

Notice for the Sitting of Parliament on 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2009

## **MOTION**

By Mr Viswa Sadasivan (Nominated Member)

### **NATION BUILDING TENETS:**

**That this House reaffirms its commitment to the nation building tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge when debating national policies, especially economic policies.**

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### **Preamble**

1. Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to move this motion.
2. Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, “That this House reaffirms its commitment to the nation building tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge when debating national policies, especially economic policies.
3. My inspiration to speak on this subject came about a month and a half ago when I was invited by BG Tan Chuan Jin, Chairman of NDP EXCO 2009 to write a piece on what the National Pledge means to me. Before that, BG Tan and I had discussed at some length the meaning of the Pledge and why it is important that it is re-energised; become a living, breathing mantra for all Singaporeans. We lamented, with a good measure of alacrity, the way we used to “get it over and done with” in school when we had to recite it – a tradition, we gathered, is held up even today! We talked about how beautifully crafted our Pledge was, and what a waste it is that its meaning and power is not understood enough or reflected on, let alone garnered for rallying us as a people.
4. It was when I was writing my thoughts for the essay that I realised how powerful the Pledge was, and how much it means to me, in spirit. The

process of writing the essay was cathartic as an avalanche of memories came rushing at me – memories, good and not so pleasant, that formed the basis of my belief system as a citizen of this country, my home. The National Pledge, I realised, contained the basis of who we are and what makes us unique. In fact, it holds the key to our success as a peaceful, harmonious and certainly economically successful nation. And it struck me that the National Pledge is the only document, if we could call it one, that cannot be amended by a two-thirds majority in Parliament! In effect, our National Pledge is akin to the Bill of Rights in the United States of America; it defines who we are; what we aspire to remain regardless of the realities of a fast changing world; it is about what we stand for – our credo.

5. It has often been said that Singapore does not have an ideology – that pragmatism is our mantra and *modus operandi*. But if we examine our National Pledge closely, it is our national ideology – a set of inalienable values, precepts that demand adherence in the face of the lure of pragmatism. It is designed to serve as the moral compass for us as a people – we lose it, ignore it, or misabuse it to our peril.
  
6. The stability provided by the National Pledge gave us, especially our government, the confidence to take decisive steps, make quantum leaps, rapidly shift gears or change directions to keep us moving with the currents – knowing very well the boat is even keeled and won't capsize. As such, the value of the Pledge comes into sharp relief not when the going is good, but when we are facing tough challenges, be it the economic challenges we are up against now, or SARS a few years ago. During these times, when scarcity is the order of the day, the centripetal forces of race, religion, language, and class go into overdrive – our instincts and impulses become primordial. It is during these times that our mettle, our resilience as a nation is tested. We did well during the SARS outbreak, and we appear to be working together to get through the current economic crisis. But the fault lines remain. What if we were to face a national crisis today that is not based on economic

or health issues but on race and religion, like the race riots of 1964? Are we confident our national impulses are entrenched enough to override the divisive, primordial instincts? If the situation worsens and our livelihood and survival as a country is in doubt, would we have enough Singapore citizens, let alone PRs, digging in our heels come what may because this is our home? I wish I could say with absolute certainty the answer is “yes”. The truth is, I am not sure.

7. Look at results of a scientific survey done in 2007 by the Singapore Polytechnic. 800 Singaporean youth – between the ages of 15 and 20 – were polled. They all went to Singapore schools and attended National Education sessions, as required. 37% of the youths polled said categorically that they are not patriotic. More than 50% said they would migrate if given a chance. The findings of this survey are not very different from many others conducted with youths, younger working adults, overseas Singaporeans and even National Servicemen. I read a July 2009 article in **AsiaOne.com** that quoted a major survey by **Experiences 2009** (the organiser of an annual US education convention) that highlighted that of the 153 Singaporean students studying overseas polled, 79% prefer to work in the USA after they graduate. Earlier this year, at Chung Cheng High School’s 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong revealed that more than one-fifth of the students who performed well in their “A” level examination between 1996 and 1999 are no longer working in Singapore today, a decade later. Even though these findings may not be surprising for some of us, they must certainly be a cause of concern.
8. To me, the biggest challenge we face, as a nation, is not so much the sluggish GDP growth or flight of capital. It is not about whether we have enough able bodies here to create economic prosperity, but whether we have enough hearts and souls committed enough to make this home, not just a convenient place to live, work and play. We need to ask ourselves if we are an “Inc” or a nation. If we are content to define ourselves as an “Inc” then our focus should be on the top and

