

**SPEECH BY
PAP SECRETARY-GENERAL LEE HSIEN LOONG
PEOPLE'S ACTION PARTY CONFERENCE
AND AWARDS CEREMONY
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Comrades
Brothers and Sisters
Fellow Singaporeans

Happy to be here with you this morning, for this exceptionally important Party Conference Party Awards.

First, let me congratulate all the recipients of the Party Awards. You have all contributed much to the party, in different ways. Some are young activists, committing energy and passion to the party, like Comrade Chua Wei-Shan from West Coast branch, who is receiving the Youth Medal. As Assistant-Secretary of the Young PAP EXCO, she organises activities to bring together Young PAP activists and unionists from NTUC. All this while starting a family – for Wei-Shan became a mother last year! Congratulations!

Other recipients have served faithfully for decades.

Comrade Asiah Mesnawan from Bukit Panjang branch, who is receiving the Dedicated Service Medal, has been a volunteer for 37 years! And Comrade J. Thanabalasingam from Siglap branch, better known to her friends as Mrs Bala, is receiving the Gold Award today. She is 90 years old, and still active!

Both Asiah and Mrs Bala are at MPS every week without fail, helping their MPs and mentoring new activists.

Yet others are being recognised for their leadership, like Comrade Steven Lim from Telok Blangah, who is receiving the Commendation Award. Steven Lim has chaired the Telok Blangah PAP Branch Election Committee for three successive General Elections, and each time, successfully.

Leading the list of recipients is Comrade Lim Boon Heng, receiving the Distinguished Service Medal. There will be a full citation later, but I must say a few words here. Boon Heng has served the Party and Singapore loyally and with distinction for four decades.

Comrade Goh Chok Tong brought him into politics. He was first elected MP in Kebun Baru in 1980. He was re-elected there twice. Boon Heng was a warrior and therefore we sent him into the toughest fights – to Ulu Pandan in 1991, and to Jurong GRC in 2001 and each time he answered the call of duty and won important battles for the Party and for Singapore. In all, he contested seven GEs until he retired from active politics in 2011.

Boon Heng was a key member of both ESM Goh's team and mine. I have benefited from his shrewd advice and staunch support over many years, ever since I entered politics in 1984. Kebun Baru and Teck Ghee were neighbouring constituencies in Ang Mo Kio town

Boon Heng works quietly behind the scenes, he gives credit generously to others, and dedicates himself completely to the party's cause. He served as Party Treasurer and later on, as Party Chairman. Even though he has retired as an MP, he continues to render signal service to the party.

He helps identify promising candidates to join the cause, because he chairs the committee, which interviews the candidates before they appear before the Secretary General's Committee, which I chair. I value his assessment, his probing, his overall judgement of what the person says and what the person is. Boon Heng is also a good operator. He mentors the PAP teams in Hougang and Aljunied GRC, and had a lot to do with the good result in the 2015 elections when the PAP team in Aljunied came within a whisker of victory, winning 49% of the vote.

Congratulations to Boon Heng and all the other award winners too once again!

Politics and Policy

It has been a busy year for Singapore, both domestically and internationally.

As Chair of ASEAN, we have kept up a heavy schedule of events and meetings, culminating in the ASEAN Summit next week. The Summit is actually a series of more than 10 meetings, plus four official or state visits on the sides – by Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, Premier Li Keqiang of China, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Vice-President Mike Pence of the United States. Immediately after that, I will be travelling to Papua New Guinea for the APEC, and then a week later to Argentina for G20.

In addition, we have had several major external engagements this year. We hosted the Trump-Kim summit in June. French President Macron invited me to be guest of honour at their Bastille Day Parade in July 4.

In October I had a bilateral retreat with Indonesian President Jokowi in Bali; and we have just hosted the Bloomberg New Economy Forum which is a major conference, bringing in global and business leaders from around the world including Vice-President Wang Qishan from China and Dr Henry Kissinger, from the US. And of course, Mr Michael Bloomberg himself, who may be a Presidential Candidate.

