“Singapore: Global City of Buzz, Home for Us”

1. As some of you may know, I spoke at your Ministerial Forum in 1986 and 1996. Since then, I have grown a little older. So it is a delight to speak to students who never seem to age. Some of you may also know that the two student leaders who chaired my earlier fora, R Sinnakaruppan and Zaqy Mohammed, went on to become Members of Parliament. So, Ms Lau, perhaps.....

2. The organisers have asked me to speak on “Singapore: City of Buzz”. This is indeed a timely and appropriate topic. Timely, because this is the right time to think about the next goal for Singapore, having achieved First World status economically. Appropriate, because we should be clear as to the kind of “buzz” we want to create for Singapore.

3. Buzz can refer to marketing buzz, hype or glitz, where people talk about a product and word spreads. This kind of buzz can be created by promotional advertisements and tends to fizzle out over time. Or we could be talking about the positive vibes of a place, where the environment is vibrant and exciting, and where people feel energised, engaged and happy. Some call such a place “happening”, “funky” or simply “lively”.

4. The buzz of a place can come about spontaneously; from bottom-up and not created by the government, like Geylang where you can get, I am told, amongst other things, good food. However, more often than not, to generate a positive buzz for a country, we need a government with a vision and ability to create the right environment through appropriate policies and programmes. Of course, this vision must be supported by the people because in the end, it is only the people who can bring about the buzz.

5. Today, I would like, first, to reflect on how we have developed Singapore into a City of Buzz. Then, I would like to throw a challenge to you, the generation of the future, to turn this city into a Global City of Buzz and Home for Us. The emphasis is on “global” and “home”. We do not want to be just any city with buzz, interesting but not world class or distinctive. We want to be a global, cosmopolitan city. But even more important, this city must be a home for us, not a temporary abode but a place where we feel we belong. I shall focus on three critical building blocks of a world class city and home: a buzzing economy; a vibrant lifestyle; and an engaged citizenry.

**A Buzzing Economy**

6. A buzzing economy is necessary to provide us with challenging jobs and good pay. We need economic surpluses to support a vibrant lifestyle beyond work. The immediate prospects for you are bright. Our economy has rebounded strongly from the impact of the global financial crisis. We should end this
year with a growth rate of between 13 and 15 percent, one of the fastest in the world. Employment in Singapore has risen. Amongst this year’s graduating class, most have found jobs, quite unlike the situation just a year ago. This year, the average gross starting pay of your seniors who have just graduated was $2920, compared to $2800 last year. For those of you who will be graduating next year, your job prospects are good as the labour market is expected to remain tight.

7. Our vibrant economy today is a far cry from what it was when I was your age. I graduated in 1964 to an uncertain future. Singapore’s domestic politics was turbulent and unstable. Singapore had joined Malaysia in September 1963. Indonesia had mounted a campaign of Confrontation against the formation of Malaysia, suspending virtually all trade with Singapore. There was conflict with Kuala Lumpur over the politics of multi-racial equality in Malaysia. Singapore then left Malaysia in 1965. Our employment rate was 10 per cent. To aggravate the dire situation, the British later shut down their military bases and withdrew their troops from Singapore. In response, the government focused on national and economic survival. It built up the Singapore Armed Forces quickly. It developed Jurong Industrial Estate and attracted foreign investors. The government actively sought out multi-national companies to bring their capital, technology, markets and management to Singapore.

8. By the 1980s, we were on firmer footing. We restructured our economy from low-cost, labour-intensive industries to higher-skilled and knowledge-intensive activities such as engineering design, computer software services and research and development. We became the largest disk drive manufacturer in the world by the late 1990s. We created Jurong Island out of many small islands and turned it into a major hub for the chemical and petrochemical industries. To a younger generation who had not experienced all this first hand, our progress and achievements may not seem difficult. But I can tell you they were. They required strong leadership, political will, thinking ahead, taking risks, team work, a supportive people, sacrifice and hard work.

9. Today, Singapore is ranked the third most competitive economy in the world by the World Economic Forum. The range of industries and jobs in Singapore today would have been unimaginable even 10 years ago.

10. Take for example our financial sector. You probably know that Singapore is among the top four financial centres in the world. But do you know that we are also a major wealth management centre, managing trillions of dollars out of here? Hedge funds, boutique funds, investment bankers, fund managers – we have them here in large numbers. Duxton Hill in Tanjong Pagar is buzzing with them. They have displaced the buzz of late night pleasure-seekers in dimly-lit pubs. And our financial industry will grow further. We are located not only at the crossroads of global financial flows but also at the heart of a fast growing region.

11. This financial buzz did not come about spontaneously. It was created. We built a whole ecosystem to make Singapore home to global financial institutions – the hard and soft infrastructure, tax incentives, rule of law, pro-business regulatory framework, a great place to live and play, a safe place to raise and educate your children; and importantly, a home where you can have fun - not just a place to work your guts out and make money.

