

SOCIETY

Charting a new course out of the pandemic

At the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference themed 'Reset' on Jan 25, Education Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted how changes in policy thinking and mindsets in three areas can make the nation fairer, more equal and greener.

FIRST RESET: MERITOCRACY AND INEQUALITY

Mr Wong noted that the pandemic has widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, with poorer segments of society paying a higher price all over the world.

When the pandemic hit, the country drew on its reserves to save jobs and tide over those who were hardest hit. These temporary measures will taper down this year as the economy improves. But the pandemic has created added impetus to strengthen the social support system, Mr Wong said.

He pointed out that Singapore is making substantial investments in pre-school education to ensure that children of all income groups can benefit from quality programmes.

Schools with a larger proportion of children from lower-income families are getting more resources, so that these children get more support.

In Singapore, merit has become narrowly defined by one's academic and cognitive abilities. But societies require a wide range of abilities to thrive, Mr Wong added.

He also noted that the pandemic has again thrown the spotlight on essential workers, and that the country must ensure that remuneration is fair for people in these roles.

What this means for you: While the Government is making changes through policies, you would also have to examine your understanding of what it means to be successful, and if you are able to value different people for their different skills.

Also, think about if you are willing to pay more as a consumer or as a future taxpayer to ensure a better distribution of resources and a fairer society.

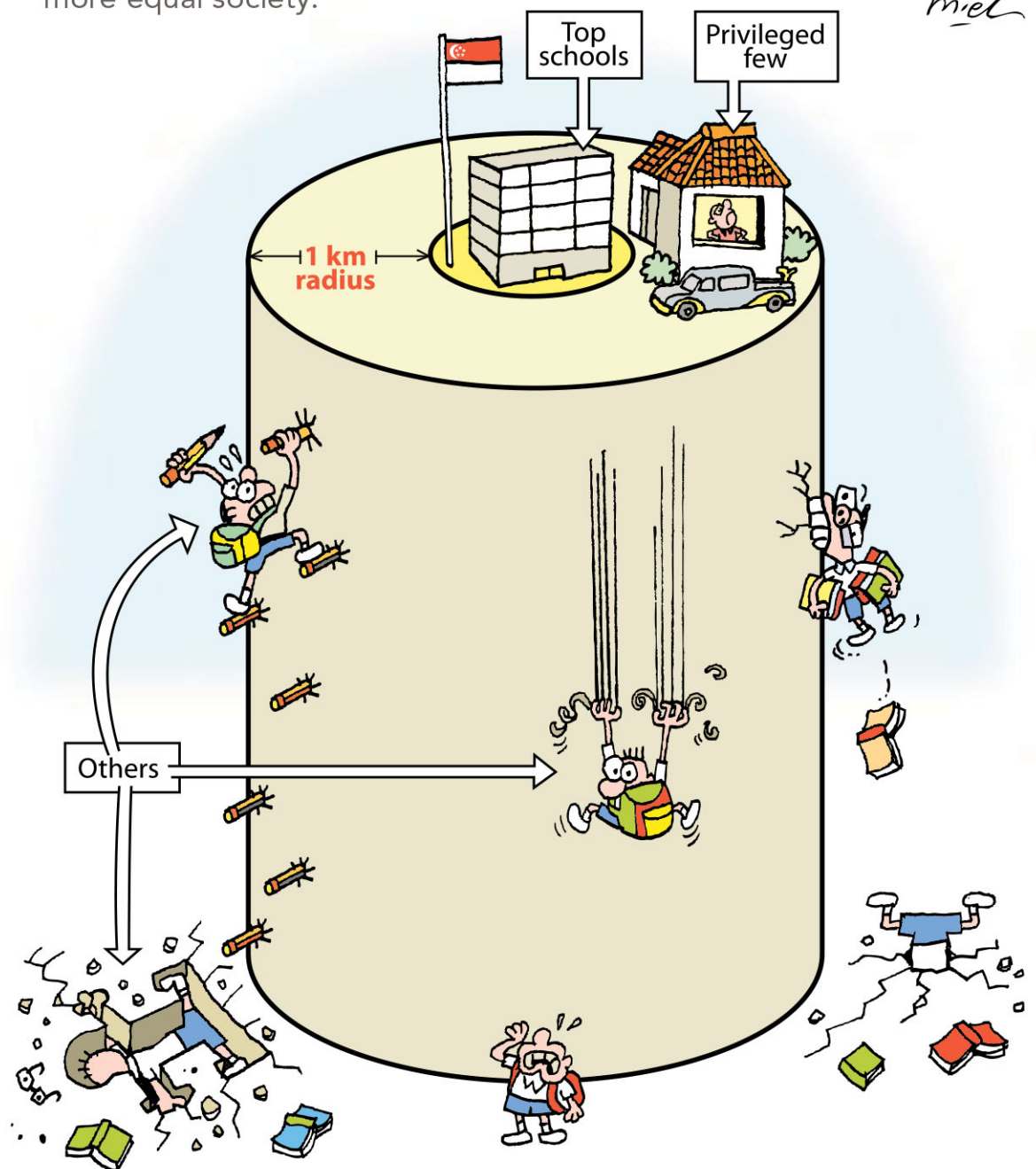
ON BROADENING MERITOCRACY

“ If we attach more value in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields and not just cognitively, incomes will naturally spread out more evenly across society. And we will go a long way in advancing our cause towards a fairer and more equal society.”

