

**SPEECH BY MR TAN CHUAN-JIN**  
**SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE**  
**AT THE END OF THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY DEBATES**  
**SINGAPORE PARLIAMENT HOUSE**  
**11 MARCH 2022**

This is my fifth Budget. Actually, there were more Budgets if you count the multiple Budgets that we had in 2020. But as a wrap-up speech, this is my fifth one.

2 It is very challenging. Every year, the night before, or two nights before, barely any sleep because you are trying to distil the last one and a half to two weeks' worth of discussions, discourse, and all the work done into a "Too Long Didn't Read" (TLDR) version. It is really difficult. People often say, "Government communications cannot make it! Why is it so complicated? Why can't you keep it simple?"

3 I can tell you that Government is trying. But the reality is this: When you are in the business of making things work, when you are in the business of actually having to do the real work and the heavy lifting, the details do matter. It is not quite so straightforward.

4 You can't just virtue signal. You can't just bandy about ideas. It is very different when you have to carry them out.

5 I remember a few years ago, when Chee Meng was Minister for Education, and I, as a parent, as all of us as parents would have a lot of issues about MOE, said "Eh, why is your MOE policy like that?". Then, I remember Chee Meng replied to me, "Why don't we switch jobs. You can come and change the policy".

6 Suddenly, everything took on a very different hue. I think we all know that. It is easy to critique and it is important for us to critique. It is easy to toss out ideas. But when we actually have to bear the responsibility of translating those ideas, views and opinions into reality, it looks very, very different.

7 So, in the same way, I would say that it is very difficult to distil everything down into a meme or a TikTok clip. And I would not be able to do that.

8 Trade-offs are needed; things take time. As we all know, are we able to satisfy every need and want? We can't. Many of you here who work, you have your own organisation, whether you are the leader of your

political party or your company, school – we know that we are not always able to do that. But we endeavour to do our best. So, it is not easy.

9 The Budget and COS process is very involved. It can be quite colourful. This year, we had blue and yellow featuring, red and white, and of course, green! I do not know whether Minister Grace Fu is wearing green today. She had been wearing green almost every day.

10 And it can get quite technical as well. But not to worry. I am not going to repeat all that. I am not going to “BEPS”<sup>1</sup> you until you “COMPASS”<sup>2</sup>, or “TRECS”<sup>3</sup> you with “JOY”<sup>4</sup> or “HEIDI”<sup>5</sup>.

11 But what I will do is to take a step back. We have been going through all the details, the technical and all the different things that are required in the Budget to make things happen. I would like to take a few steps back and perhaps survey the woods and not just look at the trees, the weeds, the bushes, important as they be to the whole eco-system, and to consider the world that we are living in.

12 And really three main themes: the world we live in, the worries and uncertainties that we are grappling with now; the post-truth world that we live in; and the world that we live in in terms of the bigger stories, noting that all of us zoom into the individual stories that we share. It is important, sometimes, to be able to also zoom out and look at the bigger picture and the bigger story.

## **The World We Live In – Worries and Uncertainties**

13 Firstly, the world we live – the worries and uncertainties.

14 We certainly live in worrying and uncertain times. We are still in the grips of COVID-19 although, increasingly, we are learning to live with it. Even as we deal with the economic ramifications of this pandemic that has stricken every nation on earth and affected everyone, we are now caught in the grips of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It may seem remote, but we are all feeling the impact immediately, with petrol prices going up. We worry about inflation. Inflation was a worry even before this conflict. If the West were to suspend purchase of Russian oil and gas, what would

---

<sup>1</sup> BEPS: Base Erosion and Profit Shifting

<sup>2</sup> COMPASS: Complementarity Assessment Framework

<sup>3</sup> TRECS: Temporary Electricity Contracting Support Scheme

<sup>4</sup> JOY: Journey with You

<sup>5</sup> HEIDI: Hyperscale Enterprise Intelligent Digital Infrastructure

that impact be on energy prices and on cost of living? This was a recurrent theme that many of you have raised.

