

# Being Singaporean

In my speech in Parliament on 18 May 2018, I spoke on what it means to be a Singaporean. This is particularly pertinent in a time of change with political and economic uncertainty, where we are confronted by social issues and undergoing a leadership transition. This is my speech.



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Minister, Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister for Finance,  
Second Minister for Education & Second Minister for Law

Every once in a while, the topic of the Singapore Identity comes up. Often, it is couched as a question - do we have a defining identity in view of our relatively short history? At other times, it is an expression of angst - we point to kiasuism, competitiveness and stress and ask ourselves - is this all there is to us? We are known to be pragmatic, logical and rational but this also prompts us to wonder: "Are we all head and no heart?"

When I came to the chamber just now, I found on my seat, a brown envelope, from Ms Kuik Shiao-Yin. She had inserted inside, a copy of the letter from NUS

students of Tembusu College to the 4th Prime Minister of Singapore, that was quite widely publicised. In that letter, the students expressed their concerns, their hopes, their fears, many of those related to the Singapore identity.

The question of the Singapore Identity is particularly pertinent as we enter a new phase of the Singapore Story.

A new global situation is emerging.

Politically we see:

- the rise of China;
- the introspection of America;
- new tensions in the Middle East;
- Britain's exit from the European Union; and
- closer to home, a new situation in Malaysia.

The global economic centre of gravity is shifting to Asia.

Technology is penetrating lives and changing lifestyles; disrupting old jobs and creating new ones; triggering innovation and posing fresh conundrums.

Socially, we and the rest of the world are grappling with income inequality, social stratification, and the dangers of polarisation. Our population is ageing; new births are not replacing the ones who pass on.

Amidst all this: the ever-present shadow of terrorism.

Against this backdrop, the following questions arise:

- Do we, this generation of Singaporeans, have what it takes to deal with these challenges and come out ahead?
- In this time of change, what anchors us?
- Who are we and what do we stand for?
- What kind of future do we want to make for ourselves?

These questions go to the very heart of our identity.

### History has shaped our identity

We do have a unique identity and defining characteristics.

We sometimes forget, but our history is not short.



Sir Stamford Raffles who founded modern Singapore

We achieved independence in 1965. Raffles founded modern Singapore in 1819. But our story actually stretches far back to 1299, to the first founding by Sang Nila Utama. It's a 700 year journey through time and space that has made us the people that we are, and given us the attributes that are now part of our uniquely Singaporean DNA.

From the 14th century, Singapura emerged as a thriving emporium built on regional trade. Open trade and commerce have always been our lifeblood. That remains true today.

Singapore declined in the early 1700s due to the rise and relocation of other economic centres in the region and that's an early lesson on what happens when you are overtaken by competition - you lose your relevance and slide into obscurity.

The founding by Raffles in 1819 gave us a new lease of life. The bold move to make Singapore a free port and an open centre of free trade not only re-established our economic importance but took us beyond the region, plugging us into global trade for the very first time. This global connection has carried on to the present day and continues to shape our economic outlook.

It also led to the coming of many peoples and the establishment of many cultures - the beginnings of our multi-culturalism.

Over the next 150 years, sojourners became settlers. People sank roots. We were not yet

one people; not yet a nation. But from a harbour, Singapore was becoming home.

As a colony, Singapore grew in economic and strategic importance. But in the 1940s the winds of war swept the world and we were not spared.

1941 saw the fall of Singapore - an ignominious blow to the invincibility of the British Empire. It shattered forever the idea of the inevitability of colonial rule. The Japanese Occupation was a period of subjugation and suffering, sacrifice and bloodshed, experienced directly by our parents and grandparents. That is why, even to this day, the word "Syonan" evokes strong reactions.

With the end of WWII came a global tide of anti-colonialism and the rise of nation states.

Our response?

The upswell of a strong nationalist spirit and a fierce desire for the right to determine our own future.

Next came the turbulent years of internal self-government, merger, separation and - finally - independence.

In just 24 years, we made the tumultuous transition from subjugation to sovereignty.

Our hopes and dreams for the future were captured in the Proclamation of Independence which said:

**“ ... Singapore shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society. ”**

That was the day we became One People. A Nation. Sovereign.

You could say that that was also the day a nascent Singapore Identity emerged - shaped by the events of the preceding centuries, and to be further forged and honed in the next 50 years, as we made the journey from 3rd World to 1st.

Who then are we, the people who have made this journey?

