

# **SPEECH BY ACTING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT AT THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON THE POPULATION WHITE PAPER, 8 FEBRUARY 2013**

## **OUR VALUES, OUR IDENTITY, OUR HOME**

Madam Speaker, the White Paper before us is not just about population numbers, nor is it just about infrastructural plans.

2 It is fundamentally about the lives of our families and the values we hold dear. It is about how we relate to each other and to the rest of the world. How we respond to this challenge will reflect our values and shape our identity.

3 The roots of our challenges lie in our ageing population and our families. How do we care for our growing number of elderly? How do we care for our lower income families? How do we care for our young?

### ***How we care for our elderly and low income?***

4 Many have spoken about the growing income gap. It is an issue of concern, something close to our hearts. We want a more equal society. This has been highlighted by Singaporeans consistently in the many Singapore Conversations which I have attended. The question is how to achieve this.

5 We know and we accept that not everyone can progress evenly in a society. We also cannot ensure equal outcomes. But we can maximise opportunities for our people to fulfil their potential and diverse aspirations.

6 We should not hold back those amongst us who can progress faster or further, just to pretend that we can thus achieve equality. Instead we should let the stronger ones flourish and bring back a bigger harvest for all of us to share. We

must imbue in our more successful ones the sense of responsibility and care to help those who are weaker. We must agree that as a society, those who have the least must be given more help.

7 Growth will give us a better chance to help our people improve their lives over time. Growing slower does not mean that we will have a more equal society. In fact, if we grow below a certain rate, the lower income in our society actually suffers negative income growth in real terms. We saw this in the first five years of 2000.

8 During Monday's Parliamentary Question time, I shared with this House that while the average real income for Singaporeans has increased by more than 2% per annum over the last ten years, it only increased by 0.1% for the lowest income group. For this group, the more rapid growth in the last five years failed to make up for the negative growth in the preceding five years. We closed the gap with various assistance schemes. But we could only afford to do this with overall net growth for our country.

9 So when we call for a slowdown or no-growth, please have a care for those in the lower income groups.

10 It matters very little for a rich person whether his income is growing by four or five percent. But for poorer ones amongst us the difference could be one or minus one percent.

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11 How do we care for our increasing number of elderly and disadvantaged? This is not an academic debate about the theoretical possibility to improve resident workforce growth. I have the privilege to serve in Tanjong Pagar and the Ministry of Social and Family Development. I frequent the areas of Bukit Merah, Tanglin Halt and Commonwealth. If anyone wants to see the future population profile of Singapore in 2030, I have already seen it there today.

12 I regularly visit the Old Folks Homes and Disability Homes across our island. I see for myself the increasing number of elderly without caregivers. I see more and

more adult disabled outliving their caregivers and parents. I always bid them farewell with a heavy heart.

13 Besides the management level, almost all of our care staff in these Homes are foreigners. They stay in these Homes 24/7 to care for our elderly and disabled. What will we do without them? Where can I find more in the coming years to care for them?

14 Yes, every one extra Singaporean we can get is one less foreigner we need. But I cannot assume that increasing the labour force participation rate will solve our problem. Our male labour force participation rate has already reached OECD level. It is likely to fall in the coming years as we have more old people and less young people.

15 From the OECD experience, our women labour force participation rate can perhaps grow by another six percent. So it is not that we are not trying to get more locals to join the workforce. As Acting Minister Tan Chuan-Jin shared yesterday, we will continue to try all ideas from both sides of the House. But we have to be realistic about what we can achieve.

16 But please also do not do a disservice to our stay-at-home-mums and assume that they are not doing anything useful and can easily join the workforce if we simply increase the salaries. Many of our stay-at-home-mums are already taking care of our old and young.

17 So please have a care when we say 'no' to more foreigners to help care for our old and weak. If there is no more increase, I will have to take the quota from other sectors such as SMEs, construction, retail, and shipyards. If I take from these sectors, what will happen to them? The numbers I need in the health, eldercare and disability sector are not small. Neither are the skill sets required the same as those in the F&B, retail or construction sectors.

18 We would need to -

- a. Start more community healthcare schemes;

- b. Build a hundred senior activity centres;
- c. Build fifty senior care centres;
- d. Extend the Wellness Programme to every constituency;
- e. Fund more innovative approaches like tele-medicine;
- f. Encourage more senior befriender services;
- g. Build more senior group homes;
- h. Build more studio apartments with integrated care services;
- i. And as a last resort, build more institutional homes.

