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What We Do and Why - A Sense of Perspective

It is now my turn. I spent the last year – it is a very “long” year - thinking about what to say today. I was actually quite tempted to repeat the same speech from last year. Not because you would not notice it, because I’m sure you paid rapt attention to it last year, but because some fundamentals actually don’t change. At the heart of everything we do, and we have heard that, is that it surely must be about Singaporeans. But as we all know, what is ideal for the individual is not always optimal for society, for Singapore as a whole. And what’s best for Singapore as a whole may not always be maximal for the individual.

2 And if you add in the perspective of time, there are urgent needs of today and there are also contingencies of tomorrow. There are our pressing wants and desires that are here and now, but there are also those of our children and our children’s children in the many, many years to come.

3 Now if we are an inherently selfish society, we will only be preoccupied with the individual and the present. But is this who we are? And what we aspire to be?

4 When we look around the world, some systems are running from pillar to post, from one election cycle to another, because the preoccupation is the present, just to get elected. Some systems operate in ways not because the work they do makes sense, but how it makes dollars and cents for them. Let

me illustrate. Long-term investments in public infrastructure are not always made because you do not reap the political dividends of these efforts. It takes a long gestation time. By the time the projects are ready, someone else will be benefitting from your generosity. The monies are better spent on initiatives where people respond to in the way they vote, today. In countries where systems are corrupt, you will actually initiate these projects. In fact, many projects because that's where you cream off the kickbacks, and you make what you can, because sometimes you don't know how long you're going to be there. These projects are seldom seen all the way through. Either way, there is precious little long term planning to talk about. Because it is always about me and it is always about the present.

5 So are we different? Is there, as Minister Heng Swee Keat puts it, a “Singapore Way”, where we are actually interested in others and not just self, and where we are actually interested in our future, and not just the present?

6 Otto von Bismarck said, “Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best”. And that is where we come in.

7 These are the blueprints we lay down, and the difficult choices we make here during the Budget, to attain the possible.

8 Now to do this well, we need to have perspective. We need to have a sense of history, a sense of time and space. Where we came from, why and how our story and our policies evolved. We need to know the context and how it and the world are changing. Our citizens too need that perspective.

9 As we debate this Budget and all its details, we need to remember,

that this Budget is built upon what has been said by many of you in the years past, and also based on inputs surfaced by our fellow Singaporeans in many, many different forums. Budgets are built upon Budgets of years gone by. There is always a context, and there is always a system in place.

10 When we consider, for example, the Merdeka Generation Package during this COS, some have asked for more universal and permanent schemes. Actually, a simple search online will yield you an existing menu of universal benefits and schemes. When we begin to understand the context of each group that we're looking at, you then realize that there are differentiated needs as well. Hence, you layer it on with various packages.

11 There'll be those who feel that they're not directly benefitting from the Budget. But it's useful to remember, and we've been through the debates in the last two weeks, that we have honoured so many different groups. But it's also useful for us to cast our eyes back to previous Budgets, where it is clear that we have also benefitted in different ways.

12 In this COS, the well-being of one particular animal was at stake. Many supported the slaughtering of this particular sacred cow, including, surprisingly, Mr Louis Ng. Now it sounds exciting but actually, it may be quite disastrous if we do not understand why the cow was put out in the pasture in the first place. Streaming changes, I think, are much welcomed but as Minister Ong Ye Kung explained, there was a reason for that cow. While every cow is a good cow, no cow is perfect. There are sometimes unintended consequences. Because over the years, we have learnt that it emits methane gas and so therefore it impacts the environment. So over the years, as he has shared, we have sought to trim the cow, adjust its diet, sliced off its rump, have a little barbecue, its flanks... and finally we lay it to rest. It's a far less dramatic story,

but I think a more accurate one and a recognition of the work done by many to get to where we are today.

13 I know that the slaying of sacred cows sounds bold, it sounds daring, even romantic perhaps. Dramatic changes always seem exciting. But I think it's useful for us to also remember with a sense of perspective that that is not the objective. Change is not the purpose. Better outcomes are. So even as we make bold moves, never do it for its own sake.

