

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MR KHAW BOON WAN  
AT THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON THE POPULATION WHITE PAPER,  
6 FEBRUARY 2013**

**“Cities can be great, given good planning and infrastructure”**

1. Madam Speaker, I rise in support of the Motion, standing in the name of DPM Teo, and further enhanced by Mr Liang Eng Hwa through his proposed amendments.

2. Last week, a friend of mine who buys 4D regularly told me that the number “6569” was hot. Or in Hokkien, “*ang ji*” (红字), “red hot”. I asked her, “Why?” She said, “Don’t you know, Government says 6.5 to 6.9 million people in 2030.” That is how she has crystallised the two heavy documents into one number!

3. But she is not alone. But at least, she took the news in a light-hearted way. Many Singaporeans have not taken it so calmly. Many MPs have conveyed their strong sentiments. Singaporeans are upset. We know. Then why are we moving such an unpopular debate? Indeed, why is the Government, well aware that Singaporeans are already upset with the over-crowdedness, still insisting on planning for a growing population?

4. DPM Teo has explained why. Basically, we have a severe crisis heading our way. Our Singapore population is ageing rapidly and our labour force will soon shrink. If nothing is done, there will be less job opportunities for our young and not enough healthcare workers for our old. That is the crisis that will confront us in the next 10 to 15 years, which is not far away - two or three terms of government, that is all. We cannot avoid it but we can mitigate it, if we do something about it now. If we sweep the problem under the carpet and wish it away, it will not. It will still be there and only become more serious and may become insoluble.

5. This is not a theoretical construct. This demographic crisis is confronting many countries and Japan is a live example because it is ageing the fastest.

And as noted by a member, Singapore is ageing even faster than Japan. Those of you who have visited Japan have seen it with your own eyes. It may not be

visible in Tokyo, but the signs of a shrinking, ageing society are everywhere

outside of the cities. Tokyo is still growing because the young Japanese are

migrating from their villages in search of opportunities. But Singapore is not

like Japan because our city is our entire country. Lack of opportunities in

Singapore means our young must go overseas to look for them. This will not be

good for the young. This will not be good for the old when they have to age at home alone. An ageing and shrinking population cannot be the backdrop of our future. Instead, our future must be a picture of continuing dynamism and opportunities, with fresh ideas, new blood and global relevance. And our seniors happy and well-engaged.

6. The choices and approach we make today to address this crisis will shape the future of all our children. It is precisely because this is such a grave issue that we need to discuss it openly, frankly and rationally. Yes, it is a highly emotional issue. But it is important that we use both our heart and our head. It would be irresponsible of us otherwise. This is why we have tabled the Papers, so that we can have a full and open debate to keep our people informed and hear diverse views.

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7. We are alive to the present unhappiness over the crowdedness in Singapore, especially in transport and housing. The congestion we experience today is real. DPM Teo has explained the circumstances leading to this situation. We are not happy with the status quo. We are resolute in addressing these concerns. But we must also learn from this and be clear about the need

to plan and to build ahead of demand, so that we will not be caught again with another infrastructure crunch like this one.

### **Relieving the Strains**

8. We are making progress in relieving the strains we feel today. Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew spoke about transport yesterday. Let me talk about housing.

9. As I speak, around 200,000 homes are being built. They will be ready during the next 4 years. 197,559 new homes by 2016. I think my 4D friends will know what numbers to buy. That is not all. We will continue to launch more BTO flats, ECs and land sales for private condos, for as long as demand remains strong. There is enough land for such new homes to be built. Within the next few years, new areas at Punggol North, Tampines North and Bidadari will be available for new public housing.

10. To complete the ramped up construction programme, I do need more construction workers, more than currently available. And that is why I was shocked when I heard WP's recommendation yesterday: that we freeze the foreign worker population, immediately and for 8 years. That is throwing a spanner in my building plan. My housing plan will be badly affected! I will not

be able to deliver the new flats as promised to 200,000 families. On behalf of these families, I ask the Workers' Party to rethink its idea and approach. They are our people too, Singaporeans. Many people need to move house, set up families and have babies. Please do not disrupt the plan.

### **Enough Flats for All**

11. Anyway, I have ramped up BTO supply to about 25,000 flats per year. That is a lot of flats. New Singaporean family formations do not exceed 15,000 per year. I am into year 3 of this ramped up HDB programme. Statistically, we have cleared the backlog of first-timers.

