

TRANSCRIPT OF ENGLISH SPEECH BY PAP SECRETARY-GENERAL LEE HSIEN

LOONG AT 2022 PARTY CONFERENCE ON SUNDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2022

Introduction

1. Comrades, brothers and sisters. We're almost midway through this term of government. I called the GE in July 2020 to clear the decks, and win a fresh mandate for the PAP Government to tackle COVID-19 and other major challenges. And indeed, it has been an eventful two years for all of us.

2. We've seen Singapore safely through the COVID pandemic. It is not quite over yet, but we are learning to live with COVID-19. And I thank everyone for doing everything necessary to protect ourselves, and even more for keeping faith with one another and with the leaders whom you elected.

Challenges ahead

3. Still, there are so many things that we have to pay attention to. We live in a fractious and troubled world. The war in Ukraine shows no signs of abating, and likewise its impact on global energy and food prices. US and China tensions continue to worsen. The US now seeks to maintain an absolute lead over China in key areas. And the Taiwan issue – which is a particularly dangerous flash point, has heated up.

4. As a small country, Singapore always needs a government which can deal confidently with external challenges, retain the trust of our foreign partners, and at the same time enjoy support at home. And we especially need to be vigilant and united now, given the unprecedented international economic and security challenges.

5. At the same time, the government is dealing with the immediate and pressing worries of Singaporeans. Inflation is affecting every household. We have rolled out comprehensive support packages to help people cope with a higher cost of living. But prices will continue rising for some time yet. On top of this, the Western economies may well enter recession next year, and China is still implementing COVID Zero, which will affect our growth too. We are watching the situation closely. If necessary, we will do more to cushion the pain. But given the global situation, some belt tightening will be inevitable. Meanwhile, HDB resale prices have been rising. It is partly because of the pandemic which delayed BTO projects, and prompted more couples to buy resale flats instead. But it is also because more people want to live in their own flats instead of staying with their parents or in-laws. The average household size has come down. And finally, there are psychological factors – rising prices have led to fears of further price increases. Hence, instead of moderating demand, higher prices have made people get more

anxious and have made more people (want to) get in, buy now, before the prices go up. And so, pushing prices up further, at least for a little while. But as I said in NDR: we know how to find the space to build enough flats and to keep homes affordable for Singaporeans. We have: Implemented cooling measures to moderate demand and prices; we are prioritising first timer couples who are setting up homes, and anxious to start their families; we are ramping up the supply of new flats – building 23,000 this year, another 23,000 next year, and up to 100,000 between 2021 to 2025, in this term of government. And this is the top priority for Minister Desmond Lee and his MND and HDB team. The measures will take a while to show results, but I assure you: they will work. And, when we say that we will get it done, you can trust that we will and it will get done.

6. We have done it before and we will do it again. That is the PAP record, that is how the PAP works and that is how we work not just with housing but with everything else which we promise Singapore, including all the promises we made in GE2020. We promised to grow the economy, support industry transformation, help local companies upgrade themselves and venture abroad. We undertook to create jobs, upskill our people, and uplift lower-wage workers. We said we would enhance support for vulnerable

groups, and strengthen our social compact. And we have done all of these and more.

7. We also resolved to never stop planning for the future. Changi T5, Tuas Port, and our broader redevelopment plans across our island looking ahead 30, 50 years. They are all making good progress, as I updated you at the NDR. (But today is not the NDR so not so many slides to show.) We are also supporting the marriage and parenthood aspirations of young couples – fostering supportive workplaces, making raising children more affordable, improving the quality of preschools, making them cheaper and more affordable. And recently, we launched Healthier SG, a major reform of our healthcare system to help you stay healthier longer.

8. In the past few months, DPM Lawrence Wong and his 4G team have been engaging Singaporeans on the Forward SG agenda. Comrade Lawrence spoke to you about it just now, explained what he is doing. He and his team are developing ideas to update and refresh our social compact for the next bound. They are working with stakeholders across our society, engaging Singaporeans to imagine and shape the Singapore we want in the next generation.

9. When we call the next general election, the PAP will be able to report to Singaporeans that: We have kept faith with you and delivered on our manifesto promises. We have kept you safe through the pandemic, in a turbulent world; and we are steadily achieving progress for you and for the nation. And we have the team and the ideas to secure and build our future together. The PAP has delivered, and will continue to deliver, for you.

