

EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE LAWRENCE WONG AT THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION'S COMMUNITY SEMINAR 2022 ON 29 OCTOBER 2022

Deputy Chairman Minister Edwin Tong,
PA Board Members,
Fellow Grassroots Advisers, Grassroots Leaders and Community Partners,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning. It is so good to see all of you here this morning, all in one room. Finally!

I see everyone acting like Covid-19 is over. Even though Covid-19 is not over yet, it's ok to be a little bit more relaxed now and I am glad to see many familiar faces here at our first Community Seminar held in-person since 2019.

We have been through a lot, as a society, in the past two and a half years

Everyone in the People's Association – management and staff – as well as all our grassroots leaders and partners here today, all of you played a critical role in getting us to where we are today.

You helped us to make that last-mile connection with our residents

In the darkest moments of the pandemic, you provided relief for those in need; you took special care of our seniors, you encouraged them to get vaccinated, and you helped them to stay connected

The Government rolled out the Temporary Relief Fund to help those whose incomes were affected, but it was all of you who helped to make sure residents actually received the help

The Government introduced the CDC vouchers – but again it was all of you who helped to make the scheme work by bringing shop owners and hawkers on board, and making it easier for families to use the vouchers

So this morning, I'd like to say a big thank you to everyone here for giving your best and making a difference to the lives and livelihoods of our fellow citizens in this generational crisis. Thank you very much.

A High Trust Society

Ultimately, it was the deep trust we have in one another that got us through what we

hope will be the worst of the pandemic. Trust was the key difference in our fight against Covid-19 – it was the X factor that helped to make a difference and to make us succeed

All this did not happen by chance. In fact, nothing in Singapore happens by chance – we are like the duck that is very calm on the surface but paddling furiously underwater. And so the fact that we are a high-trust society today is partly because of the painstaking work that PA has done since our early years of nation building

PA was formed in 1960, almost immediately after we attained self-rule and before Singapore became independent

Those were not peaceful days at all. We were battling the communists for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans

Many here would have remembered the Battle for Merger radio broadcasts made by Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1961

Perhaps fewer may know that once the referendum was over, Mr Lee made the effort to visit all the constituencies in Singapore personally

And he was accompanied by grassroots leaders. They went deep into areas with strong pro-communist sentiments

They went to the people, engaged them, and gave them the confidence that the PAP government could be trusted

Without these efforts by our political leaders and our pioneer grassroots leaders, history in Singapore could have very easily gone down a different road

And of course, PA would go on to play a key role in many other milestones in our nation building journey

Like getting early cohorts of NSmen and their families to support National Service

And helping to adapt and transplant our kampong spirit into HDB flats

I too personally have been a beneficiary of the PA network and grassroots movement in Singapore

My parents bought their HDB flat in Marine Parade in the early 70s

Marine Parade then was very different from Marine Parade today. It was completely a new estate, built on reclaimed land – people were saying then ‘better don’t buy, because built on reclaimed land sure to sink at some point in time’. But my parents grew up in the East, they were more comfortable living in the East. And Marine

Parade was considered the 'BTO' of that time – a completely new estate.

When we all moved in as a family, everyone were strangers and it was a completely new environment; many came from the kampongs like my mother who had lived at Kampong Amber previously

But the grassroots leaders there helped to build up the kampong spirit

I was just a small boy, but I still have fond memories of the pot-lucks and the gatherings that were conducted at the void deck – as kids, we especially enjoyed the magic shows, performances, and games. Some things don't change, we still have that today. And I still have photographs of me as a kid participating in those games and pot-lucks back then.

One time, we were locked out of our flat because my father had misplaced the key to the padlock

It was late at night, and there was no one to turn to. In those days, there was no handphone, no internet.

So late at night, we did not know who to turn to, and so we asked one of the grassroots leaders for help. Very quickly, he activated his network within the block and soon we had the gathering of people outside my unit, trying all sorts of different ways to open the padlock. Eventually someone found a big saw, and they came and managed to saw open the padlock, and we managed to get in

Some years later, there was a burglary in our block. It happened to be my unit, and I was the victim. My brother and I – then little boys – were going back home when the thieves who had followed us rushed into the unit before we could close the door. They tied us up, ransacked the whole place, and stole everything they could find. And again, the grassroots sprang into action, they decided to engage the residents in the block because people were worried. They managed to pull some funding from the residents, and amazingly, they hired someone to be a security guard. Block 3 Marine Terrace must have been the first HDB block in the estate with a security counter at the void deck. So in the 1980s, if you went to the block, you would have seen a table with a gentleman. If you were a stranger, the gentleman would ask you 'who are you, who are visiting?'. This was truly grassroots in action!