12. Another example where we have created economic buzz is Biopolis at One North. The buzz words there include genome, genetics, DNA, bio-medicine, pharma, nano-technology, and robotics. Cutting edge research is carried out here.

13. If R&D is not your cup of tea, you can always work in the creative and animation industry in Singapore. Lucasfilms, the producer of Star Wars, has a presence here. There are many, many more examples of vibrant new industries and businesses in Singapore.

14. We will continuously reinvent our economy to keep up with the ever changing global business environment. Our long term prospects are bright, especially as we are situated in a fast-growing Asia. But we can ride on this growth only if we keep on upgrading our own skills and knowledge, and welcome talent.

15. That is why we are investing so much in your education: $6,000 on each primary school student each year, $8,500 on each secondary school student, $11,600 on each Junior College Student and $20,000 on each university student like you. Put in another way, by the time you finish your course in NTU (assuming a 4-year course), the government would have invested about $175,000 in you.
We are creating more opportunities and more peaks of excellence in our education system. Our schools cater to different types of students: from the students in Integrated Programme schools, to students who prefer a more hands-on learning style at Institutes of Technical Education. At the tertiary level, our polytechnics and the new Singapore Institute of Technology will be offering more degree options. A fourth university, the Singapore University of Technology and Design, will be set up in collaboration with MIT and Zhejiang University. You also have many postgraduate options in Singapore, including world class universities like INSEAD, Chicago Business School, and the Duke Medical School.

Why are we doing all these things? Because we need talented people, both local and foreign, to create a global city of buzz. By providing more education options, everyone will be able to find a field he is good in and passionate about. I believe that a passionate, engaged, well-trained and well-educated population is the best way to create a vibrant economy, with good, meaningful, well-paying jobs in all sectors.

A Vibrant Lifestyle

A strong economy will give us the resources to develop the environment for a vibrant lifestyle. One that is lively and exciting, where there are activities and facilities to engage and interest Singaporeans, where we can enjoy a comfortable, rounded and satisfying life.

Up till the early 1980s, we focused mainly on achieving economic growth and raising per capita income. So Singapore was widely mocked as a “cultural desert”, a “sterile” place where the main preoccupations of Singaporeans were *makan* and making money. When I was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the second generation of leaders in 1985, my colleagues and I set out to make Singapore a cultivated and distinctive society, and a fun place. The Ministry of Information and the Arts was set up. It provided strategy, direction and funding to spark a new beginning in the literature, arts and culture scene. New theatre companies were established and censorship was relaxed. We began to invest in hardware for arts and culture such as the Singapore Art Museum, the Asian Civilisation Museum and the Esplanade. We followed up by investing in software to develop our own talents, such as the School of the Arts, and the Yong Siew Toh Music Conservatory. We increased funding for arts and cultural groups. Today, we have an incredibly packed and exciting cultural calendar, including regular appearances by world class artistes such as Lady Gaga, Adam Lambert, Jay Chou, cellist Yo Yo Ma, pianist Lang Lang and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. We built up our Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Singapore Chinese Orchestra to international standards. Local acts have proven popular too, like Hassan Leong’s stand-up comedy, Dick Lee’s musicals such as Fried Rice Paradise and Ivan Heng’s drama productions, like Cinderel-lah! The SISTIC website has more than 200 shows and events which you can buy tickets for. In addition, there are many other free shows in Singapore, including regular concerts in our parks and heartlands. Our busy cultural calendar has caught the eye of international writers and journals. Last year, Forbes Magazine considered Singapore to be one of the World’s Culture Capitals and wrote that “While many perceive Singapore as a sterile business centre, its cultural presence in the East is now undeniable”.

The sports scene has also experienced a new burst of buzz in recent years. I opened the Singapore Sports School in 2004. In 2014, the much awaited Sports Hub will be ready. We have hosted world class sports events, including the recently completed first ever Youth Olympic Games, the F1 Grand Prix Night Race, and golf events which have attracted some of the world’s best women and men players. At the same time, we have a full schedule of sports events for all Singaporeans every year, such as the Standard Chartered Marathon, with over 60,000 participants.

Our living environment has also improved. The Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters (ABC) programme by PUB will transform our drains, canals and reservoirs into user-friendly streams, rivers and lakes. More parks and park connectors have been built, including the Henderson Wave Bridge and South Ridge Park. In 2012, the Gardens by the Bay will be ready.

Of course, no discussion about the Singapore buzz will be complete without mentioning the favourite past-time of Singaporeans - eating. Our local fare is uniquely Singapore. We miss it when we go overseas. But we also have a wide range of international cuisines, and many internationally known chefs. I don’t think I need to say more on this subject. I am sure, amongst you, there are many food-experts and “makan kings”!