12. While there are still many BTO applicants, most of them are not yet married. They are applying under the Fiancé-Fiancée scheme. As flat allocation is conducted through balloting, some married couples do lose out to the not yet married couples. That is why we introduced the Parenthood Priority

Scheme to put the first-timer married couples ahead, starting with those with children. Once we clear the backlog, we can extend the scheme to the married couples without children. Parenthood Priority Scheme can morph into Pre-Parenthood Priority Scheme. The acronym is still PPS. This will affect the not-

yet married couples, but not too much because of the large number of new flats to be launched.

13. In short, young Singaporeans, you do not have to worry. There are enough flats for everyone and you will not have to wait too long. And once the current backlog is cleared, we will start to build up a meaningful stock of unsold HDB flats to meet the needs of couples who may need housing urgently.

### **Affordable Homes for All**

14. But I know Singaporeans remain anxious about prices. They see the prices of resale flats continuing to rise, and as BTO prices are pegged to resale prices, they worry about affordability. Again, don't worry. I have suspended the practice of pegging BTO flats to resale prices. And that is how we have stabilised the BTO prices – increasing the Government subsidy when resale prices rise, instead of following the resale prices up.

15. Let's look at last week's BTO launch. A 3-room flat in Choa Chu Kang costs an average of \$160,000; a 4-room flat at \$260,000; and a 5-room flat at \$340,000. These prices were similar to the earlier BTO launches in Choa Chu Kang a year ago. Prices are not identical – so it is not a straight horizontal line –

as every BTO launch is unique, with some local differences. But by and large, we have kept the BTO prices steady, even though the resale prices had risen. Similar observations can be made in other non-mature estates.

16. I will continue this pricing practice until the resale market stabilises. In addition, we have implemented several rounds of property cooling measures. We are determined to tame the property market, especially the HDB resale market. We think the recent cooling measures will make an impact. If necessary, we will do more.

### **Enough Land for Long Term Needs**

17. For the longer term, we have reserved sufficient land to develop another half a million housing units. If fully realised, this will increase our housing stock today at a proportion nearly double the projected population growth. This is a “*kiasu*” approach, to give us plenty of buffer. We may not need to build as many units as projected but we can take comfort from our planners’ assurance that we will have more than enough land to build new homes for all Singaporeans, and to keep housing affordable.

### **High Quality of Life**

18. Another concern of Singaporeans is their quality of life. With increasing density, will our quality of life get worse? This is a very important and totally valid concern.

19. We have always taken pride in our high quality of life. Singaporeans travel and you have seen how other people live, in Hong Kong, in Shenzhen, in Tokyo, in Shanghai. Singaporeans know that we are a little red dot, with no mountains and lakes, but we still get to enjoy the lush greenery, the clean air, the blue sky, and our HDB flats are superior to most of the apartments in Hong Kong, Tokyo or New York. We will not let our quality of life go down. On the contrary, we want to continue to be able to raise our quality of life. We are confident we can achieve this.

20. First, we have the advantage of starting from a strong foundation. By most measures, Singapore is more liveable than many other cities with lower population densities. From the time that Mr Lee Kuan Yew led Singapore, our policies have always focused on good planning to ensure liveability. We take this as key to Singapore's survival as a city-state.



21. With better resources and deeper experience, we can do even better than today to ensure Singapore remains highly liveable.

22. Second, we are determined to make Singapore a City in a Garden. What does that mean? It is to bring nature into our urban spaces. It is to create oases of calm and peace for us to enjoy and relax in. We have made access to green and blue spaces a top priority. Within this decade, our park connectors will double in length to 360km, as we progressively develop the Round Island Route. As you know, I've been cycling because I wanted to cover the entire park connector because it is under my ministry. My interest was not for leisure; my interest was to look out for little gaps in-between because I want the park connector to be a truly seamless, good and pleasant experience. It is not quite so yet for many of the routes. By now, I have cycled about half of the 180km and there are some routes, where, as I've said before, they are really "*terok*" – you have to carry the bicycle and cross the highway and so on and so forth. It's very troublesome but we will improve on that. By 2030, at least 85% of all residents will find a park within 400m of their homes. Where possible, we will infuse our tall buildings with lush vertical and rooftop greenery.

