

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MR EDWIN TONG, MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH, SECOND MINISTER FOR LAW AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION AT INCONVERSATION: A DIALOGUE ON INCLUSIVITY IN MULTICULTURAL SINGAPORE, ON 23 JULY 2022, 9.30AM TO 12.30PM, AT RAFFLES TOWN CLUB**

1. Good morning.
2. It is my pleasure to be here at the inaugural INConversation.
3. This morning we will have the Dialogue on Inclusivity in Multicultural Singapore 2022, as part of the People's Association's (PA) Integration and Naturalisation Champions' (INC) 15th anniversary celebrations.
4. I thank everyone for supporting the INC initiative over the years. It is important for us to integrate, to not just talk about integration or multiculturalism, but to really act it out and make it part of our daily experience. It is not something we talk about in conversations in a seminar or dialogue, but what we do day to day with our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, people we see in school, and people we don't know or don't recognise in our midst just as well. All these goes towards defining our identity as a truly multicultural Singapore.
5. Since the inception of the INC in 2007, INCs have played a very important role in engaging and integrating newcomers into Singapore:

- (a) There are different segments of society, and Singapore sits in the middle of probably the most diverse region in the world. Diverse, in the sense of race, religion, language, and ethnicity. We sit in the middle of that and every day we see people of different stripes, different colours, different creeds, and INC plays a very important role in making sure that we do not exist in different silos in Singapore, but that we integrate with one another, to make ourselves One Singapore, One Community.
- (b) It is done through various integration-centric programmes, grassroots activities, and purposeful collaborations with strategic partners; enhancing the lived experience day to day, breaking down barriers, and fostering more common spaces.
- (c) INCs facilitate sustained engagement for newcomers to better understand the local culture and social norms. It will take some time to fully understand and integrate, but it is very important to start and continue that journey.

### **Racial Harmony Day**

- 6. In Singapore, in July each year, we celebrate Racial Harmony Day. We have multicultural activities in our schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, our precincts, and our communities.
  - (a) These are happy occasions, where we take the opportunity to come together as a society to celebrate our diverse cultures and traditions. It is a constant reminder of our unity

and our social cohesion which is very much part of our country's success.

- (b) But Racial Harmony Day has sombre origins. It marks a day in July 1964, where there was a series of very violent, and in some cases fatal, riots that occurred in Singapore. This was in 1964, and it follows the merger with Malaysia in 1963. There were lots of communal tension and people were drawing distinctions with one another based on race and, in some cases, religion.
  - (c) This resulted in the deaths of 30 people with many more injured, and much property damage.
  - (d) Race relations and trust between various communities sharply deteriorated then, and religious tensions were high.
7. Looking at all of us here today – gathered and eager to display our unique cultures and practices, integrating with one another – shows we have come a long way. The events of 1964 seem so far away. I challenge you to find another place in the world where we can come together like this – to have people of different races and religions, but sharing the same common identity, share food at the same table. What we have in Singapore, we have to cherish, nourish and preserve.

8. Racial and religious harmony must be a constant work-in-progress in our society, and it must always be seen as a continuing journey. The day we say we have arrived, we have done well, we can now relax and take our foot off the paddle – we will begin to go downhill.
  
9. We are here today because we constantly tell ourselves that this is something we must work hard towards, and it makes us special. It defines us as Singaporeans. It is therefore dangerous to think that we have arrived, and take for granted what we have, especially with what's happening around the world. We don't have to look very far to see that around the world things are not quite like what we have today, even around this room. Let me just cite some recent examples to illustrate the point a little bit more.
  - (a) In Indonesia, anti-Ahok riots broke out in 2017 because of accusations that the Christian politician of Chinese-descendent had committed blasphemy against Islam. There were loss of lives, lots of property damage and a lot of tension. A hundred people were injured and several dead.
  
  - (b) In Myanmar, Rohingya people who are the ethnic Muslim minority group in the country faced discrimination and violence. This has been happening for decades because they are the minority group. It is easy to take advantage of and bully the minority. That is what happens in many other societies. As a result. many Rohingyas were compelled to flee their homes, places where they grew up in, just for survival.

- (c) Violence has also plagued Southern Thailand for decades, because of the alienation, discrimination, and continued marginalisation of the Malay-Muslim community. Since 2004, not that long ago, over 7,000 people have been killed because of discrimination and conflict.
10. From these examples, we can see that tensions are not just real, but they continue to exist, and they are very near us. They happen in countries with social demographics that are not very different from ours.
  11. This has happened because of a structural inability to address the ethnic minority's grievances, to allow them to be aired, to give them a platform, to feel included, and to provide communities with an adequate sense of inclusion, protection, and security.
  12. In these places which we must look at carefully, beyond the loss of lives, injuries, and property destruction, what is even worse is the breakdown of the underlying linkages, the trust, and the cohesion that they have. This will not be replaced like you may rebuild the roof of your house that has been damaged or repair the roads that had been damaged. This will take decades if not long term to rebuild. The trust in the community, the ability to open up again. This has been long lasting. The unbinding of the social fabric, goodwill and trust.