All this activity has not only kept MFA and other ministries busy.

It has also advanced cooperation with our partners, especially our ASEAN partners. It has been an opportunity to fly our flag internationally, and raise Singapore's standing in the world.

While we focus on making progress and solving problems in Singapore, we must also track what is happening in the world, how external events affect us, and what trends in other countries mean for Singapore. Many countries are under serious stress. Their electorates are anxious, frustrated, often angry, for various reasons. Often, people feel that their lives are not improving. Perhaps the economy has grown, but the fruits of growth have not been evenly distributed, so income gaps have widened, some people see their income stagnating, and there is anger and frustration among those left behind.

In countries with generous welfare benefits, people are finding that the bill is coming due, and has to be paid now. That is another unhappy matter.

Often, immigration is a hot button issue. It was so in Britain, which led to the Brexit vote, or in Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel's policy of an open door to refugees and one million refugees came in and provoked a violent response, caused a drastic loss of support for her party, the Christian Democrats, and forced her to step down as party leader.

In the America, immigration is a hot issue too but it has been compounded by social change. In particular, one group, the non-college educated white voters are anxious. Because they fear that Blacks, Asians, Latinos are catching up and overtaking them, or gaining influence and social standing at their expense, so they feel a loss of identity. They fear losing their place in the social order. They used to be middle class, now others are getting ahead of them. They do not know what to do about it, and they do not see anybody fighting on their behalf. Many of them are strong supporters of President Trump.

These countries face difficult economic and social challenges, which they have not found adequate responses to. Politicians make irresponsible promises during election campaigns, and after getting elected, they openly admit that these promises cannot be kept.

b. Populations become alienated and divided. Voters lose confidence and trust not only in individual leaders or particular political parties but in the whole elite class and in the whole political system.

So the mainstream, moderate political parties lose ground, and the groups which come up and emerge are radical groups, protest groups, extreme groups like UKIP in Britain, or AfD in Germany. When that happens, politics becomes polarised and poisonous, making it even more difficult to solve the country's problems. And the country goes into a downward spiral.

Singapore is exposed to similar stresses too. We also worry about economic disruption, loss of identity, social stresses from immigration although fortunately not as extreme as other countries.

We have coped better than most other countries. This is not just our good luck, but also the result of the deliberate choices we have made and the hard work we have sustained for generations. Our policies have worked, and our people's lives have improved.

The PAP has been upfront and honest with Singaporeans. We have shared with you the challenges and concerns, what we need to do together to overcome them. Therefore, the party has maintained the trust and support Singaporeans, of voters, and we have been able to unite the people, and make further progress together.

But we should not take what we have for granted. We do not have a magic charm, to keep us well and safe.

Can divisive forces take root in Singapore? Of course, they can

Can politics go wrong in Singapore? Of course, they can too

But we must do our best to prevent this from happening, and that means getting both our policies and our politics right, because good policies and good politics reinforce each other.

I often talk about our policies – how we are addressing people's concerns, what goals and breakthroughs we are aiming for, example at the National Day Rally.

But today is not the National Day Rally, this is the Party Conference, so I am going to talk about politics. How to maintain good politics in Singapore, so that we can continue to do the right things and keep on improving people's lives.

That is the sacred purpose of the PAP; the reason why we exist

There are four things the PAP must do to keep politics right:

One, we must understand the concerns of Singaporeans and show that we are doing our best to address them. Two, we must give people hope for the future, confidence that their lives and their children's lives will continue to improve. Three, we must encourage inclusive politics, and keep Singaporeans united. And four, we must provide capable and good leadership, both for the party and for Singapore.

So there are four things, one, understand people's concerns, two, give people hope, three, bring people together and four, provide good leadership.

Understanding Our People's Concerns

First of all, we must keep Singaporeans' concerns foremost in our minds.

What are people worried about, for today and tomorrow? What are different groups concerned about? What are their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children?

