

## **Singapore Together movement ‘a cornerstone’ of nation building where citizens, leaders find common cause: Heng Swee Keat**

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SINGAPORE — Just as home ownership was a “cornerstone” of the policies by Singapore’s founding fathers to give citizens a stake in the nation, the Singapore Together movement will be the new cornerstone of nation building, said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on Monday (Jan 20).

“What we see forming is a new model of partnership between Government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on our future,” said Mr Heng of a consultative movement first unveiled in the middle of last year, which is still in its “early days”.

Mr Heng was speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2020: Politics — a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies — to an audience of public servants, private sector leaders as well as members of civil society.

The Singapore Together movement is a platform by the fourth-generation leaders of the ruling People’s Action Party to allow regular citizens to play a part in the policymaking process, in order to expand what former Deputy Prime Minister S Rajaratnam described as “a democracy of deeds”, he said.

Setting the context, Mr Heng described the world as being in an era of “anti-politics”, in which people have become increasingly distrustful of their governments and public institutions at a time when societies are grappling with the effects of globalisation, income and wealth inequality, and rapid ageing.

This has given rise to “insurgent political parties, including far right parties, (which) have exploited these fears and frustrations for their own political gain, campaigning along nativist and protectionist lines and further undermining trust in public institutions”, he said.

Singapore may have fared better than others but is not immune to these divisive forces, he added.

He noted that there were some “semblances of nativist tendencies in Singapore”, referring to the ongoing public discourse surrounding foreigners.

“If we do not act decisively and if we allow these forces to creep up on us, our hopes and concerns can be exploited to create fear and anger, our diversity can be turned against us, our unity can fray, and our society can wither,” warned Mr Heng.

Against this backdrop, he said Singapore can be different, given how its people’s unique sense of unity and self-determination has allowed it to find success as a sovereign nation.

Calling this a “historical anomaly”, he said: “I believe a strong sense of ‘We’ was key to this. Our improbable success was made possible by exceptional governance – capable leaders, working together with a united people.”

That gave Singaporeans a shared sense of progress — the Republic’s post-independence economic and industrial growth, the opportunities that came due to education, and housing

policies that “turned a city of squatters and slums into a nation of home owners in just a few decades”.

Calling it a virtuous circle that led to Singaporeans trusting their leaders, Mr Heng said such an approach must remain core to the Government’s mission as the country confronts issues in ageing, technological disruption and the tussle between the United States and China.

To this end, the Singapore Together movement was launched to “mobilise the passion, creativity and can-do spirit of Singaporeans, as we find common cause, experiment with new ideas and solutions, and beat the odds together”.

Drawing from his experience from the 2012 Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) exercise, which he led, Mr Heng said Singaporeans understood trade-offs and the need to make hard decisions for the collective good.

“In this process, government agencies are learning to develop and deliver policy solutions in a more collaborative manner. At the same time, Singaporeans, too, are gaining a deeper appreciation of the challenges and trade-offs in making national policy. And collectively, we are learning to understand different viewpoints, to distinguish truth from falsehoods, and to find a way forward in the midst of diverse and often conflicting opinions,” he said.

During a question-and-answer session following his speech, Mr Heng was asked by a National University of Singapore student to clarify the difference between the OSC exercise and the Singapore Together movement.

The former was a conversation to hear and better understand the views of Singaporeans, replied Mr Heng.

His hope, he said, is that the latter will be more than words but actual action, so as to create a democracy of deeds.

The student also asked whether the movement will act on difficult issues that have popular consensus from people, such as whether the Government would reconsider its planned goods and services tax hikes, or on Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises gay sex.

To this, Mr Heng said if there is consensus, the government is prepared to make changes. It is also “prepared to justify” why it is in Singapore’s long-term interest to have a source of recurrent income to take care of the country’s seniors.

On Section 377A, he pointed out that this is one area Singaporeans have no consensus on, referring to an IPS study which showed that a majority of Singaporeans are in favour of retaining the law.

Also present in the audience were members of opposition parties the Progress Singapore Party, the People’s Power Party (PPP) and the Singapore Democratic Party, as well as the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

Members of the Workers’ Party were also invited but decided against attending the annual event, said IPS director Janadas Devan, who moderated the session.

Representatives from three opposition parties who attended asked about the planned GST hikes, the nature of public discourse, political representation and how the PAP Government can address the problem of divisiveness among people.

PPP secretary-general Goh Meng Seng asked about the possible divisiveness stemming from new citizens who have allegiances with their home country, such as China nationals who take up citizenship here.

To this, Mr Janadas pointed to a recent study by the United Nations which found that the largest source of new immigrants is Malaysia, followed by China.

Mr Heng agreed with Mr Goh that new citizens can be a divisive force, if parties exploit this and start casting doubt on the loyalties of new citizens and create a new divide.

"We must bear in mind for those people who have become Singapore citizens, they have become citizens by conviction. They have left their country and decided that Singapore is a better place for them and their children.

"So we should, as Singaporeans, make the best effort to integrate them into society and welcome them so that they can be part of our team. In that regard, I am very troubled that so many people are trying to exploit these differences," said Mr Heng.

When asked by Mr Janadas on whether the Budget, which will be announced on Feb 18, will be "an election budget", Mr Heng said that it depends on the timing of the next election, which must be held before April 2021.

"The Budget is really a financial plan that supports a strategic plan for Singapore's future. Many of the things we invest in the Budget, whether it is to restructure economy to provide better opportunities for our people, help us build capability over the long term... We have to think of ways resources of our country are put to best use for the long term, and not a short-term giveaway," he said.