

Speech by Party Secretary General Mr Lee Hsien Loong
At People's Action Party Convention 2021
On Sunday, 28 November 2021

Comrades, brothers and sisters from the NTUC, good morning.

1. I am very happy to join all of you here in person today at our Party Convention. And also a warm hello to our comrades who are participating virtually with us all over Singapore in our 93 branches. Welcome to you all!

2. We are very honoured to have brothers and sisters from the Labour Movement joining us today. The Labour Movement has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the PAP in this crisis – helping workers and families, engaging employers to preserve jobs, keeping a finger on the pulse, so we know how things are going. Ours is a symbiotic partnership with the NTUC. I talked about this at the Party Conference last year, and again at the May Day Rally a few months ago. So I fully support what Brother Sanjeev Tiwari said just now about continually reinforcing the bonds between NTUC and PAP. I look forward to party and union activists doing much more together, advocating side-by-side with each other, and making sure that workers at all levels feel and appreciate the value of this partnership.

COVID-19

3. We have been fighting COVID-19 now for almost two years. It has been a long journey with many twists and turns. The virus has surprised us over and over again. Repeatedly we have had to adapt our response, pick ourselves up and then press on. This has been tough on everyone. Not least our healthcare and frontline workers, who have been working tirelessly to keep us safe – and once again, we thank them all!

4. Also a very big thank you to party activists who have reached out to help residents during these difficult times. Some of you took physical care of residents, for example, volunteers in Tampines North, who distributed support packs to people recovering alone at home. Other branches attended to people's

mental well-being, which is a serious worry during these stressful times, especially for the elderly. For example, Kolam Ayer volunteers taught seniors to use smartphones to stay connected with their families. And also the mental well-being of the young, so the Young PAP worked with youths to improve their mental health and their resilience at homes and also in schools.

5. These last two years have tested not just our healthcare response, but also our social bonds and political will. I am grateful that in a crunch, Singaporeans have stayed united, worked closely with the government, and come together to support one another.

6. Overall, we have come a long way. We have made a lot of progress but we must be mentally prepared for more bumps along the way. Right now, another new variant of concern is emerging, we learned a new word – the omicron variant. We are tracking this very closely. We are not sure yet but we may well be forced to take a few steps back again, before we can take more steps forward. But despite all this, I am confident that we will find our way to living with the virus, and safely resume all the things we love to do. We are making all this effort because we want to get there safely, with as few casualties along the way.

TEST OF TRUST

7. Every crisis is a test of trust. In a public health crisis, like COVID-19, we all rely on trusted sources to explain things to us and advise us on what we need to do. Most of us are not doctors and scientists. And even doctors and scientists have difficulty in keeping up with the flood of new knowledge and science about the new virus, how it behaves, how to treat it, what is likely to happen. So people look to the government to assess the situation, judge what to do, and organise a national response. The whole country must work as one, but it is the government that must decide what to do and lead the country forward.

8. One big reason why our measures against COVID-19 are working is because Singaporeans trust the PAP government. They trust the PAP government will keep everyone safe, and keep Singapore in working order. That if people catch COVID-19, they will get proper medical treatment. That if we have a lockdown,

affected workers and businesses will be taken care of. That supermarkets will be stocked, and essential services will not be disrupted.

9. Singaporeans have this confidence because for 60 years now, we have consistently good PAP government. They know the PAP will never give up in a crisis, we won't buckle, and we will always have your back. As a result, Singaporeans patiently complied with burdensome safe management measures and repeated rounds of tightening and easing. They accepted that the tightenings were essential, to slow down infections at critical junctures, and prevent our healthcare system from being overwhelmed. They understood that the changes in plans were hard to avoid, because in a rapidly changing situation, we had to adapt our response as the situation unfolded. I am very grateful that everyone came together, accepted the inconveniences and hardships, and made our measures work. Thank you!

10. When vaccines became available, Singaporeans came forward to get vaccinated without hesitation. It has been a successful vaccination campaign, vaccinating everyone. Today, 87% of our population is fully vaccinated – probably one of the highest vaccination rate in the world. It was not just because the vaccination campaign was well organised, or because the vaccinations were free. In fact some of the vaccination centres had goodie bags. It was also because people trusted the government, trusted the healthcare system, and accepted advice to get vaccinated to protect themselves and to protect their families.