If we understand people's concerns well, then we can respond in a targeted way, work with them to address their specific worries, and give them the confidence that together, we can make things better.

Many government policies are aimed at solving people's concerns. For example, building more HDB flats to shorten HDB queues, so young Singaporeans can set up home and start their family. Enhancing preschool education, raising the quality and increasing the number of places so young parents can be relieved of one major worry when they raise a child.

Improving healthcare finance through CareShield Life and the Merdeka Generation Package and many other items, so that seniors do not fret over burdening their families with their medical costs. Working with employers and unions on SkillsFuture, to deepen workers' skills and match them to new jobs.

But beyond these individual policies, we need to connect the dots, to paint the overall picture for Singaporeans, so that people get the broader message. And the broader message is that the government understands your concerns.

That the PAP is working with you to tackle problems together. That whatever your difficulties, in Singapore you will never walk alone.

To do that, we have to complement good policies with a human touch. This is where every party activist plays a part.

The party organisation and our networks are crucial. Every one of us – our MPs, branch committees, activists and volunteers – every one of us who works day in and day out in branches

and constituencies, amongst the people and on the ground. When you work the ground, you touch people's lives and you give the PAP a human face.

When you show up week after week at MPS, you are not just helping to write letters and send them off to HDB or CPF or some other Government agency, but offering residents friendship and encouragement, so that they identify with you, trust you and confide in you. Help you to help them more.

When you go door-to-door on house visits, you understand the residents' circumstances and needs, and you can explain how exactly they can make use of government policies to personally benefit themselves.

You can show young parents how to use the Marriage and Parenthood Package to lighten their financial load when raising their children. You can explain to retired residents how the Pioneer Generation Package or Merdeka Generation Package will take care of their health care needs later in life.

By showing voters that you personally care, it convinces them that the PAP cares, and the PAP government cares.

I know your work is not easy. It will be tiring, and sometimes even discouraging. But we are all here today because we count it a privilege to serve. Each person we succeed in helping, and whose life we make better, even by a little bit, it makes it all worthwhile.

Giving Singaporeans Hope for the Future

Second, beyond showing that the PAP cares, we must imbue Singaporeans with hope about the future.

In the early years, life was hard, but people were hopeful because the economy was growing rapidly, taking off. And a whole generation of Singaporeans witnessed their lives improve dramatically.

We no longer enjoy the same spectacular growth rates, but we can still achieve steady, sustained growth. This enables our people to look forward to good jobs and better standards of living.

Recently, Comrade Tharman used escalators as a metaphor for how our society should work. He emphasised how we must keep the escalator moving up, so everyone on the escalator has the chance to do better.

If the escalator ever stops, we will all be in trouble, because then instead of everyone striving to move up – they are competing to move up a little, but more or maybe not quite so much, perhaps some faster than others. We will be fighting over who moves up and who has to move down.

We see such games of snakes and ladders in other economies which have stagnated. The fight over who is up and who goes down becomes much nastier. That is why we must keep our economy growing, and that means pressing on with economic transformation.

We can already see some early successes. Companies big and small are restructuring, embracing technology and re-training workers. Our start-up scene is warming up, for example in fintech, where home-grown companies are doing well.

High tech industries like robotics, aerospace engineering, and digital farming have sprouted here. We are attracting unexpected investments. For example, you may have noticed recently that we will have a car factory in Singapore. It is very odd.

We had a car factory in Singapore many years ago, the Ford Factory that closed down 40 years ago. We have announced recently that it will manufacture electric cars in Singapore. But now we are going to have a car factory again. Same same but different.

What is different?

It is Dyson, they make advanced electric devices and they are going to make electric cars in Singapore. So we are back in the same industry, but in a different high-tech form. And it will create jobs for Singaporeans.

It shows that with technology and a skilled workforce, we can overcome our traditional constraints of scarce land and higher labour costs, and create new and exciting opportunities for everyone.