15 We have been jittery for some time because we are living in a fast-changing world. We are living amidst a Fourth Industrial Revolution. We are concerned about things changing as our children go to school and universities, and by the time they graduate, is the world going to move on, is it going to be relevant? We are concerned about the geopolitical implications of the clash between the US and China, and how we are caught up in between them. We are worried about demographic trends in Singapore – by 2030, one in four of us will be 65 and above. What does that mean? Will we lose our verve as an economy? Is that going to affect our jobs? And with that longevity, lower birth rates, the burden on healthcare costs? And we worry also about the climate and how is it going to change and affect us, and especially our children's generation?

16 But if there is any consolation, it is affecting everyone on Earth. We are not spared; we are not the only ones; everyone is grappling with these issues.

17 The key thing is how are we able to address the concerns, both for the present and to stage ourselves for the future; and if we have the means and the ability to do that.

### **The World We Live in – A Post-Truth World?**

18 The world we live in is also – and many of you would be familiar with this term – a Post-Truth World, whatever that definition might be. We might have different perceptions of it. But essentially, these days, truth might seem indeterminant, malleable. After all, who determines the “truth”? Does Parliament determine the truth? Do you determine the truth? Does the Government determine the truth? Do facts and evidence matter? Or is truth determined by “Well, this is what I believe, what I feel, what I hear”, and therefore it becomes the “truth”? Is it based on whoever says it loudest? Whoever says it more passionately, eloquently, or more coolly? But that is the world we live in.

19 Many of us zoom in and share stories about how individuals are affected. Stories are incredibly powerful. We use stories to illustrate gaps and concerns so that we can have better policies to help. Some use stories to inspire. But some use stories to indict, to remonstrate.

20 So, stories are powerful. But we all know that stories can be false. Stories can be half-true. Stories can also be used out of context. And the

question for us as leaders and Parliamentarians is, what do we do with these stories?

21 On the ground, we know how these examples could manifest itself. For example, in my area in Chai Chee, we have rental flats. You can go to a rental flat and some of you who are involved in the work will realise when you come to a flat, it is messy, a lot of stuff that is there. And the smell of stale sweat, urine. And you feel, how on earth can Singaporeans live in such abject poverty in First World Singapore? How have we failed them? How society has failed them. How Government has failed them.

22 But if you step next door, in the same one-room rental flat, the neighbour, it is clean, tidy. In fact, some of my residents take great pride in explaining to me how they go to Daiso and decorate their house quite nicely with whatever they buy from Daiso. You walk away with quite different impressions. Wow! You are impressed by their resilience, by their ingenuity.

23 We talk about the metaverse, but this is almost like a multi-verse that we live in. Same, similar facts, stories, but then we walk away with very different impressions. It depends on the context.

24 For those of us involved in the work, you will know that sometimes, it is because of mental health issues, because of hoarding; sometimes, because of mobility issues – the individuals are not able to upkeep the flats. Whose responsibility would it be? Individuals? Do we then not ask, where is the family in the overall scheme of things? Where are the neighbours? Where is the community? And the Government has a role to play.

25 But this is how stories can manifest themselves in many, many different ways. We are living in a world where we have more information than ever before. In fact, information is increasing at exponential rates. But we are not necessarily better informed. We are, like I said earlier, the TLDR generation. If it takes a few more swipes left or right, up or down, it just takes too much time, it is just too tedious.

26 We have so much information we don't know how to process it. We have so much to distract us: Netflix, Minecraft, K-Drama, and some of you have been playing Wordle or Quordle, which is even worse! The list goes on and on. Many of us are better educated, more critically minded. But if we ask ourselves honestly, how many of us actually read? Or do we just scan? And because we are kind of smart and we have opinions and views about things, do we formulate those opinions very quickly? Or are we just

too busy with all the different things distracting us? We go to certain commentators for their distillation of the issues of the day rather than just reading it ourselves. We have “live” broadcast of Parliament today, but how many of us actually go to the source and actually listen to what was said? Or do we listen to what is being said by others? Do we fact-check?

