

‘Dear future PM...’

NUS undergraduate’s forum speech on the sentiments of Singapore youth goes viral

✓ HARIZBAHARUDIN & AUDREY LEONG

He read out his letter in a speech he gave to a forum of about 270 attendees and undergraduate Tan Yang Long never expected it to go viral.

After reading out the letter, which he had penned to Singapore’s “4th Prime Minister” at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Tembusu Forum last Tuesday, Mr Tan, 23, a sociology student at NUS and student resident at Tembusu College, uploaded it on Facebook.

It has amassed more than 1,300 likes and 460 shares since.

Mr Tan told The New Paper: “I was not expecting it to go viral, my goal for the speech was to represent my college cohort well, and translate that into a speech that would do justice to their thoughts and voices.”

He spent about a month speaking to peers, conducting a survey and focus-group discussions before writing the letter that he presented, in line with the forum’s title of Singapore’s Fourth Prime Minister: Aspirations and Expectations. (See excerpts on right.)

In his letter, Mr Tan summarised the sentiments of youth groups he spoke to – calling for



Mr Tan Yang Long giving his speech at the Tembusu Forum on Tuesday.

TNP PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

more trust in young people, expressing concerns over social inequality and identity, and making the case for more to be done for social mobility.

He also asked the future PM to be clear about how he plans to unite Singapore, and what Singapore means to him.

The letter was well-received by the forum’s other speakers like political observer Eugene Tan, Nominated Member of Parliament Kuik Shiao-Yin and Ambassador-at-large and Tembusu College rector, Professor Tommy Koh, who called Mr Tan’s speech the best of the

evening.

Netizens, however, were divided. Some called it too idealistic, while others praised Mr Tan and the Tembusu students.

One netizen, Mr Yat Ho, hoped that Singapore would change for the better through the letter.

He commented: “You guys are amazing, persuading with love and not anger.”

However, others, like Mr Vincent Chin, told the students to “keep dreaming”.

Echoing his sentiment was Mr Cory Tan, who urged the students to do more on their part to make change happen.

The letter might have more notable readers soon.

During the forum, Ms Kuik said she would personally hand the speech to some MPs when Parliament sits if Mr Tan could print out copies for her, to which the forum thundered with applause.

Mr Tan told TNP that he was considering taking up the offer. “It’s still undecided, but my school and I are talking about this,” he said.

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Snippets from the letter

ON TRUSTING THE YOUTH

“We want you to trust that we do not disagree for dissent’s sake and that we can find unity even in the face of our differences with you – differences of ideologies, opinions, beliefs or values.

“Disagreement is not weakness, and your appointment is a chance for a new way for our differences to be received.

“We truly believe that it is only in facing our differences together openly, honestly and fearlessly that our discourse can be strengthened, outcomes can be sharpened, and our relationship can be deepened.”

ON UNITING SINGAPORE

“We are very worried that social inequality is becoming an issue that is dividing Singaporeans faster than we can mitigate it. Unequal financial backgrounds, social networks, family upbringing, availability of opportunities are beginning to smile maliciously on this precious cohesion we have built.

“Social mobility is something that matters a lot to us as well. We have always been told Singapore is a meritocracy and everyone can chase their dreams. Yet, we have also seen some dreams are more difficult to chase than others for some people – much, much more difficult.”

ON WHAT S’PORE IS TO THE PM

“... we hope that when you say, ‘for the people’, ‘for Singapore’, or ‘for us’, you include those among us who are trapped in the cracks we create, silenced by the lines we draw, or rendered invisible by the walls we build. After all, what is the city, but the people?”