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Title: Looking Forward

My fellow Singaporeans, while I stand here today to talk about our future, it is also worthwhile for us to congratulate ourselves for how far we have come as a nation. It was only 58 years ago when our forefathers descended from Singapore, most of them poverty-stricken immigrants with different races and religions. Out of which, we managed to make a home for ourselves, creating a prosperous and cosmopolitan city which is the envy of the world.

The journey was never smooth-sailing. There were times where tensions between communities were fraught, and conflicts of ideologies and beliefs reached a boiling point. However, the cultural exchanges from our diverse backgrounds allowed for a new identity – a distinctly Singaporean identity – to be forged from the crucible of adversity and challenges. Singlish, which has entered our common lexicon, was created through borrowing and mixing a mishmash of terms and vocabularies that were indigenous of our constituent cultures. Finding strength from our diversity and channelling it to create something new and common that we can all share – this is the secret recipe to Singapore's success.

Just as our forefathers have once united under a common vision for prosperity, I would need to call on all Singaporeans to once again unite in this dangerous and tumultuous time. Like most of the developed world, we are facing dual pressures of an ageing population and a low-birth rate. Economies and wage growth are stagnating, and the resultant social unrest and discontent has led to mass protest and instability. Meanwhile, the climate emergency looms as the world only seems to point artillery towards each other rather than deal with potential armageddon.

In this time, it might be tempting to search for simplicity in this complex and convoluted world. We may look towards actors that point towards a singular group or institution as the root cause of all of their adversities and problems, whether it may be immigrants, the government or even a specific race or religion. They promise to shepherd their loyal followers towards a promised land, once the insidious traitors that are causing the downfall of the society are ridden of this land.

They are charlatans, being foolish or disingenuous in order to chase their ambitions for power.

What they do not tell you is that these easy solutions come with a difficult cost. In our globalised world, the issues that we faced are multifaceted and interweaved with one another. Oppressing or eliminating one group will never solve anything, but will rather beget further violence, radicalisation and self-annihilation.

Around the world, people have fallen victim to the siren song of empty problems and emptier solutions, electing leaders that done nothing but sown distrust and animosity through their reductionist rhetoric – not only towards foreign nationals but also to fellow countrymen and even institutions and systems. Their “solutions” marginalise the vulnerable and weaken the links that keep societies together. They have only worsened the crisis that they promised to solve, while leaving a trail of destruction in their weight.

With the delicate social fabric that exists in Singapore today, we cannot afford importing these polarising influences into our society – lest we divide our tiny red dot into tinier and tinier fragments till we disintegrate into nothingness. We cannot harbour hatred towards our fellow countrymen or even other nations on that matter. Instead, we need to put our faith in one another more than ever.

I cannot offer you a quick and easy solution that can rid ourselves of all of the problems. However, what I will promise is that I will work for all Singaporeans. Because I believe that behind every Singaporean, there is a common dream for a better life like our forefathers before us and the grit needed to achieve it. Because I believe that every Singaporean has family and friends in Singapore that they are willing to fight for. Because I believe that every Singaporean has the power to make Singapore a better place for all of us.

As like in the past, the journey will not be simple. Sacrifices and trade-offs will be inevitable. Some of us might have to contribute more in taxes as we work to make Singapore more equitable and give everyone fair access and opportunity to education, healthcare and shelter. There might be noise pollution and disruptions when we build new MRT stations, highways and road improvements. We might have to reconceive how we live, work and play.

These changes may weigh harder on some compared to others. But we can never go back. We can only go forwards.

What will never change however, is the Singapore spirit that is imbued in every Singaporeans. Whether it be our belief in meritocracy, diversity and equal opportunities, or our shared pride and admiration towards our national history and our heroes. Between the “lahs” and “lors”, our shared Singaporean heritage and ideas are the treasure that we are trying to protect.

While the road ahead seems ever nebulous, I can tell you that I see a bright future ahead of us – one where Singapore evolves to be ever more prosperous while maintaining our cosmopolitan identity. For us to achieve this, I am counting on every Singaporean to focus on what keeps us together rather than apart – to bravely march forward rather than cowering in the past. This has been the recipe for our success, and will be for our future.