Singapore's unique political landscape

10. But increasingly, a good report card or manifesto is not enough. Good is not good enough, especially for the PAP government. Because in Singapore, we face a unique challenge. After many years of the PAP being in power, there is a growing psychology amongst many Singaporeans. They want the PAP to continue governing Singapore, because we are doing a good job and there is nobody else who can do better. And they do not really believe that any of the opposition teams can do better or even do it at all. But they also want to see more opposition MPs elected, to keep the PAP government on its toes. And so they vote for the opposition, fully expecting: That enough other voters will vote PAP, and return it to power. And that the PAP government will still be able to function as effectively, and deliver on all our plans and programmes, regardless whether it receives strong support or

weak support; and that everyone's lives will just continue as before, normally, placidly. Unfortunately, we cannot have it both ways.

The PAP needs a strong mandate

11. Whether voters give the new government a strong or a weak mandate makes a very big difference. With a strong mandate, when the government needs to act strongly and decisively – whether at home or abroad – everyone will know that it is acting with the people's support. And everyone will know that Singapore is united, tackling problems as one, and moving forward together. In stable times, this enables the government to implement measures that may require sacrifice, but will improve people's lives in the longer term. And during turbulent periods, the government will have the confidence and the backing to make tough calls, and steer Singapore safely through the ups and downs.

12. You have seen how this worked during COVID-19. We imposed the Circuit Breaker, the Heightened Alerts, we mandated mask wearing indoors and outdoors, we introduced strict border controls, and we vaccinated the whole population. We could only implement all these tough measures successfully because there was no doubt the people had full confidence in the PAP government. And because the people trusted the PAP government.

Imagine if in 2020 the PAP had been re-elected narrowly, 51-49. We would still have formed the government. We would still have governed Singapore to the best of our ability but we would have lost many good MPs and capable Ministers. The leadership team would have been considerably weakened. The MTF would not be the same. Singapore would have gone into battle with COVID-19 divided and disheartened. It would have been much harder for the government to act decisively, or for Singaporeans to respond cohesively and resolutely. And our COVID-19 experience may well have been very different. You just look at other countries and you will know how different it can be, not very far away. And I can assure you our international position would have been considerably weakened too, both regionally and globally. A Singapore ruled by a government hanging on to power by its fingernails, is bound to be pushed from pillar to post by other countries. At the very least everyone will say, hang on, stand back, watch and see, will they still be there tomorrow. And that is what we do when things go wrong in another country and we want to work together but who are you going to work with? Not sure, cannot tell, wait and see. I wish you well, good luck, God help you, God help Singapore. So, whichever party the voters may choose to form their government, the voters have to give that

party a clear mandate to do its job. Only then can their government function properly and do what they wanted to do for them.

We must win the political battle

13. What worries me is that in every successive election, this becomes a little bit harder and the stakes get somewhat higher. Because each time the PAP comes back to power, every year the PAP keeps Singapore running smoothly, that sense of danger diminishes a little bit more. At the same time, the more constituencies are hotly contested, the more seats the opposition wins, the more the general election becomes a decision on which party will form Singapore's next government. The PAP has delivered on its policies and promises election after election through the decades. And it puts us on strong ground for the next election but it is not enough. We need to convert the people's approval of our performance and support for our policies into strong votes for the PAP in order to continue standing out as the clear choice for voters, and that means we need to do the political work. We must win the political battle.

14. And to win the political battle, we must: Put across our political message, we must counter opposition moves, we must work the ground. So we've got to get our political message across, we've got to respond to the

opposition, we've got to stay on top of the opposition, and we've got to work the ground. Let me tell you one by one.

15. First, putting across our political message. People know that the PAP leaders are conviction politicians. When we adopt a policy or a programme it is because we believe in it. We are convinced ourselves that it is good for Singapore, that we can make it work, that we will make it happen. But more important than the details of policies, we've got to convince Singaporeans why the policies matter to them, how they match everyone's needs and aspirations. For example: we talk about progressive wages. It's not just about extra income for lower-wage earners. It reflects our determination to uplift those who are not doing well, to build a more equal society where everyone is respected for what he or she is and does. Pre-school education is not just about more places in kindergartens and better facilities. We are pouring in all the resources to give all our children – no matter the families they come from – a better start in life and a brighter future. Healthier SG is not just about registering with your GPs or going for regular check-ups. It is to enable every Singaporean to take more responsibility for our own health and to live a healthier and happier life, especially as we grow older. Public housing, on top of everybody's minds, is not just about providing affordable shelter. This most fundamental of PAP commitments is to create a cohesive

and inclusive society, a home-owning democracy where everyone can call a piece of Singapore, his own, his home, his place. In all these ways, we have enabled every Singaporean who has been alive for the past sixty odd years to say: This is my life, my future; this is my home, this is my Singapore.