13. Singapore started our years as an independent country with all of these in mind. In 1964, I mentioned that we had the communal riots. That led to our separation in 1965. And so, in 1965, we were very deliberate right from the start.

### **Existing laws, policies, and programmes in Singapore**

14. We are a society where different communities should be allowed to express their identities and practise their cultures, free from any discrimination. We make sure the minorities are not being taken advantage of simply because they are smaller in number.
15. I often I ask myself and I ask other people. When we talk about multiculturalism, what does it mean for us? This was expressed by PM at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017, where he said:
  - (a) *“We are also a multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society. This diversity is a fundamental aspect of our respective identities.*
  - (b) *Our aim is integration, not assimilation. No race or culture in Singapore is coerced into conforming with other cultures or identities, let alone that of the majority.*
  - (c) *Ours is not a melting pot society, with every shorn of its distinctiveness.*

*(d) Instead, we encourage each race to preserve its unique culture and traditions, while fostering mutual appreciation and respect among all of them.”*

16. I think this aptly defines how we practice and what we do in Singapore. So, it is: More, not less; Integration, not assimilation. By doing this we make sure that in Singapore we must be greater than the sum of our parts.
17. To ensure that we continue to grow and thrive as a multiracial and multicultural society, it must be a multi stakeholder effort. It is not society alone, not community alone, not any pockets of society, and not the government alone – it cannot be. It has to be everyone working together. We started our country in 1965 with this in mind.
18. The Government had proactively and very deliberately established laws, policies, institutions, and programmes across the years which seek to fundamentally protect the positions of our minorities to ensure we do not go down the path like so many other countries, where the minorities are taken advantage of.
19. Let me just tell you, with some examples, of what sets us apart from so many other countries in the world. We do this because we do not leave social harmony, cohesion, or multiculturalism to chance. We know that it cannot be left to chance.
  - (a) For instance, we enshrined in our Constitution that every Government, whether it is today’s government or the government of the future generation, has the responsibility to

*“constantly care for the interests of our racial and religious minorities in Singapore”*. That is something that is hardcoded into our constitution from Day 1. We do not allow minorities to be taken advantage of, and the government of the day has this fundamental responsibility to ensure that.

- (b) We recognise the *“special position”* of Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore. That is the reality, that is how Singapore was and therefore we must safeguard and support their political, educational, religious, economic, social, and cultural interests. This is what we put in our constitution.
- (c) We enacted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act or MRHA, is a law to guard against actions that undermine our religious harmony. We set our boundaries. You can’t stand on a soapbox in Hong Lim and speak poorly of another religion. You can go up there and you can promote your religion, you can evangelise, you can tell people what your religion is about, but you never go up and degrade another religion. That is a hard-line for us. We will soon also be introducing a similar law to safeguard racial harmony in Singapore, and I think it is needed.<sup>1</sup>
- (d) One of the other structures we have included is the GRC to ensure that we always have political leadership representation in parliament of people across all races in Singapore.

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<sup>1</sup> *“PMO | National Day Rally 2021.”* Prime Minister’s Office Singapore. August 31, 2021. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2021-English>



- (e) We also ensure that our public housing estates have the EIP. Many people ask, what is the relevance of CMIO, why do you still need the EIP. This is because there is a natural selection. You go to the established first world countries such as Europe, France, UK, US, some of the most established cities like New York City, there are enclaves which are dominated by one particular race. And when there is one single race in a particular enclave, the services around there will change. The identity of the community will change. Schools, services, restaurants, shops will change to serve the needs of that particular society. We can't afford to have that in Singapore. So, we have policies that make sure that in every precinct, we might come across someone from a different race, and share the lift with someone of a different race. It is part of our day, part of our lived experiences.
- (f) We set up institutions such as the Presidential Council for Minority Rights also entrenched in the Constitution. What does it do? It ensures that even after parliament – which is the will of the people – passes a bill, it still has to go through the PCMR, it still has to ensure that there is nothing in this bill that prejudices the rule or the rights of the minority. And that is how seriously we take it. Even after we pass the bills in parliament after a full debate, it goes through the PCMR. I say all this not to brag, but to tell you that it is important that we build these structures, to look at these structures as what is relevant for our community in Singapore and how we protect, preserve and in some cases enhance what we find so special in our community.