### **Strong sense of self-determination**

Well, we are a people with a strong sense of self-determination. Our history has made us so. We have a deep and abiding belief that our future should be charted, not by others but by ourselves and on our own terms. Our independence was hard won. We will preserve and protect that inalienable right.



View of High Street, Singapore, with dome of Supreme Court Building visible, 1940s

Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

This is why the President's Address makes securing Singapore's place in the world one of our priorities.

And it is also why we do not allow external interference with our politics.

As a small country we are often subject to external pressures. Countries larger and more powerful than us may from time to time try to dictate what we should do. However, we will act only in accordance with the best interests of Singapore. This takes courage, deftness - and a healthy sense of realism. These too are our attributes.

We wish to be friends with all. But we will defend ourselves if the need arises.

We advance and defend our right to self-determination through diplomacy and deterrence.

- That is why we act on principle and support a rules based international order, where states must act in accordance with agreed rules and not purely on the basis of might or size.
- And that is why we have the SAF and that is why we support NS.

### Multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious

Long before multi-culturalism became a buzzword, we made it part of our identity as a nation. The power of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's words in 1965 still resonate today, when he said:

“ We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore.

We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place: equal; language, culture, religion. ”



Singaporeans show their unity during National Day Parade (NDP) Rehearsal

- To be Singaporean is to accept that all can practice their faiths - as long as you don't do harm to others.
- To be Singaporean is to be able to have your own distinct racial identity while at the same time being part of a larger Singaporean family, and sharing a broader national identity with many other races.
- To be Singaporean is to be able to appreciate and celebrate other cultures, while retaining your own.
- To be Singaporean is also to be part of a uniquely Singaporean culture: Singlish, eating at hawker centres, the concept of "choping" especially with a packet of tissue paper, our habit of calling everyone Auntie or Uncle, whether or not they are related to us; our preferred dress style – casual wear and slippers. And when you say "fun shot" every Singaporean immediately knows they must put their thumbs up! These are things which cut across all ethnicities.



Maxwell Food Centre

## Values

At the core of our Singaporean Identity is our values. More than anything else, it is our values that define us –

- Family, kindness, inclusiveness.
- Honesty, integrity and anti-corruption.
- Meritocracy and the aspiration for equality.
- Justice, fairness and rule of law.

## Trust

Because of our values, our hallmark is trust. People know they can trust us. In global and regional trade, many accord a premium to dealing with Singaporean businesses. MNCs set up shop here and investors invest because they know we can be trusted.

As a country and as a people, our brand is trustworthiness, reliability.



## Our commitment to build a better life together

We are a committed people. When we say we will do something, we will.

Our biggest commitment is closely interwoven with our identity. That is to be found in the Pledge. What is the Pledge but a commitment, by every Singaporean to each other, to build a better life together? In the Pledge:

- we affirm our unity;
- we define the kind of society we want to build together - democratic, based on justice and equality;
- we set out our goals - happiness, prosperity and progress for everyone.

This is instilled in every Singaporean schoolchild, every adult.

Anyone who becomes a citizen must take that Pledge as one of the first acts of citizenship and understand, through the Pledge, what it means to be Singaporean.

## Excellence and exceptionalism

The pursuit of excellence is also part of our identity. This is a function of our size and lack of natural resources. If we want anyone to pay attention to us, if we want to have a place at the international table, if we are to secure our position in the world, then we have to be better than merely good. We have to be exceptional.

And through our combined efforts as a people, we are.



We are a tiny island of 719 square kilometres.

We have a population of 5.5 million, of which 3.4m are citizens.

There are 193 member states in the United Nations.

Almost all are bigger, more populous and far more generously endowed with natural resources than we are.

Yet we make our mark internationally.

## Hub Status

- Singapore is the world's busiest transshipment hub. In 2016 PSA Singapore was ranked Best Container Terminal Asia.
- Changi Airport - In 2018, it was voted the World's Best Airport for the 6th consecutive year.
- SIA is the No. 1 Airline in the World.
- Singapore is the third most preferred seat of arbitration globally.
- Singapore is the 4th top financial centre in the world.

### Global Mobility

- The Singapore passport is the most powerful in the world in terms of global mobility.

### Water

Our water story has been an amazing one. We have taken the little we have and made it robust and sustainable.



- Singapore is a world leader in water recycling.
- In the 2017 benchmarking exercise by the European Benchmarking Co-operation Foundation, PUB was ranked in the top 10% of water utilities benchmarked for (i) compliance with applicable standards for drinking water tests and (ii) wastewater treatment plant compliance with discharge standards.
- We have one of the lowest Unaccounted-for water (UFW) rates in the world.
- PUB received the Stockholm Industry Water Award in 2007 and was named Water Agency of the Year in 2006 for being an exemplary model of integrated water management.

