

PM sets out challenges Singapore could face in next 50 years

In his Ho Rih Hua Lecture Series speech yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong set out the challenges he expected Singapore to face over the next 50 years at various points, namely growing the economy, an ageing population and strengthening the national identity.



ECONOMY: Transforming the way we learn and work

“We have reached a high level in terms of GDP. Our per capita GDP is as high as Japan’s. But we have to find a way to continue growing, so that we can improve people’s lives ... If we can continue upgrading, in 10 years, we can be in a different league. We can make investments in our people, afford the social safety nets, improve our lives. If we cannot, we will stagnate and lose ground, like what some countries are going through now — Taiwan, Korea, even Japan. After a decade, we will face not just economic problems, but social problems — unemployment, young people unable to find jobs, restlessness instead of hope.

“That is why we have launched SkillsFuture as a national movement. It will play a critical role to help Singaporeans become resilient and adaptable. It will make sure ... that our people will always have opportunities to develop to their fullest, with training available at every stage of their lives. Because as your jobs change, your skill sets need to change. And you cannot depend on what you’ve learnt ... in the past as you grow older. You have to learn new skills and you have to be able to do new jobs. And then when the world changes, we are prepared and we are able to change with it.

“So this is a transformation of society (and) in the way we learn and ... work, the way we value individuals for what you do ... And we must work at this because that is the way to make progress in productivity. That’s the way to grow the economy. And that’s the way, really, most fundamentally, so every worker can feel proud of themselves and our society is one where everybody has a valued place.”



POPULATION: Keeping the nation young and vibrant

“While the economy will go up and down, in the long run, demographics is destiny. Twenty-five years is long enough for our birth trends and our marriage and parenthood policies to take root and have an impact ... The difference between a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 1.2 and 1.5, which is where we would like to be, is 9,000 babies per year, or over 200,000 more babies born over 25 years. And it will make all the difference to the population if we can get our TFR up to 1.5.

“Of course, I’d like (it) to go higher, but let’s get to 1.5 first because then, we can keep our population younger and vibrant. But if our TFR continues to be at 1.2, that will be much harder, even with immigration. A shrinking society will also be an ageing society, and that will cause profound problems. Our economy will be stagnant or declining, and the whole tone of our society will not be young and forward-looking, but pessimistic, oriented to the status quo or even the past.

“Ultimately, the best and, indeed, the only fundamental solution is for Singaporeans to marry and have more children. And on that count, we have laboured mightily. And I’m happy to say that if you look at last year’s numbers, there’s a little bit of good news, although it is still early signs. We have (put in place) many measures over the last 20 years. What we have done, I think, has helped ... But these are just policies and the Government cannot solve this problem just by policies. Because it requires all of us to change our norms, our culture, for us to become a more family-friendly country. And that takes time.”



IDENTITY: Shared sense of what Singapore stands for

“Even more fundamental than demographics is the question of identity ... As we progress, there are two threats to this idea of a Singaporean identity: One, we could just dissolve, melt into a globalised world and lose that special sense of being distinctively Singaporean, different from non-Singaporeans. The other risk is that we could divide internally, along fault lines, fracture into different groups, and each group with its own exclusive identity, and lose any sense of becoming one people.

“... (Our identity) has to come from a shared sense of what is it Singapore stands for, what we want to achieve together, and that comes from our shared experiences, our bonding through these shared experiences, becoming one people, becoming comrades, more than friends. It depends on how we grow and live together ... how we overcome crises, whether it’s SARS, MERS or the global financial crisis, how we help one another in times of need (and) how we celebrate successes together, in SG50 and as we did during the SEA Games.”