23. Despite urbanisation, Singapore will remain rich in biodiversity. Apart from our parks, we have conserved a significant and representative part of our native biodiversity. However, we cannot protect every local green area. Some are slated for development and, in time, will need to give way to other uses. It is painful, I know, for the local residents. Actually it is more painful for us in MND. We seek your understanding. Overall, we will maintain about 9% of our land for parks and nature reserves. This is highly significant for a small urbanised city.

24. Both natural and built heritage are important to us. That is why we will continue to retain buildings and structures which are of significant historical, cultural and architectural merits wherever possible, even as we develop.

25. Third, we can justifiably take pride in our public housing programme. It is the truly best in the world and we intend to keep it that way because the vast majority of Singaporeans live in HDB towns. The next generation of public housing will be even more comfortable and better designed. When you have the time, do take a walk – I'll be happy to organise it and accompany you – through the HDB precincts in Punggol South, and see for yourself how we have carefully planned, designed and integrated the common areas, the greenery, open spaces and recreational facilities. The common green area in each

precinct is centrally placed, at the foot of HDB blocks, so that residents can have wonderful views and direct access to the greenery. They are designed to keep cars away so that it is pleasant and safe for residents of all ages to enjoy. This common green is supplemented by gardens and gathering spaces on the rooftops of the multi-storey car parks. These pleasant outcomes are achieved, despite a higher population density.

26. We have received many visitors and they are all impressed. They are especially struck by the playgrounds and the children playing happily there. That is the real test – are children happy there? And there are many. The green areas, the playgrounds, the fitness corners, and the seniors' activity corners are always bustling with activities at their respective peak hours. These features are further complemented by the beautiful Punggol Waterway.

27. What is our future? It is not to be a concrete jungle. It is to be a City in a Garden. It is to be Punggol - multiply that many times. And the best is yet to be. HDB has completed the preliminary planning of Punggol North. The models and the plans have been in HDB Hub for several months now for public viewing. They have been very well received by both experts, architects, and laymen. I have received many emails from architects, city planners – Singaporeans architects - who tell me how impressed they are with the Punggol North plans.

The planners are now working on Tampines North, Bidadari and Tengah, which will incorporate fresh ideas for better living. They will be awesome.

28. Let me add that these new plans are not to make HDB flats more luxurious. HDB flats will always be cost effective to build and maintain. That is our key design brief. But we are improving the estate layout, the common spaces, the air flow, the height relationship between buildings, the landscaping, the greenery, and the connectivity between spaces. In particular, the layouts must promote greater community interactions. In Our Singapore Conversation, many Singaporeans have spoken about the good old days, about our past kampong spirit and they wish that the kampong spirit can be rekindled. I totally agree and I will do my best to support that wish. We have moved from third world kampong to first world apartment living, but we should never lose our good old kampong spirit, of caring for one another and watching out for one another. We will create as many communal spaces as possible for our residents to meet and interact. And of course, we will also support interest groups, such as those interested in community gardening and urban farming.

29. We will also actively involve the local residents in the planning. As one recent example, Tampines is planning its Tampines Town Hub. The People's

Association is taking the lead in this development. Over six months, it carried out extensive consultations, discussions, focus groups with 15,000 residents where they shared their hopes and ideas for the Town Hub. Some of the suggestions are included in the final design by the architects. This is the right approach.

30. Fourth, we have learnt a valuable lesson from our infrastructure problems today. It is an important reminder for all of us to plan ahead and invest in the infrastructure in a coordinated and timely manner. We will do our best not to allow population to surge ahead of our infrastructure again. What we must do is to build infrastructure ahead of demand, and where possible, we will also build in a buffer so that we can respond to unexpected needs. This is a major shift in planning and development strategy, to invest ahead of demand. It will be more costly.

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31. Public transport, especially trains, is a big ticket item, requiring multibillion dollar investments and taking years to build. For a new town to be liveable, we need the trains and buses to be readily available. But it is not just buses and trains, we also want hawker centres, supermarkets, playgrounds, clinics, childcare centres, schools, parks, barber shops, etc to be available to serve our residents soon after they move in to their HDB flats. Physical

facilities we can build. That's easy but getting the service providers and merchants to start their business from day one, that is more difficult. We will try to incentivise them to do so.