19 Productivity improvements alone cannot fund these manpower that we need.

20 Other big cities do not have this problem. The old and weak retire outside their city. We are both a city and a state. Whether you stay in Hougang, Jurong or Woodlands, we are all fellow Singaporeans. We have to take care of our old, our weak, our disabled. They are our people. We have to care for them.

21 So please be mindful about what we say about foreign manpower and slower growth. These choices affect our poor much, much, more than it affects the rest of us.

### ***Families***

22 Madam Speaker, over the past week, many have raised concerns whether we have done all that we can, to promote families. Many in this Chamber have given valuable inputs and suggestions on how to raise our TFR. We will certainly follow up on all these suggestions

23 We agree that families lie at the centre of our solutioning. Even though none of the major East Asian cities have managed to completely reverse their TFR, we nevertheless study them to see what good practices they have. Similarly, we look at the Scandinavian models even though their culture and social norms are different from ours.

24 We find good practices in their models:

- a. Having fathers play an equal and active role in parenting;
- b. Having shared parental leave;
- c. Providing affordable and accessible childcare support;
- d. Providing family-friendly work environment and practices;
- e. Having child-friendly practices in restaurants;
- f. Strengthening family education from young.

25 There are many things we can learn. The recent M&P package reflects this but we are still learning. We will need a whole-of-society approach to embrace this Family-First philosophy. We hope Members of this House will support us when we roll out more pro-family measures. We hope businesses and employers will support us even though it requires them to make difficult and sometimes painful adjustments.

26 Most importantly, we want to focus on early childhood development. We want to ensure that the next generation will have the best possible chance to move up. Even if this generation is poor, we must make sure that the next generation has the best opportunity to move on, that our children from less privileged backgrounds will not fall behind their peers in school.

27 We will do more. We will build more centres, make them more accessible and ensure that they provide higher quality programmes for the masses. We will push out even more programmes to support teacher training, curriculum development and operators management. At the same time, we want to educate parents that the most expensive course may not be the most suitable one for their child. We need to ensure that there is age-appropriate learning according to each child's needs and not add unnecessary stress to the family or children.

28 Many Members in this Chamber as well as Singaporeans have pointed out that having families and children go way beyond money. The most important and difficult piece has to do with our values and perspectives.

29 Recently, I visited an old couple in a 3-room flat. They used to stay in a 1-room flat and brought up their six children. The children used to share one mattress and some even slept underneath the altar. I saw their family photo. At least four of

them have made it to the university. All their children have their own 3-, 4-, or 5-room flats, just like any typical Singaporean family. The elderly couple was very proud that they have done it without any government help all these years. As we talked, they told me that they have only three grandchildren.

30 When I asked if they would want more grandchildren, they asked me back, how to have more? Their children feel that their houses are not big enough to give the grandchildren their personal spaces. They worry about the high cost of living. Their children worry if they can afford tuition and enrichment classes for the grandchildren; if they have to make adjustments or give up their careers. They acknowledged that the Government and society have been doing much more to provide help than ever before. But they still have many worries.

31 This is not easy. Our society has changed. Our perspectives and expectations have also changed. But we must keep on trying.

32 On another Saturday morning, I visited a family where everyone was at home. I was pleasantly surprised. I asked if the children have CCA or other lessons. The mother shot back at me with a reply: weekends are family time. Protected time. Time to bond as a family. Time to do things together as a family. No overtime for parents. No extra lessons for kids. This family has made another choice. I hope we have more families like this.

33 Clearly, having a family goes beyond monetary and housing considerations. Having a spouse and children cannot be evaluated like a financial balance sheet. It is a commitment to care for each other. Neither marriage nor parenthood necessarily has a linear or positive correlation with one's material wellbeing.

34 Ultimately, personal choices reflect our priorities and our sense of values. We will continue to do what we can, to help our families to grow from strength to strength. Yet the summation of all personal choices will have an impact on the future of our country, Singapore.

### ***Integration of new citizens and foreigners amongst us***

35 Madam Speaker, I used to chair the National Integration Council. We are keenly aware of the challenges in schools, National Service, at the workplace and in the community. Integration is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It is also not true that only the People's Association is making efforts to promote integration. The schools, the workplaces and the community are all doing their part. All our schools, polytechnics and universities have programmes and systems to encourage integration. All our community partners are chipping in. They want to play an active part to help integrate newcomers amongst us. They have plans to do even more and better.