11. Elsewhere, the situation is often quite different. Some countries have had great difficulty vaccinating their whole population. Europe is now struggling with a fourth wave of infections. Vaccines are readily available, but a significant minority in every country simply refuse to get vaccinated. Many of them are anti-vaxxers not just because they are misguided or ignorant, but because of deep distrust – distrust of authority in general, and of their government in particular. So when the governments try to them to get vaccinated, their response is: “I don't trust you. Why should I believe you?”

12. That is in Europe, but it is also a big problem in the US. There, attitudes towards vaccination split along partisan political lines, between the Blue camp

(Democrats) and the Red camp (Republicans). The Democrat supporters are eager to get jabbed, and willing to wear masks. But many Republicans still remain unvaccinated, even in Red States, where they are having new outbreaks with many people seriously ill, large numbers in ICU and dying. This is weird, because the previous Republican administration was the one that made vaccines, invented medicines, furthered the cause, and now Republicans don't want it. Essentially, Americans are profoundly divided, public healthcare is politicised, and on top of that, there is a deep suspicion of the government. These political divisions and social distrust have made it harder for the US and many European countries to bring COVID-19 under control.

13. In Singapore, we are very fortunate not to have such divisions in our society. But remember, we did not become a cohesive, trusting society overnight. Social cohesion is the work of decades. And trust has to be built up long before the crisis. When a crisis strikes, if the trust is not already there, it is too late. I am grateful that the PAP government enjoys the public's trust. Built up over years of working closely with Singaporeans. We have been delivering faithfully on promises. We have been consistently producing results for the people – housing, healthcare, education, well-paying jobs, better lives. We have shown year in, year out, in good times and bad, in crisis after crisis, that the PAP government will always be with you, for you, for Singapore.

14. And indeed, during this crisis, we needed to draw on this reservoir of trust because we faced many urgent and difficult decisions that impact lives and livelihoods. To impose a circuit breaker or not; to close schools or not; to let patients with mild symptoms recover at home or not; to allow dining-in at F&B outlets or not; and to open up our borders or not. In an ideal world, we have all the relevant information, we can decide. And then what we decide will work, and things will unfold as we expect and everyone can be happy. But in the real world, uncertainties, surprises and trade-offs are unavoidable. Whatever we decide, however hard we try to get it right and to cushion the impact, more often than not, some group will be affected or disappointed. We will do our best but it cannot be helped – these are hard choices. Yet still the government must exercise its judgement to the best of its ability, and carry Singaporeans along.

15. As I told the Ministers: in a crisis, as leaders we cannot afford to waver. It is not the time to worry about being popular, or looking good. You have been elected for one purpose, and you have to focus on your duty: to make the right decision, keep Singapore safe and see Singaporeans through this crisis. Concentrate on that, get the job done. That is why Singaporeans elected us. that is our sacred trust.

16. Just as importantly, even as we strive to do the right thing, we must continue to refresh and nurture this trust that we have. What does this mean? It means we must deal competently with the problems; solve them; explain clearly what we are doing and why, and where we are headed. So we have held regular press conferences, and quite often I have a national broadcast to speak to people directly so they can understand what we are trying to do and feel whether we know what we are doing. Everybody understands our considerations and game plan, and will be psychologically prepared for what is to come. We have to be open and transparent, to share what we know, and admit what we do not know. We have to announce bad news as well as good news. Report what has gone right, but also acknowledge what has gone wrong and will be put right. We have to lead by example.

17. In Singapore we take this for granted, but it is very important and worth reminding ourselves. The same rules apply to everybody – safe distancing, mask wearing, testing and isolation requirements. You may be a Minister or MP, community leader or safe distancing ambassador – you abide by the same rules, whoever you may be. I emphasize this because if you read newspapers, you can see how things have gone wrong in other places when leaders abuse their positions. It undermines public trust. It demolishes the credibility and standing of the government. The damage done goes way beyond COVID-19. It is a reminder to us all that the same rules apply to everybody. And never take advantage and misuse your position of authority and leadership.

