

## **Be careful of 'false sense of security'**

***By Ng Tze Yong***

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PAMPERED, with a sense of entitlement and a false sense of security.

A Member of Parliament had these tough words for Singaporeans coping with the worst recession in the country's history.

In Parliament yesterday, MP Sam Tan (Tanjong Pagar GRC) challenged the House with a simple question: 'Do the members feel that somehow, despite all the doom and gloom coming out of the US, that there is a recession in Singapore?'

'Or is it, really, business as usual, with people still spending and being as cheerful as ever?'

To prove his point, he pointed out how property sales remain strong and restaurants remain packed.

'Today, as we go to some of the mid-priced restaurants like Crystal Jade and Ichiban Boshi, do we feel that there is a recession?' he asked.

'Even at MezzaNine in Hyatt Hotel, a fairly upmarket place, there remains a sizable lunch crowd on most days.

'So, what recession?'

He followed his observations with an intriguing question for the House: Is this 'buoyant optimism' our fault?

The spending is good because it boosts the economy, he clarified.

But it comes out of a 'false sense of security'.

The Government has been through so many recessions with Singaporeans that it has become 'practised' at the craft of recession-cushioning, explained Mr Tan.

'Each time the economy shows signs of slowing down, we have the NTUC and e2i coming out at the forefront to job-match, get training, reduce retrenchments,' he said.

'We have the Ministry of National Development pump-priming with infrastructure projects. We have, of course, the MCYS (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) and its numerous help schemes.'

While acknowledging the needs of the poor and urging the Government to continue helping the needy, Mr Tan also wondered what are the 'true impact' of the efforts.

To illustrate his point, Mr Tan used the analogy of a father teaching his son how to cycle.

'Do you line the streets with cushions so that he will not hurt himself if he loses his balance?' he asked.

### **Sensible approach**

The common sense approach, he said, should be to let the boy take the knocks as they come.

'A boy who is mollycoddled is a very different person from the one who is physically tough and (able) to take spills without fear and whining,' said Mr Tan.

He added that recently, he has seen many residents, especially the elderly, at his Meet-The-People Sessions. They were people hesitant to visit in the past, preferring to rely on their children for help.

'(But) today, many see Government help as an entitlement, something that they should tap on as a first port of call, rather than a last resort,' he said.

The Government, he said, has managed its finances prudently, but the same cannot be said of the people.

'Have we, as sons and daughters, as responsible parents, steered clear of excesses?' he asked.

'Have we worked hard, saved enough and accumulated reserves for a rainy day? Have we taken care of our parents, our families, and become self-reliant so that in a financial crisis, we do not ask for handouts?'

Singaporeans, he warns, are losing their traditional family values.

Mr Manu Bhaskaran, an adjunct senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that Singapore's 'dualistic economy' means average Singaporeans have been shielded from the recession's worst - so far.

'It is foreign companies, expats and foreign workers who are taking the brunt of the pain, not locals,' he said.

He warned, however, that a delayed response in the months ahead will spread the pain to the average Singaporean.

Mr Lee Yoong Yoong, a research fellow at IPS, felt that Mr Tan was only referring to a certain segment of society.

He pointed out a recent survey conducted by the IPS, which showed that 80 per cent of the respondents would take personal initiatives such as tapping their savings and turning to family and friends, rather than look to the Government for help in the recession.

'Perhaps... Singaporeans have become more mature with each and every crisis they have gone through,' said Mr Lee.

Echoing this, Mr Bhaskaran said that Singaporeans have gotten used to the Government's intervention in their lives.

'But Singaporeans are a mature and practical lot,' he said. 'If they have to fend for themselves, they can and they will.'

'I wouldn't say that they behave like immature children.'