Comrades, even as we make sound policies and implement them competently, we must crystallise what these policies mean for Singaporeans. We must do this in person face to face, when we meet each other, when we interact with residents on the ground. At the same time, we've got to do this using all available platforms and channels – newspapers, TV, radio, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, even TikTok! And that last 30 seconds may turn up on TikTok and be played over and over again. We have to help people understand: good things do not happen by themselves. We've got to show people why it matters to them, how it affects their lives, why they must support these policies and vote for the PAP into government. Then we can win their mandate to see the policies through.

16. Secondly, we've got to counter the opposition moves, to show voters where the opposition falls short. It is the opposition's job to criticise the government, to scrutinise what it does and highlight our mistakes or shortcomings. To have better ideas and show people that they can do

better. It's their role, and we accept that is how a parliamentary democracy is meant to work. But equally, when the opposition doesn't quite reach the mark, it's our job to turn on the torchlight, and show people: here, better take a look. This part is going to be a problem. You better know it before it becomes a serious problem. We have to point this out.

17. It is very easy for the opposition to only support the pleasant things the government does, but to oppose the harder moves that are sometimes not avoidable. For example, they claim credit for good things the Government does, in face that the government is already doing, for example, the support packages to help people cope with inflation. They say: "Brilliant!" "Actually we asked for it first, by the way." "How about giving more?" But then they avoid talking about how all this can be paid for, especially how more can be paid for. When it comes to tougher moves like revising the GST rate, they ask: "Must we do it? Can't we postpone it? Surely you're very clever, you can think of some other painless solution? How about taxing the rich or raiding the reserves?"

18. But unfortunately, comrades, government is never only about doing the easy things. If governing were so easy, there would be many spectacularly successful governments in the world. But there aren't. In government, it means we have to make hard choices. How to pay for a good

programme, like affordable healthcare for our growing population of ageing people? Which underused services can we trim back, like certain bus routes, so we can spend or subsidise more in other more urgent areas? Which group among us can carry a bit more of the burden, to relieve the load on others who are in greater need? Each time we have to weigh, we have to choose. Sometimes we have to say “no”, or “not yet”, even to reasonable requests, because resources are limited. It is the government’s duty to make these hard choices, sensibly but also sensitively. And a responsible opposition should be held accountable also for what it proposes and what it opposes. Their sums must also add up. And when they do not add up, which quite often happens, then it is our job to point this out and to produce a little calculator.

19. Sometimes, the opposition is missing in action. When spiky issues come up, like the repeal of Section 377A, this happens. For the government, when a spiky issue comes up, you can't disappear. You've got to assess the problem, weigh the arguments, and work out what, in our best judgement, is the right way forward for Singapore. There are strongly held opposing views among segments of our population, we do our best to bring everyone along, and to hold everyone together and keep society together. On s377A, our ministers – Comrades Masagos and Shanmugam, Edwin Tong and

Desmond Lee and many more – they have spent weeks and months meeting the contending groups, all with very strong, passionately held views.

Explaining, listening, taking in, giving time, bringing people gradually to accept what we ought to do together. They listened carefully, they explained patiently, they got all sides to accept that on such an issue, everybody has to give and take, no group can get everything it wants. Now, where is the opposition on s377A? Are they critiquing the government's approach? Do they support or oppose what the government is doing? Are they offering alternative proposals? None of the above. The Opposition is missing in action. They have said nothing, so far. They have declined all comment. They refuse even to say whether they have a party position, or if they will lift the whip on their MPs when Parliament votes on the amendments which it's going to do at the end of this month. Why? They do not want to displease anyone – so they have gone AWOL. You can't be AWOL if you want to govern Singapore. Governing Singapore is a serious business. And so is being the Opposition, especially if it aims to win more and more seats, which must eventually mean taking over. You cannot lie low and disappear when it suits you. And when the Opposition does that, it calls into question their fitness for Parliament, let alone to govern.

