

Our diversity must not divide us: President

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So, what is the significance of President Tony Tan Keng Yam's speech yesterday at the opening of the 12th Parliament?

Think of it as the Government's big picture plan.

Over the next five years, the President is saying, this is what the Government plans to do.

How the Government specifically plans to get there will be spelt out over the week by the different Cabinet ministers.

The President's speech covered a wide area, from the difficulties faced by the underprivileged to the political divide, to challenges wrought by the current economic uncertainties.

But the key message appears to be – no matter how tough it gets, everyone matters.

At a time when some nerves are still frayed from the two recent hotly contested elections, the President has a gentle reminder.

He said: "Even as we pursue our different interests, we must also deepen our sense of common purpose. Our diversity must not divide us.

"Fault lines in our society have to be carefully managed."

Changes

The President noted changes in the society, economy and politics here.

New media has become an important platform for engagement, he said, adding, however, that "the new media also creates real challenges".

"On the Internet, truth is not easily distinguished from misinformation. Anonymity is often abused. Harsh, intemperate voices often drown out moderate, considered views," he said.

Politics here has become more diverse and open, the President said, because of changing generations and the more diverse expectations of Singaporeans as their basic needs are increasingly being met.

He added: "More voices want to be heard; more people are contending to represent different groups and interests. The composition of Parliament reflects this.

"We can expect more diverse views and vigorous debates in the House. This is positive for Singapore."

The President also spelt out the Government's goal of creating a better life for all.

To achieve this, he said, the economy must grow.

He said: "Growth is not an end in itself. We seek quality growth by improving every job, raising the productivity of every worker, and helping companies innovate.

"We seek inclusive growth that benefits all citizens, not just a lucky few. With high quality, inclusive growth, we can afford to invest in our people, our country and our future."

The President navigated the challenges facing the low-income group, the middle class and the successful. He spoke of the aims for the young and senior citizens.

But the Government can't do it all alone, he said. Singaporeans cannot be passive bystanders.

So what stood out for the political observers?

National University of Singapore's Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser said that the speech "attempts to balance opposing pressures, for example, the need for growth and the need for immigrants; the positive effects of social media, and its negative effects".

Trade off

Or trade-offs, as **Dr Gillian Koh from the Institute of Policy Studies called it.**

She said: "As the Government takes heed of public sentiment to reduce the amount of foreign labour in the economy, it means that economic growth and even a rise in wages will slow unless productivity grows.

"This is an example where citizens must understand that if you tweak one side of the policy equation, it will have other consequences elsewhere."

Singapore Management University's Assistant Professor Eugene Tan said the focus on inclusive growth, premised on a "fair and just society", seeks to explain the purpose of economic growth.

He added that the speech reinforces the constant fundamentals, but stresses "inclusiveness, engagement, shared ownership and the subtle theme of dignity of life in Singapore".

And the President didn't avoid the political divide.

Prof Eugene Tan said: "A significant mention in the speech is the reference to a new 'fault line' developing between local-born Singaporeans and freshly-minted Singaporeans.

"This is the first time, I believe, that 'fault line' has been used to describe the growing divide."

Political commentator Derek da Cunha was drawn to the President's point on how new media can be abused.

"We will have to wait and see in the weeks and months ahead whether there will actually be some policies related to how untruths or misinformation disseminated on new media portals are dealt with," said Dr da Cunha.