

Success is less about means, more about meaning: DPM Wong

He says refreshed social compact centres on new approach to success and other key shifts

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

Conversations between the Government and Singaporeans over the past year have shown an emerging consensus on what the refreshed social compact could look like, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on Monday.

This compact is centred on a new approach to success and skills, a revamped system of social support, and a renewed sense of solidarity, he said in a speech that also reit-

erated the domestic challenges and troubled external environment facing Singapore.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th Anniversary Conference held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Mr Wong said that in terms of success, society still tends to converge around certain material definitions.

But in the end, success should be for each person to define as there is no single measure of achievement.

"Success is less about means, and more about meaning... We must value the success of every individ-

ual – each one pursuing his or her own path," he said.

Entrenched mindsets will have to be changed, though it is not an easy task, he added.

It must also be recognised that formal education early in life is not the endpoint of Singapore's meritocracy, said Mr Wong.

"Our refreshed meritocracy must be a continuous one, with learning opportunities at multiple junctures of life. Everyone must have the chance to try again, do better, and move forward in life years after leaving school," he said.

On social support, Singapore has been careful in designing its social safety nets in a way that boosts a sense of ownership and agency over their own circumstances for

vulnerable groups, he noted.

As Singapore enters a more volatile and unpredictable environment, the Government will do more to assure both the broad middle and the vulnerable that they can meet their needs in life and not be left behind, said Mr Wong.

Measures include support for the unemployed, lower-income families, vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, and senior citizens.

On a sense of solidarity, Mr Wong said that society needs to be less about "I", "me" and "mine", and more about "we", "us" and "ours".

"No one succeeds alone. Every success story is a shared story. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us," he said.



Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong says the Government will do more to assure both the broad middle and the vulnerable that they can meet their needs in life and not be left behind. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Mr Wong added that while the Government wants every group to celebrate its own culture and traditions, which are part of its roots and identity, it also encourages everyone to look beyond their own communities to expand their common ground as Singaporeans.

"We have to do this deliberately and purposefully to facilitate more inter-group interactions.

"Such interactions are deeply personal... and therefore there are no easy policy interventions. But we should certainly continue to find ways to strengthen our sense of community and human connections," he said.

He added that ultimately, Singapore's social compact is not forged by confrontation or by asserting the rights of one group over another.

"Instead, it is built through regular interactions, through accommodation and compromise, and a spirit of mutual respect and fellowship. The Singapore way is not insular, it's not tribal; it is always open, inclusive and big-hearted," he said.

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MOE will broaden Edusave Award to recognise students' contributions: Chan

Success in Singapore goes beyond personal achievements, says Education Minister

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The Edusave Award, which is given to students to motivate them to do well, will be broadened to recognise those who have contributed to their schools and society, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing on Monday.

The award given out by the Ministry of Education (MOE) has traditionally been awarded to students based on academic excellence, he said. Over time, it has progressed to cover other aspects such as co-curricular activities (CCAs).

Speaking during a panel discussion on meritocracy at the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th Anniversary Conference, Mr Chan said: "I'd like to see Singapore evolve into a society whereby we can find success not just by our own achievements, but instead by our contributions."

"Regardless of one's station in life, whether we are rich or poor, whether we are academically inclined or otherwise, we all can make a contribution. And your contributions must be commensurate with your abilities."

Responding to concerns about the entrenchment of alumni networks, Mr Chan alluded to plans to cluster schools together, to encourage alumni to contribute beyond their own communities.

"I have appealed to some of the alumni of the illustrious schools to go and serve on boards, on school advisory committees beyond your

own boards, not just to give them ideas, but to help them to open up new networks and new opportunities," he said.

"Instead of schools competing against one another, we will pair up schools or have clusters of schools working together on different CCAs for people to build the social networks and to share the social capital."

Mr Chan was speaking on the need to redefine success and meritocracy, in the context of new challenges for Singapore and concerns about growing disparities in society.

"Success in Singapore must be a team sport. It is not just about each one individually running our own races," he said.

Rather, he said, meritocracy must be about collective contributions from different members of society to the best of their abilities beyond personal achievements.

