

SPEECH BY MR TAN CHUAN-JIN
SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE
AT THE END OF THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY DEBATES
SINGAPORE PARLIAMENT HOUSE
6 MARCH 2023

Due to recent developments, I have seven goals to achieve today, or rather seven points to be made in the wrap-up speech.

Moving Forward Together

2 Firstly, thank you to Leader for her comments and her thanks. I cannot agree more. What we do here will not be possible without the quiet work of so many behind the scenes. Whether in big or small ways, it matters. Similarly, as we set forth and translate these policies into action, the work of so many on the ground ensure that they are not just words but deeds.

3 I had lunch yesterday with our KidStart team, with families and children under their Healthy with KidStart ‘What’s for lunch’ series. It was sponsored by Prudential. I was hugely encouraged by every parent I spoke to who found the program so very useful to their parenting journey. They are grateful to our KidStart Practitioners, like Ms Pearl Goh whom I met, who visit them at home to work with them.

4 We have partners like Prudential who sponsor important programmes like that of providing food and nutrition for the families. We have folks like Huda Ali who come on board as host for cooking programmes along with Chef Mazlan to help families learn how to cook in nutritious and delicious ways because families often think that healthy food equals expensive food.

5 But they actually go the extra mile too. Huda, for example, brings in her son to demonstrate how parents can involve their children when cooking at home; how to put into practice the techniques taught by KidStart on conversing with their children during such activities. We almost never see these actions and they go beyond the policies we launch here. And these folks play such critical roles to make sure that we are not just going through motions.

6 Now, this is a significant strength of ours here in Singapore that we must never take for granted. In many places—many of you have lived and

worked abroad you will know that things do not always get realised. So thank you to all who play an important role.

Unity in Diversity

7 Secondly, for all the sound and fury, which I have to say was relatively genteel and civilised—so please keep it that way—there is more agreement and alignment than not. To be honest—in all our respective organisations we know that—there is no way that every single person would agree with every single thing. Not within the Government, nor the opposition, nor the society at large. This is natural and to be expected. We have different views, needs and wants. We need to articulate them forcefully and passionately in Parliament. But when the dust has settled, I think that it's important for us to agree to disagree in areas that we don't find agreement on, but also come together, unite, and support a shared agenda so that we can move forward decisively together. And if you cast your eyes back to not just this Budget, but the Budgets preceding this—certainly all the Budgets I've presided over, there's really a lot more agreement than disagreement. And I thank you for that.

Effective Parliament

8 Thirdly, I am struck by what NMP Cheng Hsing Yao had just shared. I believe there is a resonance with many and his speech bears listening to it again and to be read as well, and with Leader's response. There are some valuable thoughts for all of us to ponder.

9 What kind of Parliamentarians and Leaders do we want to be here in this Chamber? What kind of leaders do we want as citizens? Because how we respond and signal, will shape the type of people we choose and how they in turn choose to behave. But notwithstanding that, I think we all here have choices to make too. Mr Cheng shared a few principles to guide us. I will work on that and offer perhaps three themes, related in some ways, to think about.

Who We are and What We Want to Be

10 So my fourth point really is about what are our thoughts on Form vs Substance. We live in a very visual world fuelled by social media. Attention span can be frightfully short. Policies are TL;DR (Too long; didn't read). If the form and style appeal, does that trump substance? If a person is deemed cool, so does that mean what he or she says must be right? We see how this phenomenon manifests itself all around the world. It's not meant as a criticism. It's an observation that I think that we all not and see.

Is this happening here as well? Does it worry us? Should it worry us? Are we as citizens concerned enough to do something about it? And if indeed so, what exactly should we do?

11 Fifth, what are our thoughts on Facts vs Perceptions and Emotions? I shared last year and I will say that again. We live in a world where there is far more information than there's ever been in history, and this will increase exponentially. But we are not necessarily better informed. Are we evidence-based? Are we act-driven? And truth be told, most of us don't often read everything. And because we have such a high level of education, we are educated, we think we know, we scan, and I think we form opinions very quickly. And if you touch your hearts, I think many of us could be guilty of that too.

12 Storytelling is important, and we know it's an important tool and we use that quite regularly in Parliament. But we also know that it's powerful because it stirs emotions. We have seen stories that are being shared that are sometimes not quite true, or half-true, or presented without proper context. In Brexit, it has been clearly documented without dispute how various parties on both ends or multiple ends made campaign statements that are clearly false. There are real life outcomes that result from this environment. So again we need to ask ourselves—should we be concerned? Is this already happening here? How do we respond?

13 Sixth. I often run leadership and related workshops in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Civil Service, social and private Sector and in our universities. Amongst the various questions I often ask of our leaders or would-be-leaders is: do we aim to do what is right, or to do what is popular? Do we do the hard right or the easy wrong? I believe that all of us know what the correct answer is and should be. But given the earlier few points I mentioned, and what we see happening around the world, what do we as leaders in the political environment—what should we do?

14 Do we pander to popular sentiments knowing that it actually does work? Or do we try to make what we believe would be right, but perhaps a less popular decision? Do we promise dreams that cannot be fulfilled because we know that we do not have to actually do it for real? Truth is, this is probably the norm in most societies. So the question again is, what do we want for our own society here in Singapore?

A Brighter Future

15 For the seventh and last point, I just want to end and say that I feel that our best days are ahead of us. Yes, we are, like every country, buffeted by the same pressures, similar to many other societies and Parliaments face. It can seem overwhelming. When we look at the disruptions—we seem to be recovering from Covid and then there's a war, and high inflation et cetera. And we also know that we are not perfect. Because if you want to nitpick there are many things we can criticise; either we do it publicly or privately. There are many areas that we can improve, there are things that we can do better, and certainly all of us can all lead better. But to be fair to ourselves, we are in a decent place, in fact in more than a decent place.

16 We are not falling apart as a nation or society. When I work with foreign counterparts as many of you do, when we meet Singaporeans living abroad, it is clear that we have a strong reputation and standing. If anything, it has even gotten stronger following the COVID situation. This did not happen by chance. And where we are, our standing, our reputation, the way we are valued and respected, all these have been achieved despite the limitations that we sometimes see in ourselves.

17 So the question is, can you imagine how much further we can go? How much better can we be, if we begin to iron out the kinks, if we begin to actively seek to improve and to develop better leaders at all levels. There are far greater heights that we can climb, and we can all do even better for our people and nation. And I think that's what before us in the Chamber.

18 Yes, we cannot and should not take it for granted. But we have an incredible base to build on. This year's budget is yet another foundational piece to stage us for the better years ahead. And we are all part of this journey, together. And every Singaporean who plays their part, big or small, makes that difference. Like those involved in the KidStart programme—and it is completely evidence-based—the impact on our families and their children will last a lifetime.

19 So let's all do what we can. Let's all just try our very best. Thank you!