

**SPEECH BY MR TAN CHUAN-JIN**  
**SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE**  
**AT THE END OF THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY DEBATES**  
**SINGAPORE PARLIAMENT HOUSE**  
**8 MARCH 2021**

This is, I promise, the last speech. I won't repeat the details that the Leader has shared but clearly it has been a really long session. But the 569 cuts that Leader has mentioned is actually not the highest in five years. It is actually the highest in the last decade. I was curious and I asked my Parliament colleagues as to which year had the highest number of cuts. I was told that there was one year where there was 700 over cuts....but please, don't get any ideas. I think the important thing is not to mistake volume for quality.

2 I would like to also echo Leader in thanking both my Deputies and all of you, Members of this Chamber, my Clerks, my Parliament colleagues, and all our public officers out there, for making this Budget and COS possible. I think last year had been extraordinary. I think it continues to be challenging. And just a big word of thanks to all our public officers for serving our country diligently.

3 Now before I share some reflections from this Chair to round up the debates, you would have noticed that some Ministers like to distribute this or that before their speeches. So because of FOMO, I would also like to do the same.

*"So Mr Speaker, may I have your permission to distribute some handouts to our fair Members on occasion of today being International Women's Day?"*

*"Yes, please proceed."*

*"So if I may put this to all of you in Parliament: The question is that this being the year of celebrating our better halves in family and society, we, the lesser halves here in Chamber, present a small token to say 'thank you' to all our ladies here, whether serving as MPs, NCMPs, NMPs, Clerks, Interpreters, and our wonderful assistants."*

*As many as are of the opinion say 'Aye'? To the contrary say 'No'?*

*I think the Ayes have it, the Ayes have it!"*

### Remember our Past

4 Now we may not realise that this year is also the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Women's Charter in Singapore. We began putting in place these moves many years ago in 1961. We continued to strengthen our efforts over the years. Today, we have high literacy rates, low maternity mortality rates, high life expectancy, high full-time employment rates...or just simply providing a safe environment for our womenfolk to operate in.

5 I raise this as a first reflection: That what we do is often built on the hard work of all our predecessors. In our yearly Budget and Committee of Supply debates, we rightfully dive into the weeds because details do matter. There will always be shortcomings. There will always be areas that we can do better in. As we seek to ever improve and to introduce new initiatives and new ideas, let us not also forget the efforts by many that have come before us. Let us not just latch on to one or another negative issue and just forget completely all the wonderful work that has been done over the years.

6 Let us remember the giants on whose shoulders we stand.

### Remember our Context

7 In the 2018 COS wrap up speech, I talked about not missing the woods for the trees. This analogy is particularly apt this year given the concerns over the developments in Clementi and Kranji. Now this is my second reflection: Let us all have a sense of perspective and context. Are there genuine concerns with what has happened? For sure. I share the horrors that many felt when we

read the news and saw the clips on the forests being cleared when permit was not given. But is our green conversation just about this alone?

8 Do we not forget that we live in an island state that is just 40-plus kilometres east to west, 20-plus kilometres north to south? Where do we live? Where do we work? Where do we play? How many reservoirs do we have? How many air bases do we have? Where do we retain the green? Where do we conserve the heritage? For those of you who are familiar with the game SimCity, I think you will know exactly what is at stake. As SM Teo shared, “The trade-offs are real, and often the choices are difficult. We cannot wish these away.”

9 By all means, please do grapple with the Clementi and Kranji issues. But do ask ourselves: Which other country in the world even comes close to having to make these difficult choices both as a city and as well as a nation? And despite the constraints that we have, do actually take a look and read what has been done and what will be done under the Green Plan.

### Remember our Roles

10 The deep division and polarisation that we saw in the recent very bruising US Presidential campaign serve as a reminder to never take what we have for granted. And how very easily things can go south. We have also seen how politicians in many countries wave the anti-foreigner flag often enough, whether accurately or not, just to get people stirred up.

11 The sad truth is that these efforts actually work and the temptation to play these political games is very real.

12 Do we want to play to the gallery and distil everything down to a provocative speech, an emotive meme, an inflammatory post?