27 That is the world we live in. You can lament all you want, you can describe it, but that is the reality.

28 Minister Iswaran shared from Ernest Hemingway’s “The Sun Also Rises”. I am less cultured than he is, so I can only share from a book that I find quite telling, “Factfulness” by Hans Rosling. While some might criticise Rosling for being overly positive, my main takeaway is that, as human beings, our nature, are we sometimes not really very evidence-based? We are very much driven by emotions. That is why stories are so powerful. We have this instinct to be negative, “Oh, the world is a lot worse than it is today”. But is it really? We tend to blame, we like to generalise et cetera, et cetera. It distorts the way we look at things.

29 When we look at the combination of these different things in the world that we are living in today, it has real implications. We see around the world today, for example, the divisions and the polarisation of American society. And I believe that even the storming of Capitol Hill is arguably a physical and violent manifestation of that. BREXIT also happened on the back of a number of fraudulent claims by political leaders. It’s a monumental decision. We wish them well. But there are real-life implications to how all these things play themselves out.

30 The important question for all of us as leaders in this Parliament, in this environment, is to realise that this playbook, sadly, actually works. Which is why you see many politicians using it. The rise of the far-right or even the far-left are examples of that. Playing the anti-foreigner card. We see that happening the world over. Race and religion is an easy game to play because it is so primordial in every society. Do we play fast and loose with the stories we use? Do we just lift “facts” from chat groups, or wherever it might be? Do we use anecdotes recounted to us without checking whether it is true? Do we verify? Or is it a case of what I believe is true and therefore, it is? Also, in this world where we are all politically correct, are we just too shy, too scared to take a stand, lest we be accused of being closed-minded, being cancelled out on social media?

31 It is happening around the world. This is a reality of the world – it is not going to go away. I think it is just going to get worse, if you will. But the important question both for us as Members of Parliament and

Singaporeans at large is what do we do with that? And especially for us in this Chamber, how do we then carry out our roles? Do we exploit these gaps and these trends? Or do we rise above it and take a different course?

32 We lead only because there is trust and respect. When that erodes, we have no basis to lead. Often, the negativity and misinformation serve to do one thing. To erode trust. What happens then? Do we end up being no different from any Internet forum? That is something all of us need to decide. We need to ask ourselves, is it creeping into our own political discourse?

## **The Big Story**

33 The last point I would like to end on is the bigger story, the world we live in. We zoom into all these individual stories and like I said, they are important, but as leaders, we must also have the ability to zoom out and sometimes remind ourselves of the larger trends.

34 We are here debating all these issues. But we sometimes forget all the different things that are happening around us. I would like to thank the many who are involved in Budget and COS 2022 – our Clerks, our ushers, our translators, our cleaners, every day who keep our space clean and hygienic, our security colleagues, our tea ladies who help us with our beverages, Leader, Deputy Leader, Deputy Speakers, our journalists out there who are actively reporting to try to keep everyone informed. And a very big “Thank You” to every single one of you who has made this possible.

35 I also want to take the opportunity to thank our public officers who continue to serve to the best of their ability, despite the challenging times. Many of them, apart from creating policies, are also at the frontlines because they need to double up, because there are other responsibilities. Dr Tan Yia Swam, Dr Wan Rizal and Dr Janil have talked about being understanding to our healthcare workers. I think it is worth reminding us to bear in mind to treat all our public officers with decency and respect. They are doing their best. No one is perfect. There will be those who fall afoul of what we would expect of them. But for the vast majority of them, they are doing their best to look after all of us. It behooves us to at least accord them that basic dignity and respect.

36 I remember during the debate on public housing a few days ago, I was quite struck by it. We were discussing about waiting times for HDB flats, eligibility ages, about housing in prime locations, about EIP concerns. Of course, there are areas to improve and there are concerns that we

need to assuage. But I am also reminded by my many residents who come to me to tell me that they are going off, some of them getting married, forming new families, they email me, they message me. As we are talking about the different things to improve on, many of our foreign visitors, as you talk to them, are remarkably impressed about our public housing policies. 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in public housing. 73 per cent – like many of my residents, they are not high-income Singaporeans, they are middle-, lower-middle Singaporeans – 73 per cent of them service their loans with CPF, with no cash outlay. For low-income families, I have a number of rental blocks as well, we have, in total, about 4,500 families in the last five years who have gained home ownership. And another 2,200 who have booked their new flats.