### **Planning For Stretched Scenario**

32. The current mismatch in infrastructure provision and overcrowding has been painful for Singaporeans and for the planners. We were caught wrong-footed and we caused Singaporeans much discomfort. That is why this time round, we have to plan infrastructure based on the stretched scenario of 6.9 million. We hope we never reach this level. However for long term planning, I think it is safer to prepare enough land and infrastructure for a larger number.

33. After my open heart bypass operation, my cardiologist requires me to biannual heart stress tests on the treadmill. My resting pulse rate is 68 beats a minute. For my daily exercise, I work my heart up to 125 beats a minute and sustain it for at least 15 minutes. This should keep my heart in good condition. But for the biannual stress test, the doctor requires me to pump my heart to 165 beats per minute. This is way above my exercise pulse rate of 125. It enables the doctor to check how my heart functions at a heightened stress

level. If my heart works well under that heightened condition, it should be OK for normal activities.

34. This is the same approach with infrastructure planning. We need to stress test our long term infrastructure plan to ensure that it will be robust.

### **Planning for Unknown Unknowns**

35. Frankly speaking, nobody can tell what the world will be like beyond 2020, let alone 2030. Though we cannot be sure how the future will be like, we can create options for our future generation. Then they can decide what they want to do with the options, to create the kind of society that they want to do with the options. Creating more space will provide them with such options.

36. Many agencies are working to create such options. They include reclamation of new areas and recycling of existing land for other uses. For example, after we decant the port facilities at Tanjong Pagar, Pulau Brani, Keppel and Pasir Panjang to Tuas, we will free up large tracts of waterfront land near the city - the Southern Waterfront City. This will allow us to create yet another growth corridor, even bigger than the Marina Bay District. This will further expand our city centre and free up valuable space there for housing,

offices and jobs. The Marina Bay district, which everyone can see now, is the eastern extension of our CBD. And the development is far from complete, probably only halfway there. But you can already see the transformative effect on our city, on our downtown, and on Singapore. The southern waterfront will be the western extension of the CBD. So the CBD, eastern wing, western wing together will offer a bigger scope, much more than Marina Bay. This is an exciting option beyond 2030 and it is totally within our grasp. What I do not know is whether I will live to see it completed, but I take comfort to be able to make my little contribution to creating this option for our future generation of Singaporeans.

37. Our long term options include expanding our underground space and the uses within. Some of these options are still costly. But there will be technology breakthroughs in the next few decades.

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38. As a first step, we will carry out a geological survey to understand better our underground rocks and their suitability for uses such as utilities, warehousing and laboratories. Recently, I visited the Jurong Rock Caverns. At 130 metres below sea level, it provides storage for liquid hydrocarbons, and frees up valuable land above ground. But what else can we do underground?



39. I am chairing an inter-ministerial committee to study and coordinate underground developments, to ensure that we can seize opportunities and create the most optimal outcome for Singaporeans.

### **Planning for Singaporeans**

40. Madam Speaker, two substantial documents are being debated in Parliament. Many pages, many statistics, but they are not about numbers. They are all about us, our future and our quality of life. In the next phase of our development, we are striving for quality: quality living environment, quality work-life. However, we must always remember that Singapore being a country in a city informs every aspect of our planning. We have to be a thriving city in order to be a country for our people – a home where our children can have a bright future.

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41. We are maturing as a people and as a society. Having met the basic needs, our people are rightly yearning for more meaningful life, a better work-life balance, a smarter working life with quality time for family, friends, leisure, arts and sports.

42. Our parents and my generation slogged hard because we were poor and we wanted a better life for our children. We had no work-life balance. We still don't. In fact, we did not even know of such a concept then. We were prepared to make the sacrifice so that our children can have a better life.

43. That is why we plan long term, try to anticipate future problems and try to nip them in the bud. That is why we put out these two reports, because we know if our demographic challenges are not dealt with properly, our children will suffer. We cannot simply pretend these challenges do not exist. We cannot simply pass them to future generations to deal with. I think that will be irresponsible, and that is not our style.

44. This Government is and will always be on the side of Singaporeans. The scenarios sketched in the Population White Paper are not blindly pro-business or pro-growth. It is you – Singaporeans – who are at the centre of our planning and policies: your well being, your security, the quality of your lives. People first, not growth first – that is the key thread which runs consistently through the Population White Paper and the Land Use Plan. Please read them closely and see for yourself.

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