However, all these events and facilities are of not much value if Singaporeans do not have the time to use them. As someone once observed, Singaporeans are strange people: they work so hard to buy their
dream home, but have no time to enjoy it. In fact, many do not appear to even have time to marry, let alone raise children. It is important to have good work-life balance so that our City of Buzz is a home as well. If there is no buzz in the home, all our work in creating a Global City of Buzz will be counter-productive. Over the years, we have taken steps to improve the situation. The Civil Service switched to a 5 day work week in 2004, and the government recently increased maternity leave benefits from 3 months to 4 months for all working mothers. We also introduced the Work-Life Works or WOW! Fund to encourage employers to introduce work-life measures. I hope you will choose a lifestyle with family and home at its core.

An Engaged Citizenry

24 For if we focus only on a lifestyle of making money and enjoying life, we will just be a materialistic, pleasure-loving society – nothing distinctive, nothing to be proud of. Without a home, without a sense of belonging and commitment, without loyalty and engagement, without a moral compass and sound values, we will be a selfish, shallow society, and will not last. We need a vibrant citizenry, and Singaporeans who are willing to participate in civil society, who are willing to give back and help each other, who are gracious and compassionate, who want to make Singapore better and not just live off Singapore.

25 I am happy to note that Singaporeans are generous. More than 90% of Singaporeans say in surveys that they have given to charity in the last year. In the depths of the recession in 2009, individuals giving to Institutions of a Public Character (IPCs) held steady, even as corporate giving fell. I am glad that young Singaporeans like you are willing to give their time as well. Most of the 5000 volunteers on the recently set up Singapore Cares volunteer portal are young adults below the age of 35.

26 In politics, the government encourages feedback and participation. We want to engage you. Singaporeans have become better educated and have higher expectations. This is natural, as is the growing desire of Singaporeans to want more say over matters which affect their lives and future. This is a healthy development.

27 Over the next few months, the political buzz will increase. This is because many Singaporeans believe that the General Elections will be held later this year or early next year. Well, I know that the Prime Minister is also thinking hard about this. Whatever the date, it will be a watershed election, one that is important to you, whether you are old enough to vote or not. Out of this election, we must produce Singapore’s fourth Prime Minister and a core team of younger Ministers who will take over from the present team.

28 However, some people may not fully appreciate the purpose and importance of General Elections, that it is for the people to choose the men and women to govern Singapore and whose policies and programmes will have an impact on your lives. They simply yearn for liberal Western-style democracies, without considering whether these will produce a good and effective government. Last month, the Straits Times published a letter from an American which provided a different perspective on American democracy. He wrote, “Democracy is ..... just a fancy word for partisan bickering and gridlocked government.” The letter sparked off some interesting responses from Singaporeans and foreigners. One Singaporean felt that vigorous competition between political parties was good. Others felt that what matters most is a democracy that works. Another American wished that American politicians would first ask themselves what is best for the people, rather than what will get them elected to another term.

29 These letters give an indication of what ordinary people expect of a democracy. By bringing them up, I do not intend to initiate a discussion on the philosophy or attributes of democracy, or whether one country’s practice of democracy is superior to another’s. My purpose is to ask you to ponder over this question: is a democratic system an end to be pursued in its own right, or is it a means to select a government to look after our lives like a good guardian or trustee? If it is the latter, how do we ensure that it returns a good government to serve the people? As we can see from examples around the world, simply observing the form of democracy does not necessarily deliver good governance and results.

30 Let me give an example of how we have adapted the Westminster’s form of democracy to suit our history, culture and population mix to produce a stable, effective government over the years. Like many democracies, we have open, fair and regular General Elections. However, because the PAP has consistently delivered a better life for Singaporeans since independence, few opposition Members of Parliament have been elected since 1968. Recognising the current desire of Singaporeans to have alternative views in Parliament, we introduced and gradually expanded the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) and the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) schemes. By the next General Elections, there will be at least 9...
opposition members in Parliament, either as elected MPs, or as NCMPs, and a further 9 NMPs, making a total of 18. This is a huge number, given that the House has only 84 elected MPs. We have done so because we acknowledge that many people, while wanting the PAP to form the government, also want to hear non-PAP views in Parliament. We welcome robust debate and rigorous scrutiny in Parliament. I only hope our Parliament will not end up in endless “partisan bickering” or worse, confrontational, destructive politics and a weak government.

31 I believe that what most people want is a political system which is fair, honest, accountable, and stable; which can elect the right leaders to serve the people’s interests; which can produce an honest and effective government; and which can deliver the kind of buzz which Singaporeans want for their country. In other words, a system which works and is tailored to Singapore’s needs.

Buzz or Fizz?