36 For the majority who are transient workers, our aim is to share with them our social norms so that we can live alongside each other with less friction. Hopefully, they leave us having positive memories of their times with us and become a supporter of our cause in their own countries.

37 For those who intend to sink their roots here, we have higher expectations. We want them to have shared memories, shared values and most importantly, a shared vision with us. We want true engagement for both old and new citizens and citizens-to-be. We want quality and not just quantity engagements. We want to provide multiple platforms to nudge people to contribute to the community and in the process identify and bond with the community. We also know that we cannot force the issue or make it overly transactional.

38 The White Paper proposes to slow down the intake of foreign labour and new citizens. Not just bringing in fewer immigrants each year, but allowing more time for adjustment. This will help strengthen our integration efforts.

39 We acknowledge that some of these people in the queue are foreigners who married locals, and it would not be fair for the families to face constant uncertainty in staying together. Any inflow of foreigners will need to consider the capacity of our infrastructure. We need to achieve the balance, and we will try our best to do so.

40 But, what is our identity?

41 When I was in army, I had a unit where only eight out of thirty-two soldiers were “true-blue Singaporeans”, as some in the House may call them. The rest were either not born here or not raised here. I asked why they would fight together. None of them gave me a high-brow answer like how many Singaporeans are there in Singapore. They fight because their buddies fight alongside them. They will defend this place because this is their home – where they share common experiences, common values and most importantly a common vision for a better tomorrow.

42 Our job is to do our best to support our NSmen in their duty to our country. Our job is not to constantly talk down their motivation, deflate their morale and question their sacrifice.

43 Will Members of this House fight for Singaporeans and Singapore if there are X or Y million foreigners living here with us? If our answer is yes, then the answer from our NSmen will be an unequivocal yes as well. But if our answer is no, then we do not need to ask our NSmen any further. This is not politics. This is leadership.

44 It is not easy. Our NSmen sacrifice time and effort to uphold our defence. Often our NSmen feel the competition from the foreigners here and they wonder if they will be disadvantaged. It is a heavy price to pay for our independence. But I am confident that they understand that this is the price that we pay, because this country belongs to us.

45 Let us also not start drawing lines dividing who is a true Singaporean and who is not. Is someone born a Singaporean having lived fifteen years overseas, speaks with a foreign twang and came back to Singapore to serve his NS, any less a Singaporean? Is a foreign child who came here at the age of ten, embraces our values and systems, speaks Singlish and goes on to serve NS any less Singaporean?

46 We have always been an open society. We draw strength from this. Unlike others who define their nationality by tribal lineage; or those who define their



nationhood through many years of history and perhaps persecution, we are a young country with fifty years of history.

47 We have come to be proud of our unique heritage because of what we have achieved over time - defining our identity through our common values, common experiences and a shared future. This is more positive and uplifting than division by place of birth, race, language or religion.

48 If we believe that the Singapore Dream of multiracialism, meritocracy, incorruptibility, rule of law, society before self, are the values that we want to hold dear to, then we have the ingredients to build a nation. Economic success can never be the glue that bonds us together. Economic success buys us time to forge a common bond, develop a set of common values, form a system of governance and define a common future together.

49 If economic success is the only glue, then will our people stay when times are tough, or when we have many years of recession? Or will our people, like the 1965 generation, stay and build a nation that we are proud of, in spite of our inadequacies, in spite of our imperfections and all our inability to promise them anything except blood, sweat and tears?

### ***Conclusion***

50 The 1965 generation taught me an important lesson. Nationhood is not defined by what this country can give us. It is defined by what we can give, what we can contribute and how we overcome our challenges together.

51 We are now similarly at a crossroad where our challenges are no less daunting. We need to make tough decisions on how we care for our old, our young, our weak, our children and our families.

52 I urge the Members of this House to rise to the occasion and seize this chance to bond as a nation. Let us speak not to divide. Let us not focus just on the numbers. Let us focus on our shared values and identity. Be it left or right, what

matters most is that we choose the same path and walk it together. Let us choose the option that properly provides for our poor, our old, our young and our families in Singapore so that we can all build a better home together.

53 Madam Speaker, on that note, I urge members of the House to support this motion and the amendment, so that the planners can go forth and get the work done, while we do our best to manage our economy, take care of our people and provide the best future that we can for the next generation.

**## END ##**

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