

# Amid crisis, a promise of better days ahead

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For The Straits Times

On the eve of the week that coronavirus (Covid-19) would descend on Singapore's shores, here is what was at the top of the local news: Mental health declarations for job applicants without proper justification was deemed discriminatory; Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had emphasised the importance of strong cooperation between the civil service and political leadership; and a renewed debate on immigration was under way.

Today, these seem a lifetime away. Since Singapore's first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on Jan 23, we have had to quickly adjust to a new way of living. The fight against the coronavirus has since overshadowed everything else.

The Budget speech delivered on Tuesday by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat thus takes on special significance. This is not merely because of the measures announced, but also because it is a welcome symbol of continuity, order and a courageous offensive against an invisible threat.

I thus approached this Budget not with excitement, as I usually did, but with hope. I knew that the Budget could not simply solve all the problems we are now facing, but I hoped it would help plant the seeds of a better tomorrow.

I watched closely, read between the lines and listened carefully. What I heard were three promises.

## A PROMISE THAT NO ONE WOULD BE LEFT BEHIND

For the taxi driver having to cover the cost of rental from his own pocket, the small business owner facing the threat of a shutdown and the worker at risk of layoff, each day brings them closer to a financial tipping point. For them, the fight to stay in work as the outbreak continues must feel like a lonely one, with no end in sight.

What I heard from Mr Heng was that this would not be a fight they would undertake alone. From wage support measures for local workers via the Jobs Support Scheme and Wage Credit Scheme, to enhanced property tax rebates and the Government's risk-share on working capital loans, Mr Heng spared no effort providing a broad-based package for employers and employees at risk.

But that is not quite the end – read between the lines. Most of the time Mr Heng used the word “retain” in reference to workers, he coupled it with “retrain”,



Budget 2020 offers an indication that stronger government-citizen partnerships would be a mainstay in building future Singapore, with \$250 million set aside for these partnerships, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

“upgrade”, “reskill”, “train” or “recruit”. The Government's promise was not merely that it would leave no one behind, but that it would also help the most vulnerable get ahead. The message to workers at risk: There is hope and opportunity, even in the depths of a crisis – and we promise to help you find it.

## A PROMISE OF GREATER TRUST

But, of course, for promises to mean something, trust must have been established. The Singapore Government enjoys commendable levels of trust with Singaporeans, painstakingly built over generations.

Nevertheless, as social theories of risk and trust have established, environments of higher risk can have negative effects on trust levels. Recent events related to Covid-19 – the spreading of unsubstantiated rumours, panic buying in the aftermath of the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition moving up to orange and disagreements over mask usage – suggest just how such effects might well play out.

While the short-term task of reinforcing trust is left to the Covid-19 task force, who are responding with openness and information, Budget 2020 complements these efforts by offering a promise of greater trust in the years to come.

It did so partially by

incorporating suggestions from Singaporeans into the proposed policies. These ranged, as Mr Heng acknowledged, from trade associations and business chambers' feedback on internationalisation support schemes, to youth leaders' calls to reduce Singapore's carbon footprint. Read between the lines: We trust your judgment and we are serious about working together to take Singapore forward.

But this was a mere hint of what was to come: Stronger government-citizen partnerships would be a mainstay in building future Singapore, with \$250 million set aside for these partnerships. Backed by a promise worth its weight in gold (or Singapore dollars), this was a demonstration of the Government's commitment to reach out and make this relationship work, even as a new normal of risk and uncertainty seems here to stay.

## A PROMISE OF BETTER DAYS AHEAD

Indeed, as much as the Budget dealt with current challenges, it was planned with a clear eye on the future. But the glimpses into the future, offered through visions, projections and policy plans, were no ordinary ones. Take a moment to realise this: These were glimpses into a future beyond Covid-19, where things would be back to

normal again.

These were glimpses into a future with so much to look forward to: Singapore emerging as a global-Asia node of technology, innovation and enterprise; exciting opportunities across emerging fields and regions; a realised vision of a low-carbon economy and many more.

These glimpses offered a promise of better days ahead.

Covid-19 or not, Singapore remains a shining jewel of a nation. While this jewel may shine a little less brightly these days, it is but a temporary setback. Budget 2020 was a reminder of light at the end of the tunnel, and it is only a matter of time before it comes into view.

And when that happens, in the same Chamber where this Budget was delivered, we can go back to channelling our energies fully to mental health issues, debate over immigration policies and, yes, even argue over matters of governance.

That day is coming, but it is not today. For today, let us stay calm and carry on – confident we have the resources to see it through. Singapore, better days are coming.

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