In a speech at the event held at Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Mr Chan said: "Meritocracy has helped Singapore succeed in the last 50 years, but unless we consciously keep strengthening the system and avoiding the pitfalls, it may not continue to do so for the next 50 years."

"But just because meritocracy can be flawed, like any other system... does not mean we should give it up altogether."

The question then is how meritocracy can help Singapore to be even more relevant, competitive and cohesive going forward, he said, by attracting the best people



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing says there is a need to redefine success and meritocracy, in the context of new challenges for Singapore and concerns about growing disparities in society. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

and ideas, finding the best of diverse talents, and respecting and rewarding different abilities.

"Most importantly, meritocracy must be combined with the right values – gratitude for what we have received and compassion towards those who have not had these advantages in life and a collective sense of responsibility for us to

uplift everyone together," he said.

On the panel with Mr Chan were Associate Professor Daniel Goh from the National University of Singapore (NUS), and Associate Professor Jason Tan from the National Institute of Education.

"The paradox of meritocracy is that perfect equality can lead to growing inequalities, if we do not

ensure equitable baselines for everyone to unlock their skills and talents for performance," said Prof Goh, who is also vice-dean (special programmes) at NUS College.

More can be done to encourage broad-based school admissions and outreach by removing obstacles, including psychological ones, that may hamper students apply-

ALL CAN MAKE A CONTRIBUTION

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EDUCATION MINISTER CHAN CHUN SING, speaking during a panel discussion on meritocracy at the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th Anniversary Conference.

ing to schools, he said, adding that alumni privilege could also be removed during admissions.

Prof Tan added: "It's only natural for many parents to think that they need to try their very best, in order to help their children stay ahead and acquire more merit."

This points to the uneasy balance between natural tendencies to look out for one's own interests, and considering the greater public good, he said.

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(From left) Aware executive director Corinna Lim, South China Morning Post executive managing editor Zuraidah Ibrahim and Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam on the panel titled Revisiting Pluralism, moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee. Mr Shanmugam said the Ethnic Integration Policy is one of the policies the Government uses to promote racial harmony. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Nearly a third of ethnic quota appeals for HDB flats successful in 2022: Minister

Jean Iau

Almost a third of households that appealed for help with an ethnic quota policy on selling their HDB flats in 2022 were successful.

These sellers could have asked to waive the policy or for more time to sell their flats, for instance.

The sales made up a small minority, or 1.5 per cent, of all resale flats, said Minister for Law and Home

Affairs K. Shanmugam on Monday.

In 2020, about 21 per cent of households successfully appealed for a waiver of the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) on their HDB flats, compared with 14 per cent in 2018.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th Anniversary Conference held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Mr Shanmugam said: "Our approach – rather than do away with the entire policy, which keeps Singapore cohesive, we exercise flexibility in a tar-

geted way, to deal with the effects directly, for the small number who are affected."

Introduced in 1989, the EIP sets ethnic quotas on flat ownership within each HDB block and neighbourhood to prevent ethnic enclaves from forming.

Mr Shanmugam noted that in 2022, nearly a third of all HDB blocks and one in 10 HDB neighbourhoods reached their EIP limits.

He said: "That is with the EIP al-

ready in place. If we didn't have the EIP, the enclaves would have become more pronounced."

The EIP is one of the policies the Government uses to promote racial harmony even as it acknowledges racism exists in Singapore, Mr Shanmugam told the audience at a panel, Revisiting Pluralism.

"Our starting point has to be to accept that racism is innate in human beings, and racism, therefore, is present in Singapore – like in any society. But we need to work hard, to make sure that it is not institutionalised," he said.

The panel was moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee from the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

The panellists were media outlet South China Morning Post execu-

tive managing editor Zuraidah Ibrahim, and Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) executive director Corinna Lim.

Ms Lim questioned if more could be done to make Singapore more racially diverse, but Mr Shanmugam said the Government is committed to keeping the racial percentages constant, noting that senior Malay community leaders have sought assurance that their community will not fall below 14 or 15 per cent of the population.

On political plurality, Ms Zuraidah argued that Singaporeans' desire for political pluralism was apparent at the 2011 Presidential Election, when the government-endorsed candidate and eventual president, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, did not secure a majority, but about

35 per cent of the vote in the four-way election.