We must also think and plan ahead for the long term, so that Singaporeans know we can look forward to a better future. Of course, no one can tell for certain what the next 50 years will be like.

We live in a troubled world. But all the more we must plan ahead, so that come what may, we are prepared the best we can, and we have options and solutions to deploy.

That is why we are making huge infrastructure investments in Changi Terminal 5, the Tuas megaport and many more MRT lines.

That is why in the NDR, I talked about HDB leases, as well as HIP II and VERS, programmes which will only start several decades from now.

That is why we have CareShield Life, MediShield Life and CPF Life, to prepare Singaporeans who are in their prime now, for the day far in the future when they are old, retired, when they will need more healthcare. It is a paradox, we do not know what the future is going to bring, all the more we have to plan for the future.

I was asked this question at the Bloomberg conference on Tuesday. A lady stood up and said, "In such an uncertain world, what do you do long-term, how can you plan for the future?" I said I do not know whether we will have war and peace, or peace. I do not know what will happen in the region. I cannot say how climate change will affect us, but all the more, there are things that we must do now to make ourselves more resilient tomorrow. Maybe not even next year, but years, decades from now, generations from now. So that they are ready whatever happened.

I listed some of the things that we did and I think people took note. That in Singapore we are able to think ahead, we can plan ahead, we can do ahead. And we will get there.

One important aspect of getting there, of hope, is social mobility. I talked about this recently at the PA's post-NDR Kopi Talk. Only must the country as a whole prosper, but people must believe that they themselves have every chance to improve their own lives, and especially their children's lives.

That is why we put so much emphasis on education and learning, starting with pre-school, to bring every child to a good starting point. And continuing into SkillsFuture and workforce upgrading to give every worker the opportunity to keep on upgrading themselves. We want our people to have many chances to improve themselves and do well in life, whether they are early or late developers, whether they come from rich or poor families.

That is what our meritocracy is about – helping each other reach the best of our ability, and not holding back others who have the potential to do better than ourselves. We cannot cut tall poppies down. We must encourage every poppy to grow. And we will be different colours, different heights. But we will be one community, one Singapore succeeding together.

Beyond education and meritocracy, we must maintain the egalitarian spirit in our society. We must be able to interact freely and comfortably as equals, to have respect for one another, regardless of income or status. Never to look down on others or push our weight around.

Without such a social ethos, social prejudice and barriers to mobility will gradually harden. You will look at somebody and you will feel, "No, he is not my class, he is not on my side. Maybe he is not deserving to be taking on a job. Or "She is not deserving to take on a job."

It would be unfair to our people, we would block their opportunities, we would do worse for ourselves. So we have to be able to work together to be informal with one another, 平起平坐. We sit together, we rise together, we are on the same level. We feel the kinship, and comradeship.

And that way, we can all be Singaporeans together, one nation, making for a more cohesive and much happier society.

Keeping Singaporeans Together

Cohesion does not come naturally and easily to any society. Every society has its tensions, contradictions, and fault lines, which have to be managed. But especially so in diverse Singapore.

Therefore, my third point is that we must keep Singaporeans together, and encourage inclusive politics. The PAP aims to represent all Singaporeans, regardless of race, religion, income or even to a large extent your ideas and preferences.

Our supporters have to accept our party's core values. Honesty, multiracialism, meritocracy, and self-reliance. Those are fundamental, and they will not change.

Party members must embrace our goal of building a fair and just society, where the benefits of progress are spread widely to all. That is what the PAP was created for.

But on many other issues, PAP members can and do hold different views across the spectrum. Some are conservative, others liberal, some want to keep the PSLE examination, others favour scrapping it. Some want to retain Section 377A, others want to repeal it.

I will not talk about all of these today, it may take several lectures. But regardless of these differences, all can be good members, loyal members of the PAP.

It is important that PAP can bring these different groups and opinions together. The party aims to be a broad tent, a broad church. We may not be able to reach a consensus on all issues, all the time, but we should always try to find common ground, and more importantly maintain a shared space where the different views can be aired constructively, where we can engage in a way that does not erode trust and social cohesion.