13 Or do we want to listen, sense-make, address head on the issues that are in front of us? Make the right, and often difficult, tough choices, and help to carry our people along?

14 In my maiden speech as Speaker, I said that Parliament needs 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.

15 So my third reflection is that how we conduct our business in Parliament, what we say, and how we discuss the issues matter a great deal. We need to be circumspect. We need to help our people understand why we do what we do. We can agree. We can disagree. We can agree to disagree. But to do so in a way that edifies and not spiral to the lowest common denominator.

16 The question we need to ask ourselves: Are we leaders or are we politicians?

#### Appreciate our Strengths

17 My concluding reflection is that I am grateful for who we are and what we have. There are no throwing of chairs and slippers and fists. But that's why the chairs are fixed. You can't do that anyway. We may debate and argue but it has always been with a decorum befitting our Parliament, and I thank you for it.

18 There is also a growing consciousness and passion for not just the material development of our country but also our heart and soul. MSE receiving 80 cuts, with MCCY coming in second with 50, tell us something. The fact that we have moved on from slaying sacred cows to fiddling with Minister Lawrence Wong's sacred stones also reflects a sort of progress.

19 Remember how excited we all got when Minister Desmond Lee said that we will have parks within 10 metres of all our homes? This was about as

arousing as Associate Professor Jamus Lim's very intimate sharing of his feeling very dangerously close to agreeing with Minister Chan after his COS speech. But unfortunately, it was 10 minutes and not 10 metres from the park; and our Associate Professor also didn't quite totally agree with everything.

20 But it's not bad. There is progress.

21 Politics is such that people like to focus on the negative and the tensions because it makes for better news. But there is much positivity and alignment that we can also celebrate.

22 Like past years, there is a unanimous support for the Budget and the Government's approach even if there are alternative views and disagreements on some details.

23 As a collective leadership body here in Parliament, we need to ensure that we really do emerge stronger together across the aisle as well. Can we evolve a different democracy where even as we are divided by our political colours, we remain a strongly unified Singapore red?

24 I recently met with our Singapore ambassador to a well-respected and often admired developed country, which shall remain unnamed. Many politicians, government officials, business leaders, medical experts and media there were very keen to understand what we were doing in Singapore. They envied our contact tracing efforts and the use of technology to help with the SafeEntry and TraceTogether token. The way we managed our hospitals and healthcare resources without straining struck a chord with them as they were struggling. They were surprised at how extensive our Budget programmes were at every level to look after our people, and to keep the economy going, and were even more surprised at how we financed it. They had a deep regard for our efforts to ensure continued supply chain connectivity, especially of essential items.

25 Above all, they were struck by the trust and confidence in the Government. They envied that this whole-of-society collaboration has strengthened Singapore to fight cohesively against the pandemic.

26 Budgets 2020 parts 1 to 5, and Budget 2021 – I’m not sure whether there are any other further parts - will not only decisively deal with the here and now, but also position ourselves for the future.

27 There is indeed much that we can be proud of. There is still much to improve on and there is much to do.

28 Now this year, I am not sure why Westlife’s songs featured quite so prominently in the COS. Even today, there were a couple of songs that were quoted. I could suggest some versions. “Everybody Knows” that when “We are One”, “Nothing is Impossible” as we go “Against all Odds” and make our “Dreams Come True”.

29 But I’d rather end with the lyrics from two popular songs in Singapore as quoted by our two new NMPs, Dr Shahira and Dr Tan Yia Swam.

30 From Ilham Pujangga: “Kasih sesama manusia, Seperti anda sayangkan diri anda, Pandang yang satu kepada yang ramai sayang, Pandang yang ramai kepada yang satu.”

*Love humankind as much as you love yourself, as how each individual beholds the community and as how the community beholds each individual.*

31 And from 小人物的心声:

“也许我一个人 不能成就一翻大事业  
但我尽力贡献一份微薄的力量”

*Though I may be but one person and may not achieve much,*

*I will do my very best to give what little I can.*

32 And on those notes....Thank you very much.