My father was so inspired that later on he even joined the RC and became an active grassroots leader himself!

Today, more than the six decades after PA was founded, we have a much stronger sense of identity as a nation. But there are still divisive forces and fault lines in our society – both old and new

There are divides along the lines of race, language and religion, which have not

gone away

Meanwhile, as our society becomes more diverse, other tensions have emerged – between those who have done better, and those who have less; between groups who subscribe to different worldviews and have different ideas about how society should organise itself

With its network of 40,000 volunteers, PA really continues to be the social glue for our neighbourhoods

You build bonds between Singaporeans of different backgrounds;

You integrate new citizens into our community; and

You continue to help vulnerable groups, like our seniors, stay engaged and connected.

PA also serves as a vital link between the Government and our people.

Grassroot leaders and advisers continue to hear and convey residents' feedback to the Government, ensuring that our policies stay relevant

And you help to explain the reason for our policies, and the trade-offs that are necessary to balance the needs and wants of different groups –helping everyone understand the common goals that we are working towards

So there should be no doubt that PA's mission remains relevant and essential to Singapore's continued unity and progress

Refreshing our Social Compact

Looking ahead, like many other countries, we face our share of global and domestic stresses

We all know that the economic outlook is worsening; global growth is slowing down and inflation is likely to remain high because of the Ukraine war

We know that relations between America and China are also worsening – and this will impact on regional stability and longer-term prospects

Within Singapore, our population is ageing, our economy is maturing, and yet our needs are continuing to grow by the day

So there is no doubt that there are challenges ahead. But the best way to tackle these challenges, the best way to tackle them is to stay cohesive and united, and get through the stormy weather as one people just as we have done in the past two and

a half years.

This is why one of my first priorities as Deputy Prime Minister was to launch the Forward Singapore exercise – to engage Singaporeans on how we can refresh and update our social compact, and ensure that we continue to be a high-trust society, continue to have that sense of solidarity and unity as one people so that we can more effectively move forward in this uncertain, dangerous and volatile world

Over the past few months, we've heard from many Singaporeans about how we can continue to progress along our nation-building journey – what changes we have to make

The Government will take these views on board, and we will consider carefully how our policies should be adjusted

But the People's Association too is very much part of this exercise and you also have to think about how the PA must refresh itself

Over the years, PA has become synonymous with community activities and events in our housing estates – the void deck parties I enjoyed as a kid continues to be a mainstay of PA events.

But you must always remember PA's task is not to be an event organiser; events are simply a means towards the more important objective of building cohesive communities. That is our mission – to build strong and cohesive communities

So how should PA refresh itself to better achieve this mission

The team in PA has been thinking hard about this

Let me suggest three areas for PA to focus on

A Refreshed People's Association

First, PA must strive to build consensus amidst diversity. Singapore is becoming a more diverse society.

Residents have all sorts of concerns, anxieties as well as different aspirations and needs

It's not always possible to reconcile what everyone wants today

For example, if you have conversation on housing – half the room will say, 'please make property prices come down'; the other half of the room will say, 'please don't take too drastic an action, otherwise my asset value will come down. So you've got divided views

If you talk about foreign manpower – some will say, ‘please tighten the rules and cut back on the number of foreigner work pass holders’, but anyone in the room who is a business owner or SMEs owner would say, ‘please ease the rules, I can’t find enough people already, going to die, why the rules so tight?’ All of you would be familiar with this

And this kind of diversity happens even on municipal issues – once, I was in a dialogue with my residents, one person came up, asked a question. He was very agitated, very angry. He said, ‘why did you install white LED lights in our common corridor? So terrible. It was warm yellow lights previously – nice and cosy. You changed it to white LED lights without consulting us. Big mistake, I demand that you change it back immediately’. So I asked the rest of the people in the audience, ‘how many of you like the white LED lights?’ and surprisingly the vast majority raised their hands. Then this gentleman saw everyone preferred white lights; he calmed down and acknowledged eventually that indeed there were different views – not just his strongly held views – and he had to take into consideration these other preferences as well.

Increasingly, we will have to find ways to get people to get Singaporeans to engage one another; to listen to the views of our neighbours and fellow citizens. We must recognise that there are often diverse perspectives on issues, and learn how to seek compromise and reach common ground

PA can help to facilitate this by developing more platforms for different groups to share their views candidly with one another, provide safe spaces for such sharing, and help Singaporeans build consensus on the way forward for our society

Second, PA can help to strengthen citizen participation in our community

It was Mr. S. Rajaratnam who coined this the idea of a “democracy of deeds” in 1971 – he said that to an audience of grassroots leaders – he envisioned a democracy where everyone in the community works together, as he puts it: to “solve practical problems in a practical way”, which is what all of you do in the grassroots movement

And we saw this vividly during the pandemic as well, when many responded with spontaneous acts of kindness –stepping forward to help others, looking out for their neighbours, and providing support to fellow Singaporeans.