32 I believe that we already have the Singapore buzz. My question is: can we sustain it or will it end up as just fizz, like the fizz in carbonated soft drinks? Can we be sure that the Singapore buzz will not fizzle out?

33 This is not a trivial question. There are many First World countries and cities which used to be full of excitement, but no longer. One example is Japan. Twenty years ago, it had one of the strongest economies in the world. It produced world class innovative products. Tokyo was full of buzz and wealth. Today, after 20 years of deflation and low growth, the Japanese have become pessimistic people. The International Herald Tribune recently wrote that while Japan remains a wealthy country, it now has a culture of fatalism and reduced expectations. Its people have lost their vitality. I recently met, at the sidelines of the F1 race, the Group Managing Director of LVMH, the maker of luxury goods such as Louis Vuitton and Moet and Chandon champagne. He told me that Europe and Japan no longer had drive. They only want the status quo. Just look at the strikes in France against the government’s decision to reform the unaffordable pension system. In other words, they do not want to change but expect the rest of the world to remain unchanged relative to their countries. Unfortunately, they are going to be disappointed. Asia will not remain static.

34 I will share with you my perspective on how we can sustain the Singapore buzz. For the buzz to endure, it must come from within us. Singaporeans must see the Global City of Buzz as a world class home, and not just a world class integrated resort. An integrated resort may have a lot of buzz, but the people come and go. A home is a place where people stay, live their dreams and will defend with their lives. For our home to be special, we must have attributes and values which we hold dear. I am talking about good, time-tested values which have come to define Singapore and Singaporeans. Throughout the world, we are known as a hardworking people, honest and incorruptible, with a focus on the family.

35 Of course, these values are not unique to Singapore. There are hardworking people around the world; the Asian society emphasises the family as the basic building block while Denmark and New Zealand score as high on the incorruptibility index as we do. But when these values are present together in one people, they create Singaporeans who are distinct from others. Of course, these must be combined with other Singaporean traits such as Singlish and taste buds for char kway teow, laksa, chilli crabs and other favourite hawker food. Our common values, traits and lifestyle make Singapore so familiar and comfortable to Singaporeans. They make us feel homesick when we travel afar or study and work abroad. Our Singaporean identity and spirit define us, but will we lose them after the older generations pass away? Or as we take in more immigrants and Singapore becomes more cosmopolitan?

Sustaining the Buzz

36 Recently, one of your professors, Professor Koh Tai Ann of NTU’s Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences called on Singapore to develop into “a truly thinking society”. There is value in what Prof Koh said. Today, we have a vibrant economy, lifestyle and citizenry. We did not get here by chance. We made conscious decisions at key points in our history to achieve economic success, create the cultural buzz, and engage the citizens.

37 Singaporeans need to collectively think about the challenges and goals in our next phase of development. We also need to think about how to cherish and protect our common values and way of life.

38 The future will be determined by the present generation and young people like you. Like previous generations, you will face new challenges. How do we support an ageing population? Can we increase our
fertility rate? Have we reached the limits to our growth? How do we overcome our land constraints? Can we find new growth engines which are environmentally sustainable? How do we continue to provide good and affordable housing and healthcare? How do we meet Singaporeans higher expectations? How do we compete against other emerging economies? These are only the known challenges. Other as yet unknown challenges will also be sprung on you.

But the difference between your generation and mine is that you have more resources and better conditions to tackle these issues. We live in a rising Asia where opportunities abound. We will have a much better educated population. We will have a more developed and carefully planned infrastructure, which will be able to provide a sustainable environment for us to live and work in. We have a hard-earned reputation for social harmony and rule of law.

It will be a tragedy if our next generation is made up of what the Chinese call “Plasticine” people (橡皮人). According to the Guangzhou based New Weekly Magazine, these are well-educated, white-collar workers in booming China who no longer have any dreams, interests or ideals, who do not feel joy or pain. They are disenchanted and disempowered, partly because they feel that they do not have control over their own lives. This is not the situation in Singapore and should never become the case. Every Singaporean matters. There are many roles for you to fill, at the university, such as the NTU Students Union; in society, such as voluntary welfare organizations; in the public and private sector; and in politics. My hope is for you and those in your generation to continue to be engaged, to pursue your passion and your dreams, to challenge conventional wisdom, to do things and make Singapore better.

Conclusion

Our founding fathers fought for independence, fought communism and fought communalism. They created a most improbable country out of this tiny island with no natural resources. They grew it into a First World country. That generation is fading away. My generation built on their achievements, restructured and diversified the economy and fostered a culturally vibrant and socially cohesive and compassionate society.

Today, we are at another threshold. Your generation will have to take over the mantle of responsibility and lift Singapore to new heights. You have a sturdy platform to work from, with resources and opportunities which previous generations never had. You can do it. You must do it. Step forward and make Singapore a Global City of Buzz and a Home for Us.

I wish you success in your journey ahead.