

**Message by President Tony Tan Keng Yam to the Parliament  
on the Constitutional Amendments on 7 November 2016  
(Delivered on behalf of the President by the Speaker of Parliament)**

Madam Speaker

Honourable Members

The Constitutional Commission tasked to review specific aspects of the Elected Presidency recently concluded its study. It was a landmark review drawing on 25 years of operating an important and unique institution in Singapore. The objectives of the review are clear – to ensure that the institution of the Elected Presidency stays relevant with time and our local context, and that the Singapore Constitution as a living document is aptly refreshed. The Commission, comprising nine eminent and well-respected leaders in both the private and public sectors, took a consultative and inclusive approach in gathering ideas for its review. Many of these views of Singaporeans were thoughtful and constructive, and the Commission took them on board when it submitted its final report to the Government.

During this sitting, Parliament will be debating the Constitutional Amendments to give effect to those changes accepted by the Government. To date, I have refrained from commenting publicly about the Commission's report or the Government's Whitepaper. There is no legal necessity for me to present my views on the proposals, nor is it in the Constitutional powers of the President to endorse or oppose any specific recommendations pertaining to the Elected Presidency. These are decisions for the Government to make. But the Government has made it a practice to seek and consider the President's views when amending the Constitutional provisions which affect the President's discretionary powers, and to make known these views to Parliament when moving the Constitutional amendments. In this case, my five years as President have given me a personal perspective on the role of the Elected Presidency and how the Elected President serves the nation and all Singaporeans. I have therefore agreed with the Prime Minister that I should send this message to Parliament to share my views on the proposals that are being debated.

**The Elected President as a Symbol of National Unity**

Prior to 1991, Presidents were appointed by Parliament to perform ceremonial functions, usually associated with the Head of State of a Westminster system of government. The President represents the State in engaging other statesmen overseas. Metaphorically, the President is the flag-bearer of Singapore. Based on how he carries himself or engages his counterparts, other countries will form a view on Singapore's position in the global community. Often, this requires the President to be well read, strategic in views and sensitive to geopolitical developments.

The symbolic role of the President also extends domestically, with the President engaging the different communities and segments of Singaporeans. In my five years in office, it has been my personal mission to rally Singaporeans towards building a caring, cohesive and inclusive society. In Singapore, an important dimension of this role is working with the different ethnic groups that make up our multiracial composition.

It was not a coincidence that Singapore's first four appointed Presidents – Mr Yusof Ishak, Dr Benjamin Sheares, Mr Devan Nair and Dr Wee Kim Wee – represented, in turn, the Malay, Eurasian, Indian, and Chinese communities respectively. As the President remains a symbol of the nation's unity, it is important that the Office of the Presidency upholds multi-racialism, a core value of Singapore that underpins the social cohesion and harmony we have enjoyed thus far.

Of course, our long-term aspiration should be for minorities to be elected into the Office without the need for any intervention. But we also need to recognise the current realities. After the Elected Presidency was instituted, all but one of the Elected Presidents have been Chinese, including myself. The role of the President as a titular Head of State representing our multi-racial society is important and we should have a system that not only allows but facilitates persons of all ethnic groups to be President from time to time.

The Government has accepted the Commission's recommendation for a mechanism of reserving a Presidential election for a specific ethnic group if a member of that group has not held the office of the Elected Presidency after five terms. I agree that this is a balanced approach. The mechanism ensures that Singapore is assured of a minority Elected President from time to time, but does not kick in if one is elected in an open election.

### The Elected President as a Custodian of Two Key Assets of Singapore

Another key role of the Elected President today is his custodial functions over two key assets built up by generations of Singaporeans – our national reserves and the integrity of our public servants. Constitutional amendments in 1991 enable the President to play a custodial role in safeguarding Singapore's reserves and the appointment of key public officers. Through elections, the President is vested with the democratic legitimacy to disagree, if need be, with the Government on these matters.

Because of this important custodial role, a decision was also made by the Government in 1991 to include competency requirements for Presidential candidates. The aim was to ensure that only persons with the necessary attributes be considered for the Office of Elected President. Having made that decision, the requirements should be updated and fine-tuned over time.

In recommending the enhancement of eligibility criteria for Presidential candidates, the Commission has cited many pieces of data, including the growth of Singapore's GDP and size of official foreign reserves since 1991. Indeed, from my own experience, the scope and complexity of the Presidential oversight on Singapore's key assets have increased significantly, even in the span of five years of my term. My finance background was useful in helping me understand the technicalities of the Government's proposals, but the decisions often also require good policy acumen and a sound judgement on what is right for Singapore. I am therefore of the view that the Government's acceptance of the Commission's recommendations is in the right direction.

### **Preventing Unconstructive Gridlocks**

I have spoken at length about the custodial role of the Elected Presidency. While this custodial role is important, we need to distinguish between the President acting as a custodian and the President acting in opposition to the Government. The two are not the same. The Elected Presidency cannot be a second centre of power. He must act in accordance with the roles prescribed in the Constitution, and not hold back the Elected Government of the day from performing its executive role.

The Council of Presidential Advisers was therefore set up to provide expert advice to the President and to moderate the President's custodial powers. While it is clear that the President has the right to accept or reject the Council's recommendations, a mechanism to allow for Parliamentary override ensures that the President does not make arbitrary decisions. In practice, up till today, the Presidents and the Council have worked well together. There has not been any need to subject any decision to the Parliamentary override mechanism, because decisions have been well considered for the long term good of Singapore. And in line with its stature and the principle of collective responsibility, the Council of Presidential Advisers as a non-elected body has remained above any political fray. We should maintain that.

Nevertheless, while the President should not be unbridled in the exercise of his Constitutional Duties, it is not practical to remove all possible scenarios of gridlock and yet expect the Elected President to remain an effective custodian. We cannot hamstring the Elected Presidency just to guard against a worst case scenario of a populist or power-hungry President. We must rely upon the wisdom of our electorate to elect a President who is able to work with the Government of the day for the proper and effective governance of Singapore.

As President, my working relationship with the Government has been harmonious. The Government keeps me informed of all its major decisions. On a regular basis, the Prime Minister and I meet over lunch and on other occasions, for him to brief me on his preoccupations and intentions, and to exchange views on the strategic direction in

which Singapore is heading. Our relationship is built on mutual trust and respect. This, to me, is key to the effective functioning of our system.

**Institution of Elected Presidency Must Serve the Longer Term Good of Singapore**

Madam Speaker

Honourable Members

The Rio Olympics and Paralympics have just concluded. Team Singapore did extremely well, with Joseph Schooling winning Singapore's first Olympics gold medal, Yip Pin Xiu bagging two gold medals at the Paralympics and Theresa Goh being duly rewarded with a bronze medal after decades of hard work. Let me therefore use a sporting analogy to conclude.

The President has previously been described in this House as a goalkeeper. Indeed, if he fails to do the job well, no matter how good our strikers are, more goals will be scored against us and Team Singapore will be set back. We need a capable goalkeeper who works with the other players. Only then will Team Singapore continue to do well in the global league, against competitors who may be bigger, stronger and more intimidating.

Constitutional changes should never be undertaken lightly. For half a century, our Constitution has served us well, with periodic adjustments to bring it up to date and keep Singapore on course. The institution of the Elected Presidency was one such adjustment. I encourage all Members of this House to consider the current proposed changes to it with an eye on the next half century and beyond.

Thank you.

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