All of these actions were borne from a deep-seated instinct to do something for others in need, and to help make things better.

We can certainly do more to harness this instinct to contribute to society, especially in our own local communities

PA already has a strong base of local volunteers through the grassroots movement.

Many of you volunteer to support PA's programmes and activities, despite your heavy work commitments, and we value greatly all of you for your service

At the same time, there are also many Singaporeans who are keen to do something and contribute to the community

Some can only do so more informally, or on an ad-hoc basis

Others want to volunteer, but I will do for a very specific issue or cause that I care about, like protecting the environment or championing mental health

So we can do more to draw in this wider group of Singaporeans and help to develop in them the habit of getting involved in the community. And to do that, PA can offer platforms that go beyond the current grassroots structures. We can offer opportunities that are less structured and more flexible for people to volunteer in our community

For example, PA can work more closely with HDB to create opportunities for residents to play an active role in livening up the shared spaces in our neighbourhoods

PA can also help to convene and bring together groups of like-minded Singaporeans to undertake projects in issues and causes that they are passionate about

And PA is well positioned to do this. You know the needs on the ground. You also have networks to bring in other stakeholders and partners where necessary to coordinate the efforts and maximise the impact of volunteers

Third, PA must stay connected and relevant to our young people

We have many senior and veteran GRLs amongst us

We value all of your contributions over the many decades and we will continue to tap on your wealth of expertise and wisdom

At the same time, we do have to give space for the next generation to step up and to contribute

I know sometimes people have a tendency to compare the younger ones with the older ones and we somehow, perhaps in the world of traditional media and social media, attach certain negative attributions to the younger folks – some say they are strawberry generation, they like to lie flat, that they are quiet quitters. But all that is not new. I remember when I was young person in the 80s, people called my generation 'lazy and slackers' too but we turned out all right I think.

The reality is that every cohort thinks that the one that comes after them is not as

good. That's just human tendency. But we shouldn't be too hard on our young people.

So I say let's be fair to our youths – they have grown up in a different Singapore than their parents; their outlook and views will be different. But I have no doubt that they are equally passionate about issues that are close to their heart, and they want to be involved in making an impact in the community. They will naturally have their own ways of doing things, different from the older folks. And we should give them space to try, experiment, even make some mistakes along the way – it's ok, because the best way to learn is to make the mistake and learn from them.

So PA must embrace our youths as partners and agents of change

That means not just engaging them

That means not just having a youth network but really embracing young people and showing that we trust them – empower them to take charge; to lead projects on their own, and eventually to take on bigger leadership positions in the community

I have shared three areas that PA can do more of: to build consensus amidst diversity, to strengthen active citizen participation, and to stay connected to our young people.

These are some of my thoughts. Deputy Chairman Edwin Tong will elaborate later on PA's community building mission and he has some plans which he will share with you too

The bottom line is that we have all achieved a lot over the decades, but there is still more to be done, and we have a full agenda ahead of us

So I look forward to all of your support for this important work and to walking this journey together with each and every one of you

Conclusion

To conclude, when PA was formed, Mr Lee Kuan Yew said that the task of PA was to make "the people participate in the Government"

In fact, this was an incredibly bold and innovative idea during that time

No other country had a national grassroots movement like the PA which provided a platform for people to be active participants in nation building

But we made it happen in Singapore

So we have every reason to stand tall and be proud of the PA and the grassroots

movement

Your contributions are not in found in buildings, in hardware or infrastructure

They are in something intangible and far more important – that's the building of our national character, identity and values

The work of PA in bringing people together, and in solving practical problems in practical ways – that work contributes to a certain quality in Singaporeans. That's why when you ask yourself 'what is it that makes us Singaporeans?', I think we are a people with a 'can do and never say die' spirit – our veterans would say: 打死不走 (pah si buay zao), never say die. We don't just talk, we get things done, we focus on action and during bad times, we are highly creative and resilient – not just for ourselves and our families, but also in looking out for the people around us. That's what makes us Singaporeans

So I encourage everyone to focus on this essential work of PA

Let's emphasise our role as community and people builders

Let's strengthen solidarity, trust and the Singapore spirit in our people

Together, let's chart our way forward to a better and brighter future for Singapore

Thank you very much.