Only then can Singaporeans unite to create happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation. If we fail to expand this common ground, if we fail to maintain this shared space, our society would gradually be polarised.

The middle ground would wither away. The extremes will grow.

Politics would become a zero-sum game, organised along the fault-lines in our society. And this sort of politics would make the fault lines deeper. People would be forced to take sides, you are either for me or against me. In America the politics is so deep, that when families gather, they cannot talk politics. In fact, it is reaching a point where some Democrat families have a view that if some young member of the family wants to marry a Republican and vice versa. It is like between Romeo and Juliet, different clans, different tribes and different nations.

In that situation, a party like the PAP trying to hold everyone together will have a very tough time. A centrist party will not easily be able to bring people from the two ends together, the differences would be too deep. If they lose ground, the extremist protest groups, the radical groups, and populist groups will gain ground.

Once our society goes this way, we are in that downward spiral and it will be practically impossible to rebuild a centrist politics again and bring Singaporeans together again. Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. It fell down, finished.

It has happened to many countries, and it can happen to us too. I hope Singapore never becomes this way.

We must never allow the differences to polarise our society. When there are disagreements, we must try to resolve, or at least contain the differences. Do not let them poison our relationship.

The PAP must strive to reconcile different views and interests, and work hard to strengthen confidence and trust between different groups. So that we can keep this a society with a broad middle ground, multiracial, multi-religious, tolerant and progressive.

One salient example of how we bring people together is tripartism.

Employers, unions and the government - we each have their own interests, our own concerns just like in any other country. But in Singapore all three can work harmoniously together because we have built up trust and confidence among the tripartite partners over many years, and all three understand and uphold the national interest.

Comrade Melvin Yong told me that when he goes overseas to attend trade union conferences, he brings along a standard presentation. He has his standard speech, 17 slides, on how the NTUC

works in Singapore, and what it does. And the other unionists are often puzzled, and ask him, why are you doing this? This is not unions' work! That is the employer's business or the Government's business.

But once he has explained and after they have understood how our system works, many envy our approach and what we have achieved.

So when we talk about maintaining cohesion and centrist politics, it may sound ordinary and dull, but in fact it is vital for Singaporeans, and it is very rare in the world, and it is a key reason why we have done better than most. The core of that is the PAP symbiotic relationship with NTUC and that is why today, all of us are in white but we have a group of people who are in NTUC colours today.

Maintaining Good Leadership

My fourth and final point is the importance of the party providing good leadership.

To understand people's concerns, give people hope for the future and unite people towards common purposes, the PAP must have good leaders.

Singaporeans must have confidence that the party has good men and women who can take the country forward. They must know that the PAP comprises men and women who are here not for themselves, but to serve Singapore.

That includes every party member, from branch activists to CEC members, to the Secretary-General and Chairman of the party.

This year, we are holding a very important CEC election. It is a major transition point for the party. Five senior CEC members are stepping down – Comrades Khaw Boon Wan, Teo Chee Hean, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Yaacob Ibrahim and Lim Swee Say

Yaacob and Swee Say retired from the Cabinet earlier this year. They have made many significant contributions to the party. Yaacob as Vice-Chairman, Swee Say as the Treasurer.

Yaacob has strengthened the party's support from the Malay community, and assured Malay/Muslims that they are treated fairly in a multiracial society. His ward – Kolam Ayer – is where he grew up and lived. His GRC Jalan Besar has been vigorously contested in every general election. But Yaacob and his team held the GRC each time, five times in a row.

Compared to other men in white, Swee Say is "same same, but different". Having started off with the NTUC, he has kept his union links. He did much to strengthen tripartism, especially during the Global Financial Crisis. But his biggest strength is his ability to relate to ordinary Singaporeans. Not just with the folksy, vivid slogans he coins, but with his amazing persuasive skills that he uses for the most difficult of issues, face to face with residents.