20. But even that is not the biggest sin. Of biggest concern, are those politicians and parties who stir up resentment in order to gain political advantage. They tear relentlessly at fault lines – residents vs foreigners, citizens vs PRs, even old citizens vs new. Sometimes they veer into racist territory. They talk about a certain trade agreement, but they are talking about a certain race. Question after question, speech after speech. They are not trying to obtain information or solve any problem. In fact, they are not interested in solutions. They are deliberately working up passions, exacerbating tensions, in order to create disaffection, divide society. Why? To win votes. Singaporeans are not naive, but neither are we immune to rhetoric that manipulates our emotions, especially when times are tough, and people are anxious and under pressure.

21. Such irresponsible actions by the opposition do nothing to improve our lives. We have seen elsewhere what happens when divisive politics hold sway and unscrupulous politicians gain support, sometimes get into government. We must get Singaporeans to recognise such rabble rousing for what it is and repudiate it, stand with the PAP and prevent divisive politics from taking home here.

22. The PAP will never give way to such divisive politics. We will never hesitate to fight rabble rousers and charlatans. We will never compromise on the values which are embedded in The Pledge.

23. I say to my comrades, especially the younger ones: this is the reality of politics. This is what it means to enter politics, to wear white, to go into the ring and fight for Singapore. Politics is not just about taking wefies, hugging babies, or distributing vouchers. Yes you do those too. But that's not all. You've got to fight. Not everything is sweetness and light.

24. In Government, even as we make good policies and plans, we have got to stay on top of the politics. Stand up for our beliefs and values. Be prepared to argue with opposing views and mobilise the ground. Have the wit and the courage, and the resolve to fight and to win the battles. Make the logical arguments – appeal to the mind. But articulate clearly the values and ideals that impel us to serve – appeal to the heart. And never fear to engage tactically on the ground with the opposition – to deny them a free pass.

25. We have to keep working at it, so that Singaporeans make the link between the policies, the politics, and their lives, to appreciate what is at stake, and to support the PAP government.

26. This that brings me to the third point – our MPs and our branch activists and all of us, we have to work the ground. Show residents how the PAP makes a difference to them. Improving the amenities in their towns. Resolving their conflicts and their problems. Advocating for their concerns. Our party branches need to ramp up physical activities. Because During COVID-19, so many activities have had to a pause. Branches worked hard to move services online, especially MPS services but we lost something when we could not gather in person. Now we must make up for lost time. We need to cover the ground comprehensively. Wearing party whites. Identifying as the PAP. Showing people the Party is with you, for you, for Singapore – in good times and bad, we are there for you. in the end, it is not just about arguments and reasons, it's not even about dollars and cents. It is about the friendships and emotional ties that our MPs and activists form with residents – the abiding personal bonds and networks that you establish. They know you, they trust you, they know you care for them. And therefore they support the government and its policies. Your patient, hard work on the ground makes all the difference.

27. In particular, I want to acknowledge our comrades working in Opposition wards. Whether in Aljunied, Hougang or Sengkang. And They

have the hardest jobs. On house visits, not every door opens when they knock. Sometimes opposition supporters are openly hostile.

28. But our comrades persevere, and soldier on. Engaging residents, helping needy households, supporting bereaved families. They cannot hold Meet-the-People Sessions, but they still help residents wherever they can. Over time, their sincerity and conviction make an impact, and gradually attitudes shift. It does not mean we will win back Opposition wards immediately, but we will keep working at it, and one day we will win them back, as we have done before, more than once. And Comrade Sitoh, if you get him over a cup of tea, he will tell you how.

29. It takes a certain gumption for comrades to step forward to serve in the opposition wards. These are activists like Comrade Raymond Lye, who is receiving the Meritorious Service Medal today. He has served for almost three decades, including over 15 years in Punggol East, now in Sengkang, Sengkang East. Even when we lost Punggol East in 2013 in the by-election, he continued to serve, and fought to help win back the seat in GE2015. At GE2020, we fielded him as part of the Sengkang GRC team. Unfortunately, our team lost, but our comrades did not give up. As Branch Chairman, Raymond kept the PAP flag flying in Sengkang East for the last two years, and helped to induct new activists to carry on the fight.

30. We owe a great debt to comrades like Raymond- and there are many more like him who are doing the hard work, day after day, year after year, in the opposition wards. We will give them our fullest support.