bottom lines and ensuring shareholder returns in quantifiable terms. But if we want to be a nation – then it is imperative that we balance quantifiable outcomes and technical KPIs with emotion-based outcomes such as racial and religious harmony, and peace and happiness. To achieve this, society needs to place a premium on and reward commitment, comradeship and conviction – qualities that provide the resilience needed to face a sea of troubles; that remain consistent regardless of the fortunes of the day; that form the ultimate buffer against uncertainties during tumultuous times. This is a key point highlighted most lucidly by Prime Minister Lee two days ago in his National Day Rally speech.

9. The tenets of the National Pledge point to what we need to do to build and sustain this resilience, this tenacity, this self-efficacy. But it will not serve us well if we merely pay lip-service to the Pledge and recite it as a ritual without internalising what it means.
  
10. We need to give our National Pledge the importance due to it as the ultimate glue that binds us as a people, a nation. We got a sense of the emotive power of the Pledge during National Day this year, when at 8.22 in the evening, the whole nation breathed it together. Many of my friends told me how emotional a moment it was for them and their family – and here you are talking about some who you could not possibly imagine had the capacity to think beyond the sex appeal of numbers and digits! My 10 year old daughter, Maya, told me she felt she was saying the Pledge for the first time because it was said with feeling. My wife told me being at this year's NDP gave her hope, and a stronger belief that, deep down, we are one united people. My business partner, who is a PR, said it made her feel Singaporean and proud of it. The emphasis on the Pledge cannot be incidental or utilitarian. We need to commit to ensuring that every time each of us recites the National Pledge, we say it with commitment. For this, we must ensure all citizens from young understand it beyond the words. Most importantly, we in Parliament must lead the way by demonstrating that

no national policy or Bill will be passed if it goes contrary to the letter or spirit of the Pledge. Better still, if we can reaffirm our commitment to the tenets of the National Pledge – that they have primacy when considering national policies, especially economic policies.

11. So, what are the key tenets of the National Pledge? Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me now to take the House through each of the 4 key tenets and share my thoughts on what they mean to me, how we have fared and what we need to address more, going forward.

### **The 4 key tenets of the Pledge**

12. Let me start with the idea of **Citizenship** – “**We the citizens of Singapore...**”
13. Born in 1959, the year we gained self-ruling status, I have had the opportunity to experience the steady, sometimes tumultuous, evolution of Singapore – and to a large extent this has shaped my idea of citizenship and commitment to country. Seeing the strapping, young Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speak at the Fullerton Square arguing passionately for merger with Malaysia, and then the excitement of Merdeka Day on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1963 when we became part of Malaysia, and learning that the Hibiscus was our national flower; witnessing the racial riots as a boy, experiencing the tense environment of the curfew; trying to figure out why our Prime Minister was in tears as he talked on black and white TV on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August about our independence – something that should normally call for celebrations; I remember the feeling of pride, even as a boy, as I watched our first National Day Parade on TV in 1966 with President Yusof Bin Ishak in full military ceremonial attire reviewing the parade at the Padang; then in 1967, the obvious trepidation parents felt when their sons were called up for National Service – how quite a few of my friends and family chose to leave the country because of it; the British announcing

their pull-out and many losing their jobs including my father and uncle; the single-minded drive to industrialise and with it the creation of jobs and modernisation of the country – the transport system, buildings, proliferation of HDB flats, and at a personal level when I was in secondary one, having to vacate the old Raffles Institution (built in 1823 by Sir Stamford Raffles) when we marched as a school to the spanking new premises replete with an Olympic sized swimming pool at Grange Road. What dramatic changes we have seen, and benefited from in just 50 years – that Prime Minister Lee illustrated during the National Day Rally. It wasn't just nostalgic for me. I felt this surge of pride, as I am sure many other Singaporeans did during the visual treat by our PM with his witty asides!