Ms Zuraidah said political watchers had wondered whether this year's presidential election would again reflect Singaporeans' appetite for a plural system.

"But then Typhoon Tharman struck," she said, referring to Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's announcement on June 8 that he would run for president.

She agreed with the observers who said that his entry in the field as the "putative government-backed" candidate shows how badly the Cabinet wants to avoid the awkwardness of another closely fought contest.

"Since independence, the PAP (People's Action Party) has had no experience in governing with anything other than a supermajority as well as near total domination of all social and political institutions, so it's not surprising that the prospect of greater political pluralism is not attractive," she added.

On Mr Tharman running for president, Mr Shanmugam said: "He's a grown man. He (made) up his own mind."

Responding to the sentiment that the PAP cannot accept diverse views, Mr Shanmugam said it is not the PAP that chooses the current Parliament, but the people.

He added: "Ultimately, it is our society's ability to choose good leaders in whichever system that they want. And it's not the PAP that decides whether there is greater or less pluralism. It's the people of Singapore who decide."

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HDB to double interim rental flats for families over next two years

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The Housing Board (HDB) will set aside more temporary housing for families waiting for their new flats, doubling the number of interim rental flats to 4,000 over the next two years.

Announcing this on Monday, Senior Minister of State for National Development Sim Ann said HDB had met its earlier target of increasing the supply of flats under the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS) from 800 units in 2021 to 1,800 in 2023.

The number of such flats will reach close to 2,000 by the end of 2023, she said, adding that applica-

tion rates for the scheme have fallen significantly due to the higher supply – from over 20 per unit in 2021 to around three now.

“But we understand that buyers who booked their flats in the past two years have experienced longer waiting times because of the delays caused by Covid-19. So HDB is hard at work to increase the PPHS supply further, doubling it again to 4,000 units over the next two years,” said Ms Sim.

HDB is also studying ways to maximise the available pool of PPHS flats, given the sustained demand and limited supply, she said in a speech at the Institute of Policy Studies’ 35th Anniversary Conference held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

These include requiring flat shar-

ing for larger flats, to allow more home buyers awaiting their new homes to benefit from subsidised rental rates.

Those eligible for PPHS flats must have a monthly household income of \$7,000 or below, and have an uncompleted flat from HDB’s sales exercises.

Speaking on a panel on “revisiting housing”, Ms Sim noted that almost 40,000 public and private homes are slated for completion in 2023 – the highest number in the last five years.

“Households that are currently renting on a temporary basis while waiting for the completion of their new homes will likely vacate their units, thereby easing the pressure on the rental market,” she said.

She added that HDB’s efforts to

meet the demand for public housing – by ramping up flat supply and catching up on delayed Build-To-Order (BTO) projects – have begun to take effect.

In the May BTO launch, the median first-timer application rate for three-room or larger flats was around 2.3 times, closer to pre-Covid-19 levels than before.

HDB resale prices also saw their smallest increase last quarter in more than two years, she added.

Ms Sim also laid out three policy areas that the Government has been relooking.

First, it introduced the prime location public housing model to address the issue of highly valued HDB neighbourhoods becoming stratified along income lines once units become available on the open mar-

ket.

With a longer minimum occupation period, restrictions on whom the owner can sell the unit to subsequently, and the recovery of subsidy, the model will help to keep neighbourhoods as inclusive as possible, said Ms Sim.

Second, as the population ages, the Government in 2021 introduced community care apartments – a new type of housing that has senior-friendly designs and fittings, bundled with care services.

Third, the Government is relooking how it classifies HDB estates, which are currently split into mature and non-mature estates.

“To many Singaporeans, it has become short-hand for how well-equipped with facilities and amenities a town is, and the desirability of

having a flat there,” said Ms Sim.

This is then reflected in flat prices, with those in mature estates generally being higher.

However, the distinction between the two types of estates is not always so clear, said Ms Sim.

Some locations within non-mature estates have amenities and connectivity that are as good as those in older town centres, while some locations within mature estates may be less sought after due to specific site characteristics, she noted.

She said the review will impact policy “because the current classification guides how we focus our efforts on making public housing affordable and accessible. We hope to share more on this soon”.

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