### Music, Art and Sport

- Over the years, Singapore has had many child prodigies in music. Most recent is 11 year old violinist Chloe Chua - who won first prize in the junior division of Menuhin Competition - the Olympics of violin.
- Our designers are dressing Hollywood stars – Dzojchen's suits are worn by Robert Downey Jr., Chadwick Boseman and Nick Jonas. So when Iron Man is not in his Iron armour, he's in a Singapore suit! Heliopolis Accessories' clutch bags have been worn by Emma Roberts and Janelle Monáe.
- Our sportsmen and women have done us proud.
- Joseph Schooling won our first Olympic gold medal
- Yip Pin Xiu and Theresa Goh, gold and bronze medals at the 2016 Paralympics.
- Jason Chee – table tennis gold at the ASEAN Paralympic Games, and

- We have scaled Everest – Dr Kumaran Rasappan and also Nur Yusina Ya'akob, the first Malay Muslim woman from Singapore to reach the world's highest peak.



TeamSG Swimmer & Hall of Famer Joseph Schooling at Olympic Games Rio 2016. Photo Courtesy of Sport Singapore



TeamSG Swimmers & Hall of Famers Yip Pin Xiu and Theresa Goh at Rio 2016 Paralympics. Photo courtesy of Sport Singapore.



TeamSG Paddler Jason Chee at the ASEAN Games 2017. Photo courtesy of Shaun Ho / Sport Singapore.



Dr Kumaran Rasappan at Mt Everest. Photo by Dr Kumaran Rasappan

### Fun Stakes

And we're not doing too badly in the fun stakes

- Zouk is among top clubs in the world.
- The Manhattan Bar at the Regent Hotel is Asia's number 1 for the 2nd year running.



Not bad for a small little red dot which you can barely find on any world map.

And this is not even the full list of our achievements. There are more which I will mention later.

Now, some of you may have felt slightly uncomfortable during my recitation of this list of achievements - if so, you are displaying another very Singaporean trait - modesty. We are not given to blowing our own trumpet or puffing ourselves up. If anything, we are embarrassed by praise and accolades. We tend to duck our heads and mumble something about just doing our duty. But this is not about chest thumping or bragging. This is about understanding the significance of what I have just listed.

Those things could not have been achieved by any single person, organization or the government acting alone. Those were achieved by the collective effort of Singaporeans, each contributing in different ways.

To have been able to achieve all those things despite the odds, despite our size, despite our lack of resources, tells you something about us.

It tells you, we are determined.

It tells you, we are resilient.

We don't give up, not even when faced by

seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We will turn a weakness into strength.

It tells you that we are resourceful and entrepreneurial.

We are the kind of people who will create something out of nothing, based just on the power of an idea.

It tells you we are innovative, able to adapt, to break new ground.

If there is a worthy challenge, we will rise to the occasion and meet it.

We were once told that we were just a little red dot, a remark that was meant to put us in our place and remind us how small we are. Instead we took that label and turned it into a badge of pride and a mark of excellence.

### Care

But being Singaporean is not just about achievements. Our achievements are the manifestation of something much deeper and more fundamental. Care. Above all, to be Singaporean is to care.

To be Singaporean is to care – about family, about others, about country. In this debate, much has been said about social mobility, inequality and the lack of social mixing. These are real concerns.

However, in the context of identity, the real point to note is not that this is becoming a problem. We know it is a problem. The real point to note is that we care that it is becoming a problem and we are determined



to do something about it. That is the essence of being Singaporean. We care enough to want to do something. If we see something wrong, our first instinct is to help, to fix it, to improve the situation.

### **Education**

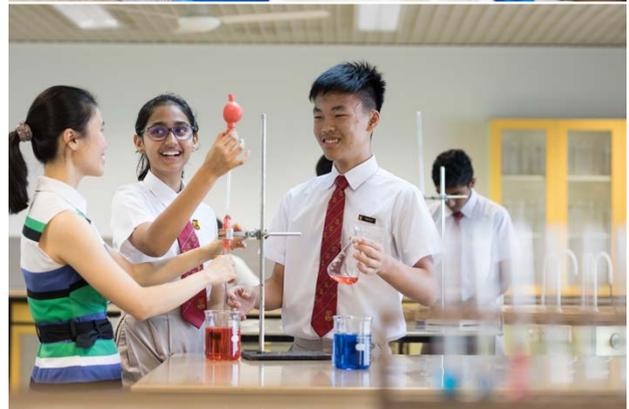
We care about our people.

