

Pandemic calls for 3 major resets in society: Minister

S'pore should aim to emerge fairer, greener and more united, says Lawrence Wong

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The Covid-19 pandemic has set the stage for Singapore to undertake three major “resets” which could help it emerge from the crisis a fairer, greener and more united country.

This entails combating inequality and ensuring social mobility, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday. It also means building a greener economy that is more environmentally sustainable, and fostering a renewed sense of solidarity, he added.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspec-

tives conference which is themed “Reset”, the minister noted that it could take four or five years before the world sees the end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Singaporeans will have to be prepared to live in an acutely changed world, he said.

To do so, he spelt out three “resets”. Singapore has to first reset its social compact by tackling inequality and keeping society fluid and mobile. All over the world, the pandemic has widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, he said.

In Singapore, the Government has always aimed to reduce inequality and ensure a meritocratic system, Mr Wong added. To that end, a balance has been struck

between free markets and state intervention, with policies tilted towards the lower income.

When the pandemic hit, the country drew on its reserves to save jobs and help those who were hardest hit to tide over.

These temporary measures will taper down this year as the economy improves. However, the pandemic has created added impetus to strengthen the social support system.

“There will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets, to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and we will have to work out how this will be sustainable over the longer term,” said Mr Wong, who is also Second Minister for Finance.

He stressed as well the importance of uplifting children from birth, stressing that meritocracy “must not ossify into a hereditary

system, where the condition of your birth determines the outcome of your life”.

Schools with a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds would get more help and resources, including some of the most committed teachers and principals, to help all students achieve their potential, he said, noting that he has made it a point to visit these schools since joining the ministry.

On the topic of sustainability, the minister pointed out that Singapore is already one of the greenest cities in the world. It is also the only one to completely freeze the growth of its vehicle population, and one of the few to have closed its water loop.

“But we must go further and build on what we have done to achieve cleaner growth and greener mindsets,” he said.

Mr Wong, who co-chairs the

multi-ministry task force tackling the crisis, noted that the pandemic has also intensified divisions in many countries. While easy access to information has been a boon, it has also meant people now can access raw, instant, unfiltered information, including falsehoods and conspiracy theories.

“So the irony is despite the overwhelming ease of access of information, we are living in a ‘golden age of ignorance’, he said, warning that as more extreme views take hold, forging a consensus and governing is made more difficult.

The answer is for societies to forge a stronger sense of solidarity, he said, noting that one of Singapore's founding leaders, Mr S. Rajaratnam, had referred to the Islamic thinker Ibn Khaldun's concept of “asabiyyah”, or the bonds in a community, which are vital to its sense of cohesion.

Concluding, Mr Wong said: “I am confident that we will prevail and emerge stronger from this crucible. And I do not say this lightly. I speak from my own conviction of seeing the best of Singaporeans over the past year, in the face of adversity and very tough conditions.”

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