ON UPLIFTING SOCIETY

“ There will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets in Singapore to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable. And we will have to work out how this can be done in a sustainable manner, over the long term.”

miel



STATS OF THE MATTER

■ Global inequality and the gap between the rich and the poor have been issues even before the worldwide pandemic. For instance, based on an Oxfam report issued January last year, the 2,153 wealthiest individuals in the world have a combined wealth that exceeds that of 4.6 billion people who make up 60 per cent of the global population.

■ A DBS report last year released during the pandemic found that lower-income workers here – those who earn less than \$3,000 monthly – make up almost half of DBS customers who have experienced a fall in salaries.

■ Of concern is that nearly half of low-income students in Singapore are concentrated in the same schools, a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development highlighted in 2018.

It found that in 2015, 46 per cent of disadvantaged students in Singapore were attending “disadvantaged schools”, up from 41 per cent in 2009.

Disadvantaged students are those who are in the bottom quarter (lowest 25 per cent) of the socio-economic index within their country, while disadvantaged schools are defined as those which take in the bottom quarter of the country’s student population.

However, the Education Ministry clarified that “disadvantaged schools” in the local context were still well-resourced by international standards.

■ On the positive side, in Singapore, more students from lower-income families are progressing further in their education. In 2018, local statistics showed that 15 years ago, five in 10 students from the bottom socio-economic quintile (lowest 20 per cent) progressed to post-secondary education. In 2018, it was nine in 10.

SECOND RESET: A GREENER SINGAPORE

When the pandemic hit, carbon emissions dropped significantly all over the world and pollution eased. Now that economic activities are picking up, Singapore cannot return to how things used to be, Mr Wong said.

Among the things that he cited that can be done include deploying more renewable energy, as well as researching new technologies that are energy and resource-efficient. It also means having vehicles run on cleaner energy and making sustainable living a key feature in Housing Board estates.

Sustainability can also be a source of competitive advantage for Singapore globally, he added.

What this means for you: Think about what actions you can take on a daily basis that can contribute to a greener Singapore.

Or think about if you would be interested in pursuing a career in green energy and sustainability, as Singapore would need talents in those areas if it develops in that direction.

STATS OF THE MATTER

■ Singapore contributes just 0.11 per cent of global emissions, but ranks 26th out of 142 countries in terms of emissions per capita, based on 2015 data from the International Energy Agency.

Emissions per capita is a measure of greenhouse gas emissions per person in a country.

■ This means that each person here produces more carbon emissions than a person based in bigger countries such as Britain and France.

■ On the positive side, based on the 2019 Climate Change Perceptive Survey, a national survey done in Singapore, almost 95 per cent of respondents said they have heard of, read, or come across the terms climate change and global warming.

The figure was up from 89.5 per cent in 2017 and 80.6 per cent in 2015.

■ Nearly four in five – or 78.2 per cent – of those polled indicated that were prepared to play their part towards a low-carbon Singapore, even if they have to bear some additional costs and inconvenience as consumers.



Solar panels on HDB rooftops in Bukit Batok West. Dr Tan See Leng, Second Minister for Trade and Industry, said the country is taking steps to increase the proportion of renewables in its energy mix in the longer term. He added that solar energy is the most viable source of renewable energy here. CMG FILE PHOTO

ON LONG-TERM POSITIVES



The greatest promise of going green, however, is not about what it will mean for us today. It's about building for the future – for our children, and the next generation."

Scan or click on this QR code to read one writer's opinion on why protecting nature also protects us.



THIRD RESET: STRENGTHENING SOLIDARITY

The pandemic has intensified divisions in many countries, with falsehoods and conspiracy theories gaining circulation over facts, Mr Wong said.

Expert knowledge is sometimes portrayed as a conspiracy by the elites to perpetuate their dominance.

While easy access to information has contributed to a healthy questioning of expert advice at times, it has also led to a downside where people self-select information to support and reinforce their own points of view, making it hard to find a consensus, and allowing extreme views to gain ground.

Yet, societies can also gain renewed strength from the pandemic by forging a sense of solidarity and cohesion in the face of difficulty, Mr Wong said.

On reconciling greater diversity with greater unity, he said the key is to build consensus around the common good – regardless of one's own political or individual differences. This strong sense of consensus is especially important for Singapore, given its small size.

What this means for you: Think about what you can do to contribute to a productive dialogue in Singapore, especially when it concerns issues that people disagree with one another about.

Also, think about how you can look out for your friends so they do not get swayed by falsehoods, conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies.

STATS OF THE MATTER

■ Recent news that a 16-year-old local student had been detained for planning attacks on two mosques have shocked Singapore, and also highlighted the worrying trend of the rise of right-wing extremism. *(Turn to page 11 to read more about this case)*

■ The University of Oslo's Center for Research on Extremism defines right-wing extremism as a specific ideology characterised by "anti-democratic opposition towards equality". It is associated with racism, xenophobia, exclusionary nationalism, conspiracy theories, and authoritarianism.

■ In Singapore, seven people under the age of 20, after getting radicalised through the Internet, have been picked up under the Internal Security Act since 2015. Four have been detained, while three were served with restriction orders.

ON BUILDING CONSENSUS



I think that gives us purpose. It gives us that sense of a common destiny for the future, and it will enable Singapore to continue thriving and doing well in the future."



Discuss with your classmates which "reset" is the most important to each of you? Why?

ILLUSTRATION: GEL GILIAN