14. National Day, especially in recent years, has been an occasion for me to reflect on how far we have come as a nation, a people – how we moved from black and white to colour and now different shades of each colour. How from being pre-occupied with getting water in our homes and sanitation, and ensuring our children get their BCG injections, today our concerns are with quality of life, travel, upgrading our home, and for an increasing number, freedom of expression.
15. I am humbled by what we have achieved in just over 40 years – what I have been given the opportunity to have and enjoy today. While lapping up the comforts of the day, how could we forget the journey here; the tough and rough corners we had to negotiate. How could we not pause to appreciate, if not salute, the many champions – leaders and unsung heroes alike – who got us here? It was service to the nation (even when we were hardly a nation) and self belief, self efficacy that propelled them. Many of them may not have known what JFK said about asking not what the country can do for you, but what you can do for your country – but they lived it. Many of these were everyday people, people I knew growing up – people I had conversations with; people who taught me the importance of believing and striving. I

understood the meaning of being a citizen from these unschooled stalwarts.

16. Citizenship is not a concept – it is something you live, breathe and feel, deeply. For this reason, I believe it is futile for us to talk in technical or legalistic terms about citizenship – rights, obligations, fairness!
17. Just as it would be odd to talk about rights and obligations as a son or daughter when it comes to protecting our parents and our family, in my view, it does not make much sense for us to ask why, as citizens, we should serve our country. Would we have got here if our forefathers thought along similar lines – their sacrifices are immeasurable? For this reason, as a citizen and National Serviceman, I say let’s drop the term National Service “liability”. It should be National Service “commitment”. The words I was introduced to, made to understand experientially as an officer cadet in the SAF in 1978 still ring true in my heart – “Duty, Honour, Country”.
18. If this is how a citizen ought to feel – unqualified commitment to country – what then is the “duty” of the country to us? Citizens should be made to feel our commitment is appreciated and not taken for granted. Rewards and privileges must be significant and discernable, and accorded without being asked for. Until recently, the only differentiator was that citizens could vote during elections – something that many hardly see as a privilege given the one party dominance in local politics and the fact that about half the wards are not contested in a General Election. Recently, there has been some effort in drawing a clearer distinction between citizens and PRs, in healthcare, for example. But this is not enough. Many Singaporeans I have spoken to still feel that they are taken for granted. Yes, we see the need to augment our resources by bringing in foreign talent, for economic reasons primarily. But if we don’t pay more attention to the sentiments of citizens in this regard, especially in areas such as competition for jobs and national service commitment, we could face a further erosion

of rootedness and commitment to country. The consequences of this should be evident. I am aware this is a complex issue, but the government must pay more attention to this, and this House must remind it to do so.

19. The country, through the government, is also expected to be accountable to citizens. And this accountability must be visible. People's views and concerns must be sought and heard, and acted upon. Where the government cannot address citizens' views and concerns, it must explain the reasons. Yes, this may be tedious and at times could slow things down for government, but it must be done. Similarly, when citizens challenge the government on issues and policies, the response needs to come across as being sincere and not robust and intimidating on the one hand and callous and cavalier on the other.
  
20. Citizenship also comes with the right to expressing views and concerns without fear of reprisal. The climate of fear, that loomed large right up to the late 80s, is not so evident today – but I still come across people who say they are afraid to speak up on matters they feel strongly about because they are afraid of consequences. Half in jest they point to the sprinkler sensors and ask if they are indeed sprinklers. But only half in jest! The government has come some way with actions to ameliorate this concern, but I feel more can be done, because a climate of fear, no matter how mild, can erode our sense of ownership and affect rootedness. The government should be happy when people rise to state why they disagree with policies even if it is conveyed as robustly as the government's own responses to the people – it shows that we care. Where you see anger, you are likely to find passion and commitment. The government can afford to “chill” more and be less thin-skinned! There is a distinct difference between being pro-Singapore and anti-government. In this regard, the “social contract” between the government and the people established in the 1960s needs to be better tailored to suit the higher level needs of citizens today.

