

Towards a bigger heart, a better future

PM Lee addresses diverse pressing issues and longer-term challenges

By **LEE U-WEN**

[SINGAPORE] The Singapore of tomorrow must always offer hope of a better future, have a bigger heart than the present and be the best home that it can be for all, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

As he delivered his annual National Day Rally speech at the University Cultural Centre yesterday, he also sounded a note of caution that the mounting costs of building an inclusive society would invariably result in higher taxes in the long run.

“Let me tell you the truth. As our social spending increases significantly, sooner or later our taxes must go up – not immediately, but certainly within the next 20 years,” he said. “Whoever is the government of the day will at some point have to raise taxes.”

Inclusiveness, Mr Lee explained, was more than just about “more good things” from the state, as all benefits have to be paid for.

Over the space of two hours and using three different languages, the Prime Minister mapped out his vi-

sion for the next chapter of the Singapore Story as being one of hope, heart and home.

He devoted much of his wide-ranging speech to addressing the pressing issues of jobs, public transport, healthcare and housing.

In relation to jobs, he pointed out that the government was bringing in investments to create new and better jobs. It was also opening new avenues for Singaporeans – for instance, through the Singapore-Industry Scholarship, which would help more enter university and find jobs at local companies. Low-income workers too, in sectors such as cleaning and security, will have more opportunities to upgrade their skills.

Turning to public housing, Mr Lee said steps were underway to reduce the waiting time to book a HDB flat and he was confident that nearly every Singaporean household could afford its own home.

Mr Lee also empathised with singles concerned about their housing options, given that they could

currently buy flats only on the resale market and not directly from HDB.

Noting how the number of singles is on the rise and that resale flat prices were going up, Mr Lee said that the National Development Ministry was “actively” looking into widening the housing options for singles.

As for education – which the Prime Minister described as “our most important long-term investment in our people” – he said that it was crucial to upgrade constantly in order to “out-think and out-smart” the competition.

Mr Lee revealed that the Singapore Institute of Technology and the Singapore Institute of Management University (UniSIM) would be the country’s fifth and sixth universities.

This would help raise the size of the full-time university intake to 16,000 a year by 2020, up from 13,000 today. These two schools were picked as they work closely with industry and emphasise practice-oriented teaching.

The pre-school sector, too, is set for a shake-up. Mr Lee said that a new statutory board would be set up to oversee pre-school education, although the sector will not be nationalised.

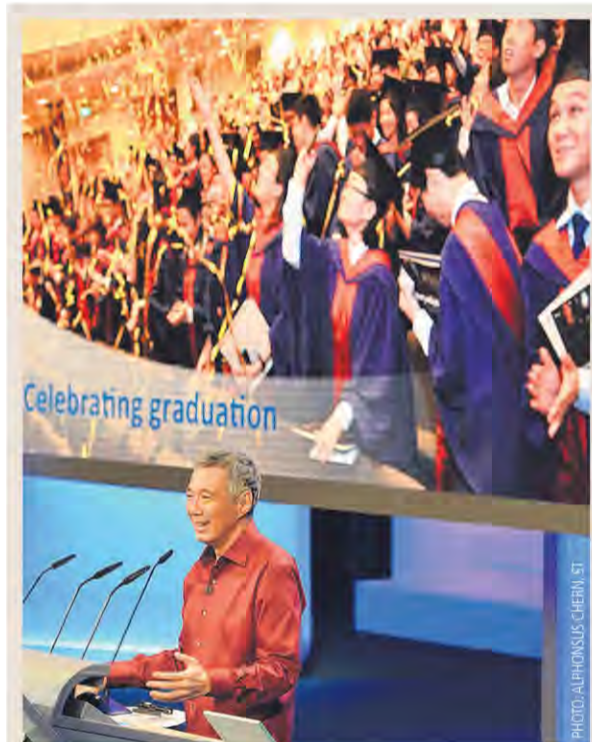
But it was not enough to just be a prosperous and successful nation, said Mr Lee. Equally importantly, people here should be caring, generous and gracious towards one another.

The Prime Minister singled out one “difficult” area where Singaporeans should be big-hearted – the relations between themselves and foreigners.

“It is fair enough to express concern, or disagree with our immigration trends or policies, but I am worried by some of the nasty views expressed, especially online and anonymously, which brings out the worst in people,” said Mr Lee.

He added that the effort to live harmoniously under one roof was a two-way effort.

“Singaporeans must show a generosity of spirit



Key highlights

PM Lee’s National Day Rally

- Singapore Institute of Technology and UniSIM to be 5th and 6th universities
- 40% of each cohort to go to university
- New statutory board to oversee pre-school education
- Pre-school sector will not be nationalised
- Taxes will go up within the next 20 years to pay for increased social spending
- Govt consulting widely on how to boost fertility rate
- MND studying singles’ concerns about housing

to one another, including new arrivals. New arrivals must also embrace our values, commit themselves to Singapore and integrate into our community.”

Above all, Singapore had to be a home where people want to get married, have children and bring up the next generation. This, however, could not be achieved unless the total fertility rate goes up. It currently stands at 1.2 last year, well below the replacement rate of 2.1. While this Year of the Dragon would probably see more births, the long-term trend was downwards, Mr Lee noted.

He said that the National Population and Talent Division was considering giv-

ing housing priority to couples with children, paternity leave in some form, creating a Medisave account for every newborn and improving the Baby Bonus scheme.

Looking ahead, Mr Lee said that while the world could be completely different in the future, the drive to keep the Singapore Story “vital and fresh” must never falter.

“Let us work together to create a better Singapore, where we look to our shared future with confidence and hope, where we treat one another and others too with a big heart, where we build for our children and grandchildren our best home,” he said.

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