I told him, we will video you, we will put you on YouTube. He says, it is not the same, you have to be there, they have to sense it; you have to feel it. I said I will make you an avatar, a hologram. One day the technology will be good enough, we will be able to do that.

Boon Wan, Chee Hean and Tharman are stepping down from the CEC too, but staying on in Cabinet. They are three of my closest comrades-in-arms.

We go back a long way. We have fought many battles over the years, and gone through ups and downs together.

Each time we had a difficult challenge, Boon Wan has stepped up to tackle it – whether it is healthcare, housing or transport. Each of these is a major policy area, and also a political hot potato. Boon Wan made progress on all these difficult problems, at the same time explaining to the public what he was doing, and showing them that things were in good hands, persuading them to be patient a little longer because things are getting better.

As party Chairman, he did not make many fiery election speeches, but his work between elections helped enormously to make sure that the party delivered on our promises, and therefore got good election results.

Tharman has played a major part in shaping our new economic and social policies. Whether it is helping SMEs to upgrade their productivity, or coming up with the Special Employment Credit scheme, to help older workers stay employed. He produces not just the ideas, but with vivid ways of explaining them, talking trampolines to escalators, leaving one word with a clear impression of the essence of what we are trying to do.

Chee Hean and I have worked together the longest, since our days in the SAF. He knows me as well as I know him, and he has given me wise counsel on the most difficult problems. I rely on his independent judgment and steady support on many matters. He does not hesitate to tackle spiky issues, and to take political flak on behalf of the team, especially at critical moments and during elections.

I cannot do justice to the contributions of these five retiring CEC members this morning in my speech, but all five have served the party with loyalty and distinction. For that, we all owe them a big thank you.

Today, we take a major step forward in our political renewal. After these CEC elections, the new CEC will meet within a couple of weeks, to elect a new slate of office holders, and in due course, I will follow up with changes in the Cabinet line-up.

The PAP has had two smooth political transitions, providing both continuity and renewal. I launched ESM Goh's authorised biography recently. He recounted how Mr Lee Kuan Yew had brought him and the other 2G leaders in early, and put them into key Ministerial positions, to master the intricacies of government policies. But more importantly, to learn to work together as a team, to develop their own leadership styles, and earn the confidence and trust of Singaporeans.

It was not easy for the 2G team to fill the shoes of our founding fathers. It was particularly daunting for ESM Goh, or anyone for that matter, to succeed Mr Lee Kuan Yew. But quietly and confidently, ESM Goh and his team forged their own path, bonded with a new generation of Singaporeans, and carried the ground.

When it was time for my 3G team to take over, the transition was equally smooth and sure-footed. It was a non-event, as it should be.

The 4G team has been in Cabinet for several years now. Many of them joined in 2011. Some joined earlier, others in 2015. They have been tested in several portfolios. At the same time, they are working with each other, and learning to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses.

It is a team of able men and women, with a good combination of skills amongst them. They are gaining experience, willing to serve, and most importantly, with their hearts in the right place. I can see them gelling as a team, and am confident that they have what it takes to lead Singapore.

I hope that you will join me in giving your whole-hearted support to the new CEC and our 4G leaders.

Conclusion

We are more than midway through this election term. This may be the last Party Conference before the next GE.

The new CEC will be leading the party into the final stretch, gearing up to put our record before voters. The PAP must win the GE convincingly.

We will do so, as we have always done, by uniting Singaporeans, not dividing them; by bringing people together, not by deepening the fault lines and pulling people apart.

We take a pragmatic and centrist approach in our politics and policies.

We serve every Singaporean, from Ang Mo Kio to Aljunied.

We are setting a clear direction, supported by the broad mass of Singaporeans who want to see stability and progress continue for many years. Let us stay on course, maintain the party unity in purpose and convictions.

Work with Singaporeans to give them, and their children, opportunities for progress and a better life, and in that way earn the right to continue serving our country and our people.

With you, for you, for Singapore, for many more terms