

4G leaders to offer S'poreans more say in shaping policy

Plans are also afoot to give more help to lower-income citizens, says Heng Swee Keat

Lim Yan Liang
Assistant Political Editor

Amid challenges such as inequality and economic disruption, the fourth-generation leadership is determined to build a future of progress and prosperity for Singaporeans, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

Mr Heng, who is expected to take over as Singapore's next leader in the coming years, also painted a vision of how he and his colleagues intend to lead the country. Their approach hinges on going beyond working for Singaporeans to working with them in designing policies and implementing them.

He also hinted that plans are afoot to give more help to lower-

income Singaporeans.

"We are now studying how we can better help lower- and lower-middle-income Singaporeans, including current and future seniors, to meet their retirement needs in a sustainable way," said Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister.

More help will also be given to workers – like those in their 40s and 50s – to upskill, with the Government putting in place the next phase of SkillsFuture, he added.

"I will provide more details in the coming Budget."

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference, Mr Heng invited "all Singaporeans to work with us, and with each other" to tackle the challenges facing the nation.

Just as the founding leaders fos-



NEW PARTNERSHIP MODEL

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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HENG SWEE KEAT

tered a sense of nationhood through policies such as home ownership that gave the people a stake in Singapore, Mr Heng said the Singapore Together movement launched last year "will be our new cornerstone of nation building".

For instance, new platforms have already engaged Singaporeans on ways to improve work-life harmony and encourage household recycling, said Mr Heng.

Singaporeans are also being involved in the development of Singa-

pore's landscape such as the Somerset Belt, the Geylang Serai cultural precinct as well as parks.

"What we see forming is a new model of partnership between the Government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on our future," he told an audience of students, academics and policymakers.

"In this process, government agencies are learning to develop and deliver policy solutions in a more collaborative manner."

This collaborative approach is Singapore's way forward in a world marked by differences and uncertainty, he said.

He noted that many countries have seen their political consensus fracture over the past decade, brought about by changes such as technological disruption, growing inequality and ageing populations.

Singapore is not immune to these divisive forces, and there were hints of this in some of the public discourse around foreigners, he added.

Amid these disruptive forces, a strong sense of unity is key to keeping Singapore successful, the same way the founding political leaders beat the long odds facing the Republic in the early days, said Mr Heng.

"Our improbable success was made possible by exceptional governance – capable leaders, working together with a united people."

People had a stake in the country and there was trust between them

and the Government.

"This approach must remain core to the Government's mission, especially as we grapple with longer-term issues facing us," he said.

But in a society increasingly flooded by information and misinformation, it is critical to find ways to deepen understanding and relationships among people, he noted.

"We must reject extremist views that will fray our social fabric, and be discerning about falsehoods and irresponsible promises that cannot be fulfilled."

That is why giving Singaporeans a bigger role in shaping policy would help them appreciate the trade-offs involved and distinguish truth from falsehoods, he said.

Singaporeans have also shown they want to let their actions speak for themselves: Total volunteer hours have nearly trebled in the past 10 years, from 45 million hours in 2008 to 122 million hours in 2018, he noted.

At the same time, the Government will continue to exercise leadership in areas such as security and defence, and in planning for the long term, said Mr Heng.

"I am confident that our partnership efforts to date will set the foundations for the work of a generation," he said.

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Divisive forces can't be allowed to take root here, says Heng

Need to act decisively against them, says Deputy PM, citing nativism as an example

Lim Yan Liang
Assistant Political Editor

Singapore needs to act decisively to prevent divisive forces from taking root here, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

These include nativism – anti-immigrant sentiment – hints of which have already shown up here in the public conversation about foreigners, Mr Heng said in his speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference.

"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," he said.

Trends like globalisation and technological shifts have disrupted jobs and affected livelihoods, especially in countries that have not kept pace with these changes, said Mr Heng.

This has ushered in an era where forces like far-right parties have exploited people's fears and frustra-

tions for their own political gain, he added.

"Campaigning along nativist and protectionist lines, and further undermining trust in public institutions, these divisive forces have washed over many societies, including Europe and Latin America," he said.

Singapore is not immune to these same forces that have swept across the world, noted Mr Heng.

Some of the recent discussions surrounding foreigners in Singapore, for instance, have been fraught with such tensions.

Earlier this month, the ruling party clashed with Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh in Parliament and online over employment data.

Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing remarked in Parliament that he was "very cautious about this constant divide, Singaporean versus PR (permanent resident)", in response to Mr Singh's question about whether employment figures could be broken down to separate Singaporeans and PRs.

Mr Singh said later on Facebook that such information was necessary "to counter fake news and false-

hoods (which) fester far more when the facts are available but not made public".

The post drew a rejoinder from Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Chee Hong Tat, who called on Singaporeans to avoid "the politics of division and envy".

"We must firmly reject all attempts to drive a wedge between different groups within our society and stand resolute against efforts to stir fear and hatred for political gain," said Mr Chee.

Last Friday, the police said they had issued warnings to four men for harassing Mr Erramalli Ramesh, the man caught on video verbally abusing a condominium security guard last October.

The widely shared video triggered a backlash: Netizens dug up his personal details, which they posted online, some accompanied with racist remarks. Mr Erramalli and his family were also threatened with death, violence and rape.

Mr Heng said yesterday that Singaporeans need to ensure that differences do not become entrenched and corrode social cohesion, and be aware of "the dangers

of political parties using divisive rhetoric to gain support in a fractured landscape, and the risks of falling prey to the pull of populism".

"Our diversity can be turned against us," he said. "Our unity can fray, and our society can wither."

Amid such forces and Singapore's own changing demographics, it is important to maintain unity as a people and focus on working together to build a shared future, said Mr Heng.

The foundation for this is strong political leadership, which means leaders who have integrity and who are deeply committed to the well-being of Singaporeans and the country's future.

They also must have the trust and support of Singaporeans, and be able to take Singapore forward, amid seismic changes around the world, by partnering the people, he added.

"They must have the moral courage to do what is right for the people, and not just what is popular," said Mr Heng. "We cannot be all things to all people."

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VULNERABLE TO DIVISIVE FORCES

While we have fared better than most, we are not immune to the same divisive forces that have swept across the world. In fact, we have already seen some semblances of nativist tendencies here in Singapore, such as some of the public discourse around 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.



DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HENG SWEE KEAT

COMMITTED TO BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE

The way ahead will not be easy, but you have the unwavering commitment of the Government, and from the 4G leadership – my colleagues and I will make every effort to build a future of progress for Singaporeans in the coming decades. A future where we can continue to prosper as a nation, where all Singaporeans have opportunities to succeed. A future where the benefits of progress will be shared with all, where no one will be left behind if they give their best. A future where we pull together as one, turning our differences and diversity into our strength.



MR HENG

NEW CORNERSTONE

Just as our founding leaders made home ownership their cornerstone policy to give Singaporeans a stake in Singapore and a share in our progress, Singapore Together will be our new cornerstone of nation building, a way of working that reflects and strengthens our shared ownership of Singapore's future.



MR HENG



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat meeting Temasek Polytechnic students at the conference yesterday, where he spoke of the need to maintain unity. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG