

Changing With The Times



By **Marcus Lin**

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Changes are afoot in Singapore's political system. The Government is taking steps to practically guarantee that there will always be opposition and non-partisan voices in Parliament to allow for more diversity and plurality of views in the crafting of policies.

It was intimated by President SR Nathan in his President's Address at the opening of the second session of the 11th Parliament on 18 May 2009. President Nathan had said, "our political system is not set in stone. Singapore politics must evolve over time, as the world and our society change. It must respond to new circumstances and goals, and continue to deliver good government to Singapore."

Rising to speak for about an hour and a half at the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address on 28 May 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "As the world changes and as Singapore society continues to evolve, so too must our democratic institutions. We are moving beyond providing for the basic survival needs of citizens.

"We face more complex policy choices and we need more creative ideas for social and economic development. And Singaporeans want national issues to be more fully debated and they increasingly want to participate in this discussion, which is all to be encouraged.

"Therefore, we should improve our political system to encourage a wider range of views in Parliament, including opposition and non-government views. Some of the changes we've made to our system over the years have been in fact for this purpose, like the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament scheme or the Nominated Member of Parliament scheme. But we should do more.

"I think there are many benefits to doing this. It will generate more robust debate, it will improve policy formulation, it will expose PAP MPs to the cut-and-thrust of the debate and it will demonstrate what the opposition can and cannot do."

However, PM Lee cautioned that changes must be careful and not at the expense of tested and proven methods: "We must not jettison the lessons that we have learnt at great cost through our political history and experience over the last half century as to what really works for Singapore, nor should we create a system which inadvertently produces weak governments just to placate those who desire a strong opposition in Parliament.

"Singapore has to have a strong and capable government with a clear mandate from the people and the ability to act decisively to protect and advance our interests. We can't afford a government that is ineffective, indecisive or paralysed by internal divisions. We are seeking a system that works well for Singaporeans and that will deliver good governance, strong leadership

and competent leadership.

"We are not looking for a system which sounds good in theory but which is unsuited to our conditions and is unworkable in practice. And this approach, this sort of system is what marks us out as different from many other countries."

PM Lee proposed 3 changes to the system:

Non-Constituency MPs

Instead of a minimum of three opposition MPs, it will be increased to a minimum of nine opposition MPs, including NCMPs, the same as the number of Nominated Members of Parliament.

It means that whatever the election results, opposition members whether elected or non-constituency members, will form at least one-tenth of the presently 84 directly elected Members of Parliament with constituencies. There will also be a cap of two NCMPs from any one GRC.

Nominated MPs

The scheme to have nine NMPs in each Parliament will be a permanent feature and Parliament will no longer need to pass a motion after each election to that effect.

Currently featuring nominees from the general public and six groups – business and industry, the professions, the Labour Movement, social and community organisations, media, arts and sports and tertiary education institutions – the scheme will be broadened to invite nominations from the people sector. It will give civil society a voice in Parliament and encourage civil society to grow and mature further.

Group Representation Constituencies

From the present nine Single Member Constituencies, there will be at least 12 SMCs. There will also be fewer six-member GRCs and a range of smaller GRCs. It is meant to make the GRC scheme work better and strengthen the link between voters and their MPs.

Added PM Lee: "Overall, the changes to the NCMP scheme, the NMP scheme and the GRC scheme will result in a more balanced electoral system. Each Parliament will have at least nine opposition members and nine NMPs so that there'll be at least 18 members who are not from the ruling party, which is about one-fifth of the House.

"This change in the composition of Parliament will affect the dynamics of the House, between the government and the opposition parties. MPs on both sides will have to learn how to operate in this new environment. Government MPs will have to become sharper at defending their positions, accepting constructive criticisms and scoring points off the opposition, once in a while.

"And I'm sure opposition MPs and NCMPs will want to score points too, which they are entitled to, but they must also understand that while they may be in the opposition, they must uphold the political system and the institutions of our democracy and their loyalty must be to Singapore."

From The Labour Point Of View

Like most other Members of Parliament, Labour MPs spoke extensively during the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address given by President SR Nathan when he opened the second session of the 11th Parliament on 18 May 2009.

Here are excerpts of what Labour MPs said in the debate that commenced on 25 May 2009:



Lim Boon Heng

"I had not intended to touch on work-related issues or employment of the elderly. But listening to Dr Lim Wee Kiak, I thought I should just briefly mention that discrimination is a perception. If we cut the CPF contributions or we cut wages of those who are older, it is not necessarily discrimination.

"To have a good understanding of why we do it, I would encourage Dr Lim Wee Kiak to engage the tripartite partners – the NTUC, the employers and the Ministry of Manpower – on the rationale for this. And there are very good reasons for it arising from a seniority-based wage system.

"We don't want the seniority-based wage system to discriminate against senior workers in Singapore to their detriment. Let's not look at this as whether provisions of wage cuts and CPF cuts for seniors are discriminating against seniors. It's in favour of seniors."



Zainudin Nordin

"The crux of our strong foundations as a nation has always been, and will always be, the strength of our people – the strength of their skills, of their mentality, and their will to combat challenges.

"On top of that, we are fortunate to have strong leadership and institutions like the National Trades Union Congress and the Community Development Councils at the forefront in helping our workers to re-skill and upgrade them to ensure continued employability, and put entrenched workers back into employment.