14 Some have asked if the various Budget goodies are part of a cynical election scheme? I honestly have no idea when the election will be, but what I do know is that our Constitution requires us to maintain a balanced Budget over each term of Government. Towards the end of each term, we have better clarity of the overall Budget and how it affords us the space to carry out strategic moves if we need them. So having a perspective of how the system works may help us understand why some of these major initiatives can be launched at this stage.

15 And let us also begin to have a sense of reality, and see how the world operates elsewhere. Honestly, if this was an election Budget, you will not see us budgeting for the Merdeka Generation package here. We will shift the burden to the future. That's what most governments do because the monies can be spent to make all of us happier in so many different ways. A politically astute Government would use this dominance and wherewithal to justify even more spending; rather than still talk about prudence, about balance, about trade-offs, possible future GST increases in the next term. It is actually incredibly politically naïve to do so! Which government in the world would embark on this when they have funds and reserves to do so many more things to keep the electorate happy?

16 But that is not the way we are. And I don't just mean the Government, but I'd like to also highlight that the opposition, at least this opposition presently in the House, our NMPs over the years, in spite of occasional differences and disagreements over details, we support this approach and do not just seek wanton political largesse and populism.

17 But we can only do this, we can only take this approach, if, and only if, our Singaporeans support it. This can only happen if they also understand the issues that are grappled with and debated here, and have that same sense of perspective.

18 But do Singaporeans take reference from what is articulated here, or from other sources? Are distortions purveyed online much more seductive? Are we Singaporeans very evidence-based in the way we look at things? We talk about false and fake news impacting perceptions. These are really not trivial at all because they erode trust, they erode confidence, and ultimately they undermine leaders and institutions, including the Parliament. When that happens, you lose that mandate and space to make the difficult decisions for the long haul and the greater good, even as you endeavour to make life better for individuals today.

19 When that happens, there will be a reversion to the norm.

20 And the norm is an absence of long-term planning. And what will Singapore look like when that doesn't exist?

21 In my inaugural speech in Parliament, I said that we, Parliament, need to be a beacon from where Singaporeans can take reference, with confidence, when addressing and understanding issues that will matter

greatly for our collective well-being. To be this beacon and to do this well, we need to gain the trust and respect of the public.

22 This is our business.

23 In the past two weeks, if we actually listened to the points made by the ruling party, the opposition, the NMPs, the front bench, you'd find that different perspectives are shared and articulated. We have an opposition that does not shy away from making sharp challenges. Notwithstanding the fact that there's no tussle over balloons this year, whether trial balloons or otherwise, you will find MPs from both sides of the house pushing and pointing out issues that may not sit comfortably with Government. That is how it should be. I urge you to continue in this vein and for the Government to be open, as you have been, to this robust discourse.

24 So if we as a Parliament can remain relevant, trusted and respected, our people will afford us that space and mandate to lead and chart the way forward.

25 We will therefore be able to put people and our society at the centre of everything that we do, plan for the present as well as the long term, and grapple with all the difficult challenges and trade-offs that need to be addressed.

26 Indeed, we are not done building Singapore. While we may not have the same mudflats to metropolis transformation on the same scale on many fronts, we can continually improve and we will, and extend our edge so that we can better provide for our people.

27 But we can have a mudflats to metropolis transformation in the kind of people we want to be, and the society we can be. Miss Irene Quay's sharing and story on her volunteering journey is inspiring, and is exactly what SG Cares is all about. As we begin to volunteer, as we begin to lose ourselves in the service of others, we will begin to change. And we will find ourselves as a society where we care not just about self but also about others and also about the future. And the wonderful thing about this is that it actually doesn't cost us very much, except a bit of organisation and a bit of our time. And it is something that every one of us here, and every Singaporean, can do something about.

28 When we become that kind of society, then I'd say that we will live long and prosper, and that our best years are truly, truly ahead of us.

Thank you.