

‘Working with the people’: 4G leadership will partner S’poreans in new ways to shape policies, says DPM Heng

Today, 15 June 2019

To build a society where every Singaporean has a strong sense of belonging and “a part to play” in Singapore’s shared future, the Government will be partnering people to help shape the nation, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said on Saturday (June 15).

In a 45-minute speech at the “Building our Future of Singapore Together” dialogue, co-organised by government feedback unit Reach and CNA, Mr Heng outlined how he and the ruling People’s Action Party fourth-generation (4G) leadership team intend to take Singapore forward.

“By charting our future together, levelling with you, expanding the common space, and journeying towards a better future.

“This is how we will expand our democracy of deeds,” said Mr Heng, harking back to a 1971 speech by former Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam.

This consultative approach is known as the Singapore Together movement, he said at a question and answer session following his speech.

To this end, he invited Singaporeans from all walks of life to participate in this effort with the 4G leaders, who will be engaging people on building a future Singapore in the coming months, he said.

Four nation-building themes will be addressed in the beginning, covering Singapore’s external geopolitical and climate challenges, economic transformation, social inequality and how to strengthen Singapore’s cohesive and multiracial identity.

“First, the Government will partner Singaporeans in new ways, to design and implement policies together. Second, beyond partnering you in specific areas, we will work with you to create a shared future, one where every Singaporean will have a part to play,” he told the 400 dialogue participants, which include student, academics, senior citizens, union members and volunteer welfare organisation representatives.

“We need to shift from a government that focusses primarily on working for you, to a government that works with you. Working with you, for you.”

The 4G’s approach to leadership will continue to stress constructive politics and unity, added Mr Heng, who is Acting Prime Minister as PM Lee Hsien Loong is on leave.

With growing diversity in views and different needs in Singapore, the Government and the people will have to consider new policy tradeoffs, including how best to allocate the nation’s resources, said Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister.

“Otherwise, society can fracture along the lines of class and backgrounds, as has happened in other advanced economies.”

He noted how several ministries and organs of state have already started reaching out to community groups, residents, civil society and businesses on various issues and policy areas.

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo will also be launching a Citizens' Panel to look at ways to improve work-life harmony, "an issue close to the hearts of many Singaporeans," said Mr Heng.

On the environment, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli has been engaging citizens and other stakeholders to come up with concrete action. Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu has worked with youths on creating the Singapore 2025 vision through a youth action plan.

Mr Heng, too, had been working closely with other 4G leaders on matters of the future economy and jobs, listening to business leaders, trade associations and chambers, and unions.

Volunteers have also chipped in, through various outlets like SG Secure and the Community Network for Seniors, said Mr Heng.

But there is more to do, and Mr Heng welcomed all groups and individuals to join these efforts especially if people feel that the Government's ideas are not sufficient. "We may have different views but so long as you have the good of Singapore at heart, we can work together," he said.

He acknowledged that many Singaporeans want to play a bigger role in nation building. Younger Singaporeans who are widely exposed to the world have grown passionate about shaping society, while older citizens want to contribute to the success of future generations having enjoyed the fruits of the Republic's success.

In order for these partnerships between Government and people to be effective, Mr Heng said that the common space must be enlarged and safeguarded.

Mr Heng said: "This can happen only if we keep an open mind. Look at issues not just through our own lens, but also through the perspectives of others. Recognise that other viewpoints, even if they are not in line with our own, may be just as valid, and that not all our ideas can be taken on board wholesale or even accepted."

But the Government, too, must also be prepared to intervene if "particular groups pursue their agenda in ways that divide society or impede the good work of other groups".

Mr Heng said: "Otherwise, we will run the risk of alienating other Singaporeans, especially those who are unable to organise and speak up for themselves."

This effort will be "the work of a generation" and such partnerships are not likely to sprout up overnight in every policy domain, said Mr Heng.

"It will be a learning process for all of us," he said.

Government agencies will have to learn how to engage and rally Singaporean groups while exercising leadership, while the community groups and individuals will need to learn how to

engage with each other and keeping the interest of other Singaporeans at heart, added Mr Heng.

Citing Mr Rajaratnam's "democracy of deeds" speech, Mr Heng said: "Partnership is about more than contributing feedback, suggestions or ideas. It is about following through on ideas and suggestions and making things happen.

"Our future Singapore – the Singapore we are building together – must be an expanded democracy of deeds, with citizens taking action to make a difference."

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said it is good that Mr Heng's "action-oriented" Singapore Together movement appears to want to reach into deeply entrenched issues, especially those concerning social inequality and youth.

"While the Our Singapore Conversation initiative had a lot of broad, higher-level discussions, from what I could gather, Mr Heng wants to go down to the ground level and look at the practical steps of how to implement the values and lessons learnt, together with Singaporeans," the political watcher who attended Saturday's dialogue told TODAY.

Another participant, National University of Singapore biology lecturer N. Sivasothi, said that for the movement to be effective, government bodies should also raise their public communication skills.

These engagements could be derailed if officials did not know how to communicate well with community groups, said Mr Sivasothi, who coordinates nature groups such as the International Coastal Cleanup Singapore.

"With Mr Heng's message today, it is a positive sign that the government wants to partner public groups and an important push for the government officials to elevate their skills in public facilitation and mediation," he said.