We care about our children and their future. We want every child to fulfil his or her fullest potential, to give every child the opportunity to succeed, irrespective of starting point and that is the reason why we put so much emphasis on education.

- Our 15 year olds are No. 1 in the world for mathematics, science and reading in PISA 2015, an international benchmarking test dubbed the World Cup for Education;
- Our students are also the world's No. 1 for problem solving through teamwork (PISA 2015's Study on Collaborative Problem Solving);
- Likewise our Primary 4 and Secondary 2 students are the world's No. 1 in mathematics and science. This includes progress made by academically weaker students (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2015).
- Our Primary 4 students are No. 2 in the world for reading.

Again, I cite this data not for the sake of trumpet blowing, but to ask people to look at the story that this data tells. The data tells the story of how, over the years, our educators have built an exceptional education system where our students outperform their peers internationally. This was and continues to be driven not by a desire to top the rankings but by the desire to ensure that our children succeed, and to give them the best chance to navigate the future and help them be the best they can be.

In this regard, I was struck by what the former Director-General of Education Ms Ho Peng said in her speech at the Appreciation Dinner upon her retirement. She said:



Pictures courtesy of Ministry of Education, Singapore



Picture courtesy of Singapore Polytechnic



Picture courtesy of Temasek Polytechnic

“ We never went out to be a world class education system but through good thinking, planning and sheer hard work, we woke up one day to the realisation that we were regarded as world class. The idea took some getting used to - and I hope never - because education is such a complex business, it is after all to mould the future of our nation, that we must never be complacent, to always keep on our toes, to be forward-looking and yet remain connected with the ground, the voices of students, teachers, school leaders, parents and the community.”

That is how our educators see their mission.

Yes, there is anxiety about stress and competitiveness. There is also a need to shift the focus from an over-emphasis on academics to embrace a broader skills approach.

We have been working on that. We have made several moves in the last few years, and will

do more. But this too is an example of our Singaporeanness – we are never content to rest on laurels. We will continually try to do better.

We care about adults too. We worry for those who may lose their jobs to technology.

We want our people to be fully employed. We want them to be able to cope with change so that they can secure their livelihoods, and care is the driving impetus behind SkillsFuture and Adapt & Grow.

**SKILLS**future **W**Adapt & Grow

### *Economic*

We care about whether our people have jobs. We know and understand the concerns about cost of living. However we recognise that the best way to address that is by generating economic activity with real wage increases and real productivity so that our people can earn more in real terms. So that is where we direct our efforts.

- Singapore is the top investment destination in Asia and 2nd in the world.
- We are the 2nd most competitive economy in the world.
- 2nd among 190 economies for ease of doing business.
- Top in Asia for best protection of IP.
- Top in Asia for innovation.

Again what story do these survey results tell? It is certainly not about growth for growth's sake. What that data reflects is the enormous continuing effort that goes into trying to keep Singapore the best place to do business so that foreign investment will flow in, so that companies are anchored here, to make us a global exchange for goods and services - Why? For one purpose: to generate opportunities and jobs for our people so that we can make a better living.

### Health

We care about our people's health;

- We're 1st in the world for life expectancy at birth, both sexes
- 1st in the world for Health-related Sustainable Development Goals Indicators
- 2nd in the world for healthcare efficiency
- Healthiest country in Asia and 4th in the world



Picture courtesy of Ministry of Finance



Picture courtesy of Silver Generation Office

Not sure how many other countries' Prime Ministers tell you to eat brown rice!

Again, this data speaks of our concern that our people should lead long healthy lives. It is testament to the work that gone in to ensure that we are healthy and that if for any reason we fall ill, Singaporeans can get the best possible health care.

### Housing

We care that our people have good homes, to have a place where they can bring up their families.

- We have 90.7% home ownership of which 80% is public housing. The home ownership rate among resident households for HDB flats is 92.1%.



### Social

In the last decade we have expanded our social networks, increased social programmes and increased social expenditure. This includes the PGP, CHAS, Silver Support, Comcare, Medishield Life, to name just a few. Again, because we care.

### Caring about others

Singaporeans are a caring people. We have big hearts. This can be seen in many ways. For example our response to the tsunami in 2004 and the Nepal earthquake in 2015.

Our volunteerism rate has grown over the years from 1 in 10 individuals (9%) volunteering in 2000 to 1 in 3 (35%) volunteering in 2016.

Total volunteer hours have almost doubled from 66 million hours in 2014 to 121 million hours in 2016.