"Since the beginning of this year, the CDC has seen the number of people seeking jobs doubled compared to last year: from an average of 400 per month last year to about 800 per month this year. The good news is that despite the downturn, there are jobs. But we all have to be prepared to work harder, because for every 51 positions, there are some 100 job seekers.

"Ironically, the only way to combat a 'Grave New World' situation is to be even

more optimistic and positive. Mindset will determine whether one lands that job or not. Stay positive. Be willing to take work beyond your scope and be proactive in searching."



Heng Chee How

"The recovery, when it comes, will require Singapore companies to compete ever more fiercely with the survivors of the global shakeout. These survivors are the fittest of the lot, and the need for the Singaporean worker to be not only job-ready but fighting-fit cannot be over-stated.

"Older workers would have to secure their employment through the value that they create at work, just like everyone else. They must actively improve their job-worth and continued employment chances through up-skilling.

"The first batch of baby-boomers – those born after the war in 1946 – have just aged past 62. This is only the beginning of the bulge. This means that the number of workers reaching 62 will swell in the coming years before reaching a peak. Companies will have to step up their efforts to design and match suitable jobs to their older workers, in anticipation of the growing numbers of positions needed, year after year.

"The expected enactment of the Re-employment Law in 2012 will make this requirement mandatory. The choice facing companies is one of turning this requirement either into a value-add or a cost burden."



Josephine Teo

"There are few examples in the world where non-corrupt parties are able to win elections to flush out corrupt parties, and then to clean up a corrupt system. More often than not, the opposite happens, that is, an opposition wins against a corrupt incumbent, and then becomes corrupt in Government.

"The better strategy therefore is to work assiduously to preserve a corruption-free political system, and to keep up a political culture where there is zero-tolerance for corrupt persons, corrupt organisations and corrupt political parties.

"That is our assurance. To the people of Singapore, I hope they will think seriously about this issue. Is it better for Singapore to support an opposition, even if it is not up to mark, in the hope that it could govern well when it overthrows a corrupt PAP, or is it better to make sure that the PAP does not fail Singaporeans, that it has the strongest team to serve Singaporeans?"



Halimah Yacob

"I welcome the Ministry of Manpower's focus on developing a globally competitive workforce. This is Singapore's distinct comparative advantage as countries can duplicate infrastructure, systems, programmes and equipment but the real

difference is the value that resides in people and how we can convert that to competitive advantage.

"The NTUC has been working very closely with many companies to put workers on SPUR (Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience). This is a win-win strategy as workers acquire new capabilities while companies continue to keep their skilled workers. I must also commend the Government for being responsive to our calls for change when it increased the absentee payroll as this would help companies train more PMETs (Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technical People) who earn higher pay.

"Companies that we worked with welcomed this move as we have seen in this recession that more professionals are affected. But I also urge the MOM to think beyond just the current downturn and to have a more comprehensive and strategic training blueprint for our workers to prepare them for the longer term needs of the economy and to meet global demands."



Cham Hui Fong

"Our strong tripartism has played a pivotal role in enhancing the industrial peace, even at times like this. More issues are now resolved at the company level. Before 2000, there was an average of 300 disputes or grievances referred to the Ministry of Manpower. The last few years we have seen that reducing to an average of 150 per year.

"At NTUC, we survey industrial relations cases every quarterly. There are still issues, but most of the time workers will resolve them at the company level. Seek some understanding, forge closer ties, strengthen relationship and move forward. Many tripartite guidelines have been effective in formulating closer understanding on issues leading to lesser disputes.

"I have full respect and confidence in our workers. The determination and resilience in them is clearly seen in the many international recognitions we have gained for our excellent workforce.

"Singapore's workforce came in amongst the top in various research and ranking reports by the International Institute for Management Development, Business Environment Risk Intelligence and World Economic Forum, reaffirming the strength of our labour market. BERI ranked us number one in labour force and number one in quality of labour, relative productivity and technical skills."



Seah Kian Peng

"We are observing today the price of our neglect. All over the world, we are seeing the destruction of clean air, the vast oceans, and the harm to animal life. In Singapore, we congratulate ourselves for being 'greener' than we had been in the past, we are delighted that our rivers are clean, and we want to be a water hub, an energy hub, and a research hub



for a better environment.

"But fundamentally, have we made the necessary change in recognising the physical limits of our growth? Should we talk instead of economic development rather than growth? That is to say, has the time come for us to acknowledge that we can no longer grow physically forever, and that there is a physical limit to the number of people we can accommodate on our tiny island?"

"This recognition does not prevent us from making economic progress. We can strive for a higher value economy, and better life, not necessarily with more things, but with better things. More fundamentally, we may have fewer material things, but a more satisfying life nonetheless."



Yeo Guat Kwang

"It goes without saying that the current downturn has affected many Singaporeans. In a time such as this, the NTUC has been even more active in helping Singaporeans in need and supporting those who may not be as badly off, but require assistance nevertheless.

"We could be worse off, but we are not, mainly because we have a tried and tested tripartism system. This uniquely Singapore system of tripartite relationships has grown from strength to strength. We, labour, employers and government, are able to work together on this strong tripartite platform to cushion the impact of the global recession. Each party understands the other and together, we strive for an all-win situation for Singaporeans.

"For instance, NTUC rallied for tripartite and business partners, union leaders and staff to work towards being the most pro-business economy, the most pro-worker nation, the most united tripartism and the most caring Labour Movement. The whole idea is to avoid record retrenchments, avoid record unemployment and strive for more up when up."