore's best days are to yet come, adding that this too was Mr Lee's belief. It was only in January that the founding Prime Minister — who died in March — told his friends, when asked if there would be a Singapore 50 years later: "Of course there will be ... even better!" This was what one of his friends had shared in a letter to PM Lee after his father died.

Mr Lee's latest reply was a departure from his earlier replies to the same question — which was "maybe" on one occasion, and "yes, if there is no corruption" on another occasion, the friend wrote.

"Mr Lee would have been proud of what he had built, if he had seen the National Day Parade," said PM Lee. "Now he is no longer here, we are on our own, but we are ready," he said, adding that Singaporeans' unity and identity have never been stronger.

The challenges that Singapore faces are still formidable but far from insurmountable, he said. "Those people who feel daunted and think Singapore's best days are behind us — they are wrong! Our best days will always be ahead of us, provided we continue to have a strong team of lions and the lion-hearted, leaders and the people."

## **PM SEEKS MANDATE**

PM Lee also gave an appraisal of his team's performance in the past 10 years and asked Singaporeans for a mandate when they head to the polling booths.

In a turn of phrase reminiscent of the National Day song We are Singapore, he said the Government had delivered on its promises of beautiful homes, stronger safety nets, more diverse pathways for children and to transform Marina Bay.

"We said we would build more beautiful homes that Singaporeans could afford, and we did," he said, flashing photos of Punggol 21 and the rejuvenated Dawson estate.

"We said we would create more pathways for our children to chase rainbows, and we did," he said.

This was done by leaders taking a leaf from the founding fathers and planning beyond their terms in Government and beyond their lifetimes, he said. "My team and I take very seriously our responsibility to make sure that Singapore lasts beyond us."

He said the nucleus of the next team is already present, having been brought in at previous elections in 2011 and earlier. But it needs reinforcement to "round out the team".

Singaporeans will be deciding on "much more" than who governs for the next five years, said PM Lee. "You will be choosing the team who will be working with you for the next 15, 20 years. You will be setting the direction for Singapore for the next 50 years."

Political analyst Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, noted that PM Lee's walk down memory lane in the earlier part of his speech set the scene for the many themes that the Prime Minister would subsequently raise, such as multiracialism, education and housing. It was a speech with an emphasis on the feel-good, but clearly with an eye on the General Election, he said. Ms Chan's performance was a "clever way" to set the tone for his English speech, Assoc Prof Tan added.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh described it as a "good election speech but a good SG50 speech as well".

PM Lee hit quite a few buttons in his speeches, she said. "The emphasis on poorer families, giving them access to a home of their own rather than renting, and the reference to Northlight and Assumption Pathway (schools) re-emphasise the commitment to social inclusion and social mobility," she said.

On PM Lee's mention of work done by ministers Vivian Balakrishnan and Mr Lim Swee Say, Dr Koh noted that with Dr Balakrishnan contesting in Holland-Bukit Timah Group Representation Constituency and Mr Lim possibly contesting in East Coast GRC, "they are going to possibly be in the most hotly contested wards outside those already held by the Workers' Party ... but it wasn't so baldly partisan."