20. I am quite confident that not many, if at all, other countries in the world can do this, in what we have achieved in Singapore. Never for a moment assume it is perfect, that we are in a steady state, and never for a moment assume or take for granted that this will carry on just because we have been reasonably successful over the past few decades.
21. Recently, at BBC's podcast 'HardTalk', Minister Shanmugam was asked about racial politics in Singapore.
- (a) He says, in Singapore, the Government does not operate on the basis that racism is absent in Singapore.
  - (b) We know it exists; we know it is part of human behaviour. The degree on racism, whatever form, is a question of how much more or how much less, exists in every society, especially a diverse society. We do not shy away from it, we tackle it head on, and we institutionalise policies and traditions that help us safeguard this very cherished position.
22. Where we constantly interact every day - as I said we come across someone from a different race, different background, local born, foreign born Singaporeans – we should take it upon ourselves to be informed and considerate of other people's cultural beliefs, practices and backgrounds.
23. We must also strive to consciously expand our common spaces, by showing respect towards one another. When I was growing up, we had moral education in schools where textbooks use the phrase

‘Religious Tolerance’. I think that we can move one step forward and call it ‘Religious Embracement’. We should be more proactive about it. It is not just about tolerating; I think we must now take steps to embrace. And embracement means to understand what other cultures, religions and practices are about.

24. This way, each of us can continue to play a part in creating a Singapore that is really for all.

### **Key Role of our INCs in Strengthening Racial Harmony**

25. On that note, the INCs, 15 years old today, have been playing a big part in strengthening racial harmony in our society.
26. Later we will launch our publication, and there are many stories illustrating the efforts of promoting integration in our community. There is no one formula for this. It really depends on the community and the people. Someone told me about having a Gotong Royong in the middle of the lobby in the HDB flat, with everyone coming together, and that person told me that a karaoke set was brought. This is what makes us unique and special – something spontaneous, unique, bonding over food and music. I think this is the best way of making sure that we break down the barriers of different races. We must continue to foster a platform, and the INCs have been playing a big part in doing this.

27. I thank the PA Integration Council and INCs and many of you here, for actively walking the talk, making sure that what we define as our policy as mentioned earlier is actually done and practiced on the ground daily.
28. On a broader level, the People's Association has strived for the past 62 years to expand our common spaces to integrate the different races and foster mutual appreciation and respect among people. We will continue to support the INCs in this work. It is something we want to do more of, to engender a stronger sense of "we" and not "me".
29. As we emerge from the Covid pandemic, we can take heart that we can come out a little bit more and put a little bit more of the 'we' in our community and a bit less of the 'me'. All of these will contribute greatly towards our common national identity and certainly will go towards the heart of Singapore.
30. At the same time ethnic and multicultural integration must also happen at the individual level. It is very good to have policies, very good to have movements like INC, events, activities, the karaoke and party that I have talked about earlier, but each and every one of us must also want to do it and be open to it. Which is why I talked about embracement, it is about mindset and also a mindset shift. To be in each other's mindshare and not think, 'This is Malay, I'm Chinese', or 'That's Indian'; but to think of us as neighbours first, and then bring that special unique mix of diverse cultural background of cooking, food, and *baju*, into the mix thereafter. I think that is how we approach integration.

31. On the same token, the local-foreign integration also takes two hands to clap. It is easy to say, this person behaves like a foreigner even though he is a Singaporean, so he must be new Singaporean. What is the point of saying that? Does it make us any closer in our fostering of that identity in us now? It just seeks to draw divides.
32. If you get that it takes two hands to clap, when there is a problem, when there is someone who is not integrated, yes, you might need more effort by that opposite party. But have we asked ourselves, what more can we do to be more welcoming? To be warmer in fostering a more open relationship where we share food and we welcome them into our midst? It takes all of us to work together. It is not just the fault or attitudes of one party alone.
33. Finally, I just want to go back to what Prime Minister said, to remember that as we move forward on this journey to the next 15 years and beyond. What we have, are created because we made sure that we acknowledge, allow and encourage different practices. It is very important for us to ensure that we are integrating and not putting everyone into a melting pot. You come out on the other side, all looking the same and say, we have achieved success. We do not want that. We want everyone to be different, distinct, unique, like everyone in this room, but all share a common identity as Singaporeans. And that is how we will move forward on our multicultural way.
34. In closing, I say to the INC side, thank you for the work you have done. I take the opportunity to encourage you to carry on not just for another 15 years, but certainly beyond that. And I want to thank you

for the very active contributions you have made because you not just walk the talk, but you give the example. When you give the example and you are the first person to say hello in the lift lobby to someone you do not know, you will be amazed how much difference that can be.

35. As we move forward, let us reflect on the lessons that our country has taught us. Never let this current state lull us into a sense of complacency but remember that tensions do continue to exist. Not very far away, and it can happen to us with a slight flashpoint. We must cherish this racial religious, multicultural harmony that we have and celebrate the diversity.
36. I hope to see more Singaporeans across all ages, backgrounds, different races, step forward to strengthen our rich and very diverse social fabric. And for many more years we will be able to say that we truly are inclusive, truly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and a place where we do not just say we are multicultural as a slogan, as a line that sounds nice, but that we truly mean it. In our day to day experiences, in what we do, who we see every day in our work, in our home, in our social and communal space. And then we can really make a difference collectively.
37. Thank you very much, you will have a great dialogue, I am sure. The panel, I was checking with them earlier, all of them they have their own stories to share and tell. Make sure you ask them extremely difficult questions. They will handle it very well.
38. Thank you very much everyone.