

Our Home, Our Future, And Our Singapore



By
Marcus Lin

The heart and soul of a country is the people. It's always about the people, for the people and by the people. That, in essence, was the thrust of the President's Address delivered by President SR Nathan in Parliament on 18 May 2009.

Using broad brush strokes, President Nathan touched on the whys and wherefores of the world economic downturn and the wherewithal needed to come up trumps in a world fraught with uncertainty not meant for the faint-hearted.

While sustaining economic growth and all that it entails will always be a high priority, limited land and labour will be a hindrance. He challenged: "How can we capitalise on new markets and emerging industries for growth and diversification? How can we build new capabilities and anchor value in Singapore for the long term?"

"How can we deploy our finite resources to maximum effect? And how can we create good, high-value jobs for Singaporeans? These questions need fresh rethinking, and creative answers. If all of us in the public and private sectors put our minds together, I am confident we will develop new ideas to help Singapore transform, advance and prosper in its next phase of growth."

Underlining the importance of social cohesion while pursuing excellence, he said: "Globalisation benefits Singapore tremendously, but it also widens income gaps and will continue to put pressure on lower-skilled, less-educated workers. The Government has done much to help this group upgrade, and to supplement their wages. In this downturn, lower-income Singaporeans will not be left to fend for themselves.

"We must help every worker train and prepare for new jobs, and especially ensure



that children from vulnerable families enjoy every opportunity to reach their full potential in education. Only when all of us share the benefits of globalisation and growth, can we stay united regardless of rich or poor."

This is on top of contending with threats like new infectious diseases, terrorism and intolerance between social groups, all of which could reach flashpoint at a moment's notice without due vigilance and collective effort. Make diversity, multi-races and multi-religions with a common respect and purpose our strength, President Nathan urged.

A main plank in the push forward is quality education and training at all levels, all ages, "whether it is to promote economic growth, narrow the income gap or bond the next generation, education is key. Education is our best investment in Singapore's future," and one that will "cater to students with different aptitudes, interests and learning styles." To this end, two new institutions will be created, he announced.

"Maintaining a safe and secure Singapore is a basic precondition for our people to pursue their dreams," said President Nathan. To do so, Singapore has got to spread its wings and

be actively involved in diplomacy regionally and internationally and have a defence force to be proud of.

He added that a first-class home, first-world infrastructure and environment is like hardware without the heartware: "We must match this with a gracious people who are courteous to one another, welcoming to visitors and new citizens, and worthy ambassadors for Singapore when we travel abroad. We must raise our standards of social behaviour, so that Singapore becomes a more pleasant society to live in. We must also develop our arts and culture to be enjoyed by all citizens."

All of the above is possible "because our politics is sound. Our political system encourages strong and effective government, worthy of Singaporeans, and responsive to the people's needs and aspirations. This system relies upon and brings forward political leaders who are committed and capable, and who have the mandate to work with citizens to build the economy, strengthen our society and improve all our lives. In a more challenging and uncertain world, a sound political system and good leadership are all the more important," added President Nathan.

MOM Is Well-Posed To Meet Challenges

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The Ministry of Manpower has responded strongly to the President's Address in Parliament on 18 May 2009 when President SR Nathan put much emphasis on the upgrading, up-skilling, re-skilling, employability and productivity of workers.

In its Addendum to the President's Address released on 19 May 2009, MOM has mapped out a comprehensive slate of programmes and measures to tackle the current world economic downturn and even beyond. Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong, together with Minister of State for Manpower Lee Yi Shyan, MOM Senior Parliamentary Secretary Hawazi Daipi and other MOM officers, said the objectives are not just dealing with near-term problems but

also have long-term objectives.

"Some of these measures that we put in place will not be just for the downturn. We hope that at the end of the downturn when the economy recovers, things like the training and upgrading facilities, the attitude towards lifelong learning, the culture of upgrading, training and learning will continue even after the recession. If we are able to do that, then we will really become a learning nation," explained Mr Gan, adding that this will help in improving competitiveness and meeting future challenges.

Despite Singapore's economy slowing down by 11.5 per cent year-on-year, Mr Gan pointed out that the efforts are already bearing fruit as shown in the unemployment rate for the first quarter of 2009 across eight countries - the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, China and Singapore. The US topped the list with an 8.9 per cent unemployment rate while Singapore

had the lowest at 3.2 per cent.

MOM's strategy is built around three themes: Developing A Globally Competitive Workforce (which includes addressing the downturn, and building capability and raising productivity); Enhancing Income Security and Lifelong Employability (which includes introducing re-employment and implementing the CPF LIFE and Workfare Income Supplement schemes); and Building Globally Leading Workplaces (which includes improving safety and health and promoting good employment practices).

It was also revealed that 94,000 workers and 1,400 companies are already committed to the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience and the numbers are set to rise. Likewise, the currently more than 40 Continuing Education and Training Centres will also be strengthened and expanded.