37 At a wake two nights ago, a senior executive shared – at first, it would seem he was griping that the sandwiched class is not getting anything and only the lower-income gets – that he works in the aviation industry and he was quite candid, that without the Government grants and assistance, he might have lost his job. Many more of his colleagues might have lost their jobs. And in many indirect ways, he has benefited too. I am glad that he acknowledged that. Many of my residents share the same, whether they are running big businesses, small businesses, many of them having jobs in management positions, they are glad that the policies that all of you have created have helped.

38 The employment figures speak for themselves. Our employment rate for those aged 15 and above, is 67.2 per cent in June 2021. It is the highest on record. In January, our unemployment rate is 3.1 per cent, and it is close to back where it was pre-COVID times. Real income has moved, especially at the lower income level. With all the different steps taken, with Progressive Wage, with Workfare, it will continue to go up. You have seen the projections in terms of where those wages will go.

39 From a healthcare perspective, I think a lot of us will have views about how the COVID-19 situation should be run. But I guess the question we should ask ourselves is, “If we were in the position of the MTF, what would we do?”. When we have to balance life and livelihood, would it be quite so simple?

40 The truth is, as you take a step back, you see we have a strong trust amongst our people, a strong trust between our people and our healthcare authorities, which allowed us to be able to carry out our Safe Management Measures (SMMs); which allowed us to be able to be vaccinated; which had enabled us to keep deaths low and serious illnesses at bay, by and

large, and enabled us to move on to the next stage, to deal with the concerns that we have.

41 Schools remained open, students continued to be educated. On the social front, despite all the challenges, we look at the contributions. Many groups have stepped up to help. President's Challenge, for example, in 2019, raised \$13.2 million. In 2020, it went up to \$16.1 million. Slight dip in 2021 but \$15 million still. ComChest, normally, \$56 million a year. FY20, it is \$87 million. Giving.sg, \$93.4 million in 2020, \$95.6 million in 2021. And the list goes on.

42 Minister Lawrence Wong was asked, amidst all the concerns with cost and inflation and so on, what would we do. I will just end off on this point. It is that we are in good health.

43 The policies that we have taken are not easy. The easiest path to take for any government of the day is to spend and keep your electorate happy. In my view, it is completely politically naïve and stupid to talk about balanced Budget, to talk about tax increases when you have reserves. I do not know what the reserves comprise. Temasek and MAS, we know. And GIC, I am not even going to ask Minister Lawrence what the amount is, but we keep it confidential for strategic reasons. But we do have a fair bit of reserves. And we have seen how that came into play in the last few years. Should the situation arise in the coming years, I have no doubt that MOF would step in and do what needs to be done. But we are only able to do that because we are healthy. We have our powder kept dry. And that is the only powder that we have. We have nothing else.

44 Which is why a Budget like this is important. As we deal with the present, we also need to deal with the future. As we deal with the individual needs, we also need to step back and look at the bigger picture. It is important that we do that. Be disciplined, do what we can. But all these can only be done when you have the support of the people.

45 And in Parliament, as we debate this, it is important that we communicate as effectively as we can, win the hearts and minds. We are not going to be able to convince everyone. Not everyone will feel that they benefit equally. But on balance, are we able to uplift lives? Are we able to make things better for Singaporeans? Are we able to make things better for Singapore, for today and for tomorrow?

46 I believe that we have laid the foundations for this. And I am grateful to all who have contributed to that on both sides of the House to debate the issues. It now leaves for us, as we have passed all the necessary Bills

and so on, to execute it and to make it happen, to improve on it, and to build on it, so that we come back again next year and repeat the process, so that we can make the difference.

47 Of all the countries in the world, as we are all struggling with all the challenges that we face, I think we can be confident that we have the wherewithal to look after our people. And to look after our people well today, and for tomorrow. Thank you very much.