18. Trust is important not just between Singaporeans and the leaders. We must be able to trust one another too. Rules and penalties are necessary, but it is not enough. We rely on everyone to exercise personal and social responsibility, for example, maintain good personal hygiene in public places. Exercising due care

and discretion when participating in higher-risk activities. Complying with Safe Management Measures. We have to trust one another to abide by the spirit of the rules, even when no one is checking. For example, if we are under an isolation protocol, we are supposed to self-test before we go out and encounter other people. We have to do it honestly and truthfully and self-declare the results, and if the results are not what we hope to see, we do what we need to do. We have to be like this so that the government doesn't have to seal every last possible loophole and we can treat people as honourable citizens who are responsible, who will take care of not just ourselves but also of others. We must also trust our collective spirit as one people. Looking out for one another, supporting those in greater need, staying united. Singapore cannot claim to have better doctors or scientists, or better healthcare than the US or Europe. But the decisive difference in our response is this: we trust one another, and therefore we work with and not against one another.

19. COVID-19 has been a searching test of public trust, for societies all around the world. Some societies are high-trust, others are low-trust – and it makes all the difference in a crisis. Singapore is and must always be a high-trust society. We have always kept faith with one another, and must always do so. That is the way to weather not just COVID-19, but through the storms that will come our way.

GETTING POLITICS RIGHT

20. To remain a high-trust society, we must get our politics right. Because only then will our system deliver results for Singaporeans, and that will give people good reason to trust the government and trust one another.

21. Politics is about people's lives and futures. It carries on even during a pandemic. We have to continue addressing people's concerns, and striving towards our aspiration of a fair and inclusive society – where every Singaporean has the opportunity to seek a better life for themselves and their children; where every citizen is accepted and valued, no matter what his background or station in life.

22. That is why even as we tackle COVID-19, we have pressed on with important goals. We are improving social mobility: Bringing every child to a good starting point in life with KidStart, UPLIFT, and many other programmes. Opening more pathways for people to improve and upgrade themselves and renew their skills with SkillsFuture. At the same time, we are re-doubling efforts to strengthen social cohesion and prevent divisive issues from splitting us. We are fostering stronger race relations and tackling racial discrimination. We are empowering women's development and improving their standing in society. We are acknowledging and dealing with tensions between Singaporeans and migrant workers, workpass holders. We are ensuring fair opportunities at the workplace through anti-discrimination legislation. These are long-term endeavours, and results will take time. But we are moving in the right direction, and making progress.

23. Yet having good policies alone is not enough. We must also help people appreciate how these policies make a difference to their lives. We must inspire people with the ideals and values behind these policies. We must mobilise everyone in order to realise our common vision.

24. We have to help Singaporeans make the political connection: All these good things – social mobility, better jobs and better lives – they know they cannot happen by themselves. In many countries, they don't happen at all. If you want to continue to get good results in Singapore, we have to get our politics right, you have to support the PAP government, and we must work with them to build the nation that we all aspire towards.

25. All this means the PAP must remain politically on top. A new generation of voters want to see more debate, more contestation, more questioning of established ideas. They want their voices heard, as you heard from Comrade Nadia Samdin, and that is understandable. The PAP must respond to this. Show Singaporeans that we are not afraid of opposing views or being challenged, that we encourage healthy discourse. We welcome good ideas wherever they come from. And just as importantly, we listen carefully to the opinions and concerns of Singaporeans. That is why this year we are holding the Conversations on Singapore Women's Developments. That is why the Emerging Stronger Taskforce

has been working hard with different groups, setting up Alliance for Action. That is why this year, we made the decision to allow nurses in public hospitals to wear the tudung, after extensive consultations and careful deliberations, stretching over many years. We listened, we considered, we make up our minds taking everybody's views into account, and we try and hold everyone together as we move ahead. Our aim is to bring people together, understand the problems, and stay connected in order to co-create the right solutions, to co-build tomorrow's Singapore.

