

Draw confidence from the past to chart S'pore's future: DPM Wong

Lim Min Zhang
 Assistant News Editor

The world is at a major turning point in history, with the wide-ranging effects of Covid-19 and the Ukraine war still being felt globally. But while these external challenges sound daunting, Singapore is in a much stronger position today than in the past, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at

a National University of Singapore forum yesterday. "We should... be clear-eyed about the challenges ahead, but we should not be overwhelmed, intimidated or daunted by the fact that these things are happening," he said at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum. Singapore has always had to deal with many external challenges since independence, he said, addressing about 350 people who attended the two-hour event at NUS University Town, mostly students

from tertiary institutes. And the Republic has always had to recognise that it has to rely on its own wits, ingenuity and people to survive and make a good living. Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister, said: "That is our fundamental mindset and that's how far Singapore has come these 57 years. "We should therefore draw confidence and strength from the journey that we have been through together these past 57 years, to look ahead and have confidence that



Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong answering questions from students during the Q&A session at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum. With him on stage is Associate Professor Adeline Seow, who was the moderator. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

we can continue to make a good living in an uncertain, dangerous and troubled world." He urged young people to seize the opportunities presented by the digital and green economy, as well as to know more about the region – including China, India and Asean countries – and not just the US and Europe. Organised by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Students' Political Association, the annual event aims to promote greater awareness among youth on pertinent issues in Singapore. In elaborating on the geopolitical headwinds faced by the nation, Mr Wong echoed a key theme from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech on Sunday. But there are also opportunities.

The growth of digitalisation and the green economy are two powerful trends that will continue to transform the region, he said. Singapore will redouble its efforts to become a more attractive and innovative hub, with projects such as the upcoming Changi Airport Terminal 5 and the Tuas mega port. But this also means young people must be prepared to venture out and know more about neighbouring countries, he said. "If Singapore is to be a relevant hub for South-east Asia, our people must know what South-east Asia is," he said, adding that this means an understanding of culture and how to do business there. He said very often, the US and Europe come to mind when students wish to go on exchange programmes.

He added: "That's fine, by all means, spend time in America and Europe, but do not neglect our own backyard, do not neglect our region." While opportunities abound, it is also critical to ensure Singapore's progress is not just shared by a few who happen to do well or those with good luck, he said. Singapore must maintain a cohesive society where everyone shares in the fruits of the country's success. He cited statistics to show how income inequality – as measured by the Gini coefficient – has fallen in the past decade. To ensure the less fortunate are not left behind, the Government's efforts need to complement those of the whole of society, such as volunteers, he said. That is why the Forward Singa-

pore exercise – which Mr Wong announced in June – is needed to refresh the country's social compact, to chart the way forward for the next 10 years and beyond. He posed three questions to the audience, asking how more opportunities can be provided for every Singaporean; how the country can remain cohesive and inclusive while moving forward; and the changes they would like to see and the role that they can play. The bottom line, he said, is that a stable, prosperous and united Singapore should not be taken for granted. "I think it's our collective responsibility to see how we can improve it and make it better. So let's be fearless and brave in shaping a better tomorrow." mzlim@sph.com.sg