## Making it happen

And our other Singaporean trait is that we are also pragmatic. It is not enough to simply care. Empathy without outcomes achieves little. Care has to be deliverable and sustainable, both operationally and financially. And that is the other part of our identity too - making sure that things actually get done. We work hard to translate care into reality and that's why the STB tagline is "Passion Made Possible" accompanied by the trust mark.

## Duty and stewardship

For us, it's not enough to get things done just for today. We are also a people who think about tomorrow – about the future of our children and the future of Singapore, our country. The CFE and its work is about the future, as indeed is this Debate. Our preoccupation with the future is driven by our sense of duty and stewardship – that we must not only tend to our own generation but plant seeds that will bear fruit for the next.

## Green and nature – loving

We are green, we care about our environment and we love nature.

- Long before the green movement, we had annual tree planting.
- From a Garden City we have moved to being a City in a Garden.
- Our Botanic Gardens is a World Heritage Site. Gardens by the Bay, the upcoming Rainforest Park at Mandai.



Singapore Botanic Gardens - World Heritage Site.

- We are a Permanent Observer of the Arctic Council.
- We have designated this year as the year of Climate Action



We love animals

- It's not only dogs and cats.
- Just look at our response to the animals which share our urban home - our otters, owls, woodpeckers.
- Campus Creatures is a popular FB page on animals seen around our schools, JCs, polys and universities
- Animal rescue and shelters are gaining more prominence.



Singapore otters. Photo by Betty Chua, Ministry of Communications and Information



Salted Egg Chicken Bao. Picture courtesy of Baomakers



Grasshopper Pie. Picture courtesy of Windowsill Pies



Picture courtesy of Foodie Drools Pte Ltd

## Food

We are Foodies.

We love, love, love our food! Before we have finished one meal, we are discussing the next! We have our traditional hawker food but young Singaporeans are coming up with creative new concepts. There's:

- Baomakers by Pang Su Yi – traditional kong bak bao with innovative fillings – salted egg yolk chicken and prawn, chilli crab, crispy chicken with Japanese tartar sauce;
- Windowsill Pies set up by brothers Jonathan and Sean Gwee – yummalicious sweet pies;
- Hainanese Chicken Rice and Laksa Potato Chips by F.EAST, by Singapore husband and wife team – Lee Yue Jer and Kee Vern Cheng;
- Salted Egg Yolk fishskin and chips – from Golden Duck by Singaporean duo Jonathan Shen and Christopher Hwang.

In fact, we've taken to putting salted egg yolk on just about everything! It's fast becoming part of the Singapore food scene.

Then we have a Uniquely Singaporean sense of humour:

- Think Phua Chu Kang, the Noose and more currently, the Ryan Sylvia YouTube Channel.



Picture courtesy of The Golden Duck Co. (Singapore)

## Warts and all

We are by no means perfect.

- We are champion complainers (although Ministers from other countries have assured me that we do not have a monopoly on this!)
- We can sometimes be inconsiderate and selfish
- Kiasu
- Impatient

But overall, our positive attributes far outweigh our negative ones.



Picture courtesy of Sport Singapore

## Unity

We value every individual but what makes us truly unique is our strong sense of unity.

Singapore is exceptional. If you ask Singaporeans, many will say they are just ordinary people doing ordinary things. But we are exceptional - and we have achieved extraordinary things - because of our unity, the way in which we pull together.

Members will recall Our Singapore Conversation, which distilled the 5 things that mattered most to Singaporeans. One of these was “Kampong Spirit”. Why is that so important? It is because what keeps us going, what makes us able to take on all the challenges we face and there are many, is the knowledge that we are there for each other, supporting each other, leaving no one behind.

The Singapore Story is still being written. It must be written by all Singaporeans. But let me make a special call out to the young, who are just starting out. You must help to write the next chapter. Earlier generations have done much. Now it is your turn. You have the qualities, the values and the opportunity to do so.

To the students of Tembusu College, not all the answers are clear right now, because the

story is being written. But you will be part of that story, and you will write that story, together with the fourth generation leadership and with your fellow Singaporeans.

No matter what our background, each of us has a role to play, each has something to contribute to make Singapore a better place. As in an orchestra, each instrument taken alone may not sound very musical, but together they produce a soaring symphony.

Together, we are exceptional.  
Together, we have achieved what we have.  
Together, we have beaten seemingly impossible odds time and time again.

Together, then, is how we must tackle the future.

And we will succeed because of who and what we are – Singaporean.

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To view my speech, click the links below to access the respective sections:

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