26. At the same time, political discourse is not just a matter of accepting or marketing good ideas. We also have to rebut wrong views, if possible gently, but when necessary firmly. And we have to expose those who, for their own reasons and political purposes, try to exploit issues to confuse people and make them unhappy. That was the spirit of the recent debates in Parliament on the CECA and on workpass holders. We explained our proposals to make things clear, to get people to make the connection and understand how this policies benefit Singapore, actually benefit Singaporean workers. At the same time, to demolish (the arguments of) people who are trying to exploit these issues for political advantage, so that Singaporeans are not misled or made use of, not led in the wrong direction. I tell my younger colleagues: in politics, if you are not able to hold your own, stand up, argue your case and retain the support of voters, you are finished. You may have noble intentions and good ideas, but if you can't get re-elected, you can't do anything about them and you won't be able to do good for Singapore.

27. Finally, the reason our politics has delivered results for Singaporeans depends on one critical factor: our emphasis on integrity and honesty. If politicians are venal or dishonest, they tell lies or are corrupt, politicians cannot be trusted, voters will not trust their motives, cannot take what they say at face value. People will become disillusioned and cynical, and they will lose faith, not just in individual leaders or political parties, but from the political system as a whole, from the political class as a whole. They despair of the system, they give up hope on their country. The country is in a bad state. And trust me, it is forever

destroyed. There are too many examples of this happening far away from us as well as nearby to us. We must never, never let this happen to Singapore.

28. In Singapore, people expect MPs and political leaders to be clean, to be above reproach in their personal conduct, and to be scrupulously truthful in what they say, inside or outside Parliament. The PAP has upheld stringent standards, ever since it came into power more than 60 years ago in 1959. All our Ministers, MPs and activists know. If someone misbehaves, we will discipline him. If someone misspeaks he will put it right, because he knows that is the right thing to do, and the party will insist on it. The PAP's rigour sets the tone for Singapore politics. Voters have to apply these same high standards of integrity and honesty to every group and every person who participates in politics, whichever side they may be on. Otherwise, we will be signalling we are prepared to lower standards, and this will eventually drag our system down.

STRENGTHENING THE PARTY

29. Because politics is so important, the PAP must always be a vigorous, effective party that Singaporeans can trust to lead Singapore forward. Our party machinery must be well-oiled and always ready to go. Our party leadership continually renewed, and always fit to lead the party and to lead Singapore.

30. We have to do three things in order to achieve this.

31. Firstly, we must strengthen the capabilities of every party branch. If we do that, we want every activist in every branch and at every rung to do their best, as ambassadors of the Party. We have been conducting political training at HQ for some time now. Many activists and branch chairmen have participated in these training sessions. We will scale up the training and sharing of best practices across the branches, learn from one another, raise standards, encourage friendly competition. We will also tap on our experienced veterans, who have much to share, to mentor and guide our newer members. Strengthening branches will make us more effective on the ground. Our activists need to be visible, and be seen wearing party whites from time to time, not just during elections. You must

be active in engaging residents, and win the support and trust of the residents, because they will see you as the face of the PAP government.

32. Secondly, we have to update party communications and outreach. The Party has been reinventing itself in the digital age. We have been re-thinking, re-organizing and re-packaging how we deliver Party communications. We need to improve our outreach and use digital platforms more effectively. We need to meet the electorate wherever they are, whether on social media or other platforms. This is especially critical during a general election campaign. We just launched Petir.sg. It is the new socio-political website of the PAP, the digital counterpart of the Petir newsletter. It will deliver party updates to a wider audience. I hope comrades will find the website interesting and relevant. Please help us spread the message. Share the articles and stories with friends and residents. Explain to your contacts and your colleagues why the Party took certain decisions or policy positions, and how these will make a difference to their lives.

33. Thirdly, we need to renew and reinforce our party membership. We are always on the lookout for new members who share the values and goals of the PAP. In particular, we continue to welcome people of diverse backgrounds, so that we can better serve residents and voters who are also getting more diverse, as Comrade Gho Sze Kee reminded us. I hope to see more people come in from all walks of life, all experiences, with many different views, as long as you support Singapore and want to do good for Singapore with a pure heart.