Things can go wrong

31. If our politics go wrong, our governance will go wrong too, and so will all our lives. We have seen this happen so often in so many places, so frequently and so recently. Politics turns contentious and volatile; government gets distracted and paralysed; society is divided. The government has neither the ability nor the mandate to push through hard decisions, or to see beyond immediate problems. What is politically expedient overrides what is the longer term good of the people and the country. Then we are all in deep trouble. Take the US, it sees itself as a city upon a hill, an example to the world of how a country should be governed, how a people should govern themselves. But their politics has become deeply polarised and dysfunctional. Many Americans do not even believe their election results. Even the New York Times has been running a series on how American democracy is fracturing. Their mid-term elections are on Tuesday, the day after tomorrow. There is great foreboding on how the results will turn out, and how it will change their politics, possibly even making it worse. Or take Britain – the country which gave us the mother of

Parliaments, Westminster. It has recently experienced such political turmoil that one would have thought impossible in Britain. Five prime ministers in the last decade, and this year alone three prime ministers. I had to write many letters of congratulation.

32. Some people think all this will never happen to Singapore. Impossible. Just simply by virtue of being Singaporeans, these things cannot happen to us. That our politics will always work well, the way it has worked for 60 years. Our country will keep on succeeding; our government will always be thinking and planning 30, 50 years ahead; and this is just the natural order of things.

33. But in fact, what we have today is not natural at all. This sort of government is rare. Almost everywhere else, Governments hardly think beyond the next General Election. Singapore has become like this only through: The blood, sweat and tears of many generations, and because the people have worked closely with the PAP to solve problems, improve ourselves, and create what we enjoy today.

34. We in the PAP cannot take our duty, our responsibility lightly. Things can so easily go wrong here too. There is no magic in our land, water or air. Our people are not inherently better, or smarter, or more virtuous than

people in other countries. We work hard, we try our best, but so do people in other countries. Maybe we are more cohesive. There is no vaccine to protect us from the same dark forces of anger, fear, racism and xenophobia. Similar divisive emotions and tensions can build up here too, can well up here too, can explode here too. We can end up with the same messy politics and broken country that we see elsewhere. To prevent this, and to keep things working well for Singaporeans, the PAP must stay true to its founding mission. Not only continue to deliver results, but to keep on convincing minds and appealing to hearts, and winning the political battles.

Succession and Renewal

35. We also need to work and to keep on working at succession and leadership renewal.

36. I received a visitor recently from a developed country. For more than a decade, his country has experienced one leadership change after another – every 2 or 3 years, sometimes sooner. He admired how orderly and systematic our political successions were. I replied to him that it was not easy for us either but we are determined to fulfil our responsibility to future generations, to the best of our ability.

37. The 4G have chosen Lawrence Wong to lead them. This CEC election will see the renewal follow through in the Party leadership. Party Chairman Gan Kim Yong is not standing for re-election. I thank him for his many contributions and services to the Party. He still carries many heavy responsibilities on my team, e.g. leading the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and co-chairing the MTF. And I am confident he, like all the other older party leaders, will continue helping the new team to succeed in whatever new roles they may or may not be in. We need to keep on inducting good people into politics. People with ideas to improve our lives, and with the heart to serve the people and represent their concerns. People who can form the most capable, committed and cohesive team of MPs and Ministers to lead Singapore. People who will carry Singapore's success further, into the next generation.

38. At the last GE, we brought in 24 new MPs. It was a major changing of the guard, in the midst of a crisis. Since then, the new MPs have been busy, both on the ground and in Parliament. They are bonding with constituents, mastering the issues, and developing their public personalities. By the next round they should have established themselves, and will be able to help the PAP to fight and win the elections and to induct yet another group of MPs for the future.

39. Since GE2020, we have been busy combing for new potential candidates. We have already identified some promising ones, and more are in the pipeline. I can tell you that the Sec-Gen's committee has been busy working, interviewing people already. I am confident that come the next GE, we will again be able to present a talented, diverse, and representative team of candidates, both experienced and new, ready to work with voters and take Singapore forward.

Conclusion

40. Comrades, the next GE is going to coincide with Singapore's political succession. We will be tested on all fronts, domestically as well as abroad. I have no doubt our neighbours will be watching closely whether Singaporeans continue to support the government. Whether Singapore will continue to function, and succeed, the way it has been doing. Let us continue to do our utmost to win the next election decisively. Every branch, every member, every activist. Work with your MPs and branch chairs. Engage residents and groups, win hearts and minds. Convince voters that the PAP government is our best hope for a stable and successful Singapore.

41. My team and I, whether we are 3G, 4G or 5G, will honour the trust placed in us. We will always do right by the people. We will never shy away

from the tough calls. And we will work with you to secure a better life for all, and a brighter future for many generations to come.

42. Thank you very much.

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