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### Let political system be a connecting tool

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COMMENTARY

# Let political system be a connecting tool



EUGENE K B TAN

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech will likely serve as the curtain raiser to the opening of Singapore's 12th Parliament on Oct 10. The myriad of issues raised will be the focus of discussion, debate and reflection in the weeks ahead.

In his speech, Mr Lee outlined the direction and tenor of his Government's strategic policy directions. Notwithstanding his giving attention to the economy first, this year's speech is characterised by a focus on "post-material" issues.

These are non-economic issues such as the social safety nets and the character of Singapore society. They are important as nation-making is not just about building economic muscle, but also about ensuring that Singaporeans have a stake in and a deep sense of belonging to the country.

Immigration formed the salient subtext of his speech. In the three key areas – housing, education and jobs – that the Prime

Minister dealt with substantively, immigration has impacted life here significantly and provided the context, understandably, for much angst and anxiety for the average Singaporean and for the Government.

Among Singaporeans, there is a sense that these policies disadvantage and displace Singaporeans. So the focus and elaboration on the "Singaporeans first" policy fundamental is timely.

Coming after the bruising General Election in May, the ground sentiments have resonated, and it is imperative that the Government respond not just in form but also in substance. The Government has indicated that it needs to explain its policies better. Mr Lee's rally speech highlighted the competing and conflicting interests, needs and aspirations in the various policies. For instance, the need for immigration is well understood but public acceptance has been tepid at best.

Mr Lee reiterated the need for Singaporeans not to turn negative on foreigners. Investors, when making decisions, will have an eye not just on government policies relevant to them, but also on whether the relevant

policies have secured buy-in and trust.

In this regard, the attempt by the Government to leaven and moderate the cold economic logic of its immigration policy is timely. For instance, younger Singaporeans at the PMET level are vulnerable to "unrestrained competition from foreigners". Thus, the raising of the salary threshold for Employment Passes and the tightening of educational qualifications are well-calibrated measures.

The emphasis on social safety nets is another notable point. One hopes the Government will continue to review the social compact. Economic growth has not benefited every Singaporean equally. It is not realistic to expect equality of benefits, but it is crucial to maintain social cohesion through ensuring that there is equitable distribution of Singapore's growth and wealth.

The tweaking of our social compact to help the less privileged, the disadvantaged, and those who have fallen on hard times is vital in the nation-building process. There is a need to regularly review existing framework of social safety nets to ensure that we do not fall behind the

changing needs of society.

One area that Mr Lee could have highlighted is how our political system can evolve to attract buy-in for our unique system of governance, given that the expectations are for a more open political system in which the ruling People's Action Party is less dominant.

The issue is not whether there needs to be political change – it is how we should strive towards engendering political change that would generate greater ownership of our system of governance. In so doing, we enhance our prospects of having each and every Singaporean bear responsibility for defending our way of life.

As we approach half a century of nationhood, our political system must be a source of connectedness for Singaporeans to the nation, not a marginalising tool. As Mr Lee recognised, getting our politics right is crucial if Singaporeans are to have a stronger stake in our country. ■

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