34. We must also renew our Party with fresh ideas and youthful vigour. I am very glad that we have such people working among our branches, participating in grassroots and joining us for the Convention today. Comrade Gho Sze Kee was one of them, Comrade Ling Weihong serving in Sengkang ward was another. We hear from them, we're inspired by them, we hope they will attract more people like them to join us. Comrade Ling Weihong is in an opposition constituency. He has a tough task. As he explained to you, they cannot do the work for the MPs. But they are there to work the ground, make their presence felt, and keep the opposition MPs on their toes. Patiently, they will win the confidence of the

voters, and win the constituency back. It may take time, but we will do it and we will give them our full support.

35. We need to recruit a new generation of party members with the staying power, commitment, and conviction of our old stalwarts. Like our late Comrade Lionel de Souza, whom we honoured with a posthumous Commendation Award. He served with tireless dedication for many years in Hougang. And was fearless in his support for the Party and Singapore. Every time I met him, he gave me heart. We have people with the conviction, with the passion. It's tough, you may have doors closed in your faces, you may not persuade people overnight to change their views. But you keep on trying, and trying, and in the case of Comrade Lionel, he kept on trying right till the end when he passed away. We need people like that.

36. Today we also honour Comrade Koo Tsai Kee. who has received the Meritorious Service Medal. He came in 30 years ago – first as backbencher, then officer-holder. Now retired a whole ten years, he keeps active in Tanjong Pagar GRC, helping the Party, helping residents, helping Singapore. This is the spirit and passion that we must kindle in the next generation. Always loyal, always reliable, always serving the people. 为人民服务。

LEADERSHIP RENEWAL

37. We hope from among the party activists, old and new, we will find many promising ones to field as candidates in future elections. We are already expanding our touchpoints and starting our recruitment process. We have many tea sessions lined up which is an encouraging sign. Because it shows strong interest in the party, in the platform, and more importantly, many Singaporeans are willing to step forward and serve the country, to fight for the Singapore which they believe in.

38. We need renewal not only for MPs or Branch Secretaries, but also Ministers and the Prime Minister too. The pandemic has delayed my succession plans. In April this year, 1ASG Comrade Heng Swee Keat announced that he would step

aside as leader of the 4G team. But as DPM, Swee Keat remains a key member of the 4G team carrying the heavy responsibilities, especially for the economy.

39. The 4G ministers have since been relooking the issue of succession. They have said this before, and I repeat what they say: It is not about selecting a “boss” or the winner of a “race”. It is not a reality show; it’s deadly serious, life and death decisions, for Singaporeans. It is about developing a strong team and settling among themselves a “primus inter pares” – first among equals, one who can bring others together and bring out the best of every member of the team. COVID-19 has been a stern test for the 4G. It has tested their resolve, both individually and collectively. The whole 4G team deserves a lot of the credit for managing the COVID-19 situation. This is a leadership team that Singapore can depend on, can trust, in good times and in tough times. I ask all Party members to give them your full support, to work with you to take the nation through the next bound.

40. As the situation stabilises, settling on my successor will be an important matter which cannot be put off indefinitely. The 4G team will need a little longer to make the decision. But I am confident they will settle it well before the next general election comes around. We haven’t decided on the date of the next general election yet but I am confident that they will settle it in good time. I am sure that they will make a wise choice, and that in due course I will be able to hand over the nation into good hands.

CONCLUSION

41. Our journey ahead will not be short of fresh challenges, but it is the PAP’s responsibility to continue to lead the nation, and to strengthen the public’s trust in us. COVID-19 is an immediate and ongoing crisis, but it won’t be the last. When the next crisis comes along, it is my hope that the trust between Singaporeans and the PAP will have been strengthened by how we have gone through this crisis together. And come what may, whatever happens in the future, Singapore will be all the stronger and prepared to deal with whatever comes

42. I urge every party member to continue serving our people to the best of your ability, in good times and bad. Give your heart and soul to represent the needs and aspirations of Singaporeans. Listen to their concerns, give voice to their needs, empathise with their lived experiences, and flag issues they want attended to. At the same time, continue to be advocates for the PAP government. Help to explain policies to our people. More than that, the motive behind these policies. The values we uphold and the Singapore we seek to create together. Through your actions and efforts earn the trust of Singaporeans, over and over again.

43. As Singapore continues to progress, our task does not end. We must keep on upholding our values. Rallying the people behind us so that Singapore can emerge stronger as one, into a brighter post-COVID-19 future. Thank you very much.

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