21. The government must address this better and faster, not as a tactical consideration to extend the longevity of rule but because it is simply the right thing to do. It is not a legal but a moral imperative.
22. The second tenet of the Pledge is that we strive to become a “**united people, regardless of race, language or religion.**”
23. We live in a pluralistic world – people with diverse backgrounds, interests, beliefs and goals. It is challenging to unite people, but we cannot and should not give up the belief that we can build a collective reflex. This reflex is not a function of economics or material goals but built on a deep belief system that all of us – regardless of our station in life – can relate to. It is more than a shared interest. It has to be a core belief that we share, that connects with our sense of self, our worth, identity, our aspirations. It must make us feel good about ourselves as a people, knowing that it is unique to us. It has to have the power to transcend the social, political and economic differences amongst us.
24. To find what this core belief system is, we need to go beyond the obvious; beyond the formulaic prescriptions that may have worked before. We need to move from the “what we do, and do well” paradigm towards addressing the question, “what do we stand for, as a people”.
25. In corporate parlance, we shift from “mission” to ‘credo”.
26. Organisations start off with a focus on the bottom-line and profits that translate to bonuses for staff. As success kicks in, bottom-line and profit increasingly become nothing more than a hygiene factor i.e. it is expected and therefore not enough to retain good talent as the competitors have the same capacity to entice. When you have to manage success, you think purely in terms of the bottom-line to your peril. Worthy people stay because of satisfaction, challenge and pride of association. This is why highly successful organisations focus more

on doing the right thing and getting people to identify with what they stand for; these organisations strive to be admired.

27. For me, what we can claim is uniquely Singaporean that is admired by many would include our multi-racial, multi-religious make up; our honest, transparent, reliable set-up; and the principle of equal opportunity that we will not give up. These are values that we have built up over the years, and today have become an intrinsic part of our psyche, our culture as a people. Time and time again my friends and visitors from overseas remind me of how lucky we are to be in an environment with such a level of racial and religious harmony – that we should not take it for granted. Yes, we are guilty of taking this for granted. We need to take pains to illustrate these values experientially to our younger generation so that we don't risk losing them.
28. In order to prevent healthy scepticism in our people, especially our young, from becoming entrenched cynicism, we, as a society, need to address apparent contradictions and mixed signals. Examples are the issue of Malay-Muslims in the SAF, SAP schools and cultural elitism, the need for ethnic based self help groups, the need for us to maintain the current racial distribution in society, and whether Singapore is ready for an ethnic minority Prime Minister.
29. We have come a long way since the late Mr S Rajaratman gave us the National Pledge. Much has changed along the way, sometimes for the better and other times posing a challenge to national unity. The terrorist threat is a case in point – it has set us back in our efforts to build trust and a social compact. We need to avoid becoming alarmist. But we cannot afford to be complacent and stick to the assumptions relevant in the years before.
30. I am heartened by the government's proactive approach in ensuring that racial harmony and our social compact are not threatened. Initiatives such as the IRCCs and the Community Engagement

Programme, and the creation of organisations such as OnePeople.com can go some way in building resilience in this area. Likewise, lucid and timely articulation of the government's unwavering stance against any elements whose words or actions could undermine inter racial-religious trust has helped send the desired signal to the ground. Senior Minister Prof S Jayakumar's considered thoughts on why it's foolhardy to take racial harmony for granted captured in his interview published in The Straits Times last month is a good example of this. And of course, Prime Minister Lee's clear, honest and inspiring articulation of the same point in his National Day Rally speech is timely. To me being complacent about our racial harmony based on what we see on the smooth surface is akin to skating on thin ice: we assume from the surface that the ground is solid, but all it takes is one crack to deepen and spread into a network of cracks. By the time we realise how thin the ice is, it may be too late.

31. We need to move forward in a leap of faith: that yes there are fault lines and some have deepened and widened, but the bonds that have come to bind us at a basic level since the 1960s can endure if we choose to focus on it. What we must avoid is overt propaganda, which can be counter-productive. Instead, we should seek to deepen the primordial ties between communities using sports, arts and culture and the mass media as agents. Talking about the media, let me suggest something the TV media should do in this regard. When TV came to Singapore in 1963, there was just one channel – so we watched all programmes regardless of language. Then it became two channels – channel 5 in English and Malay, and channel 8 in Mandarin and Tamil. What was interesting, as a result, and because it wasn't that convenient to switch channels (no remote control), Tamil newsreaders were recognised in Chinatown. Likewise, Chinese newscasters had star status when they went to Little India! Today, with each ethnic community having our own channel – we have lost the opportunity to cross-fertilise through the media! It would be useful to have a policy for each vernacular

channel to carry more stories or features about what is happening in the other communities.

32. The third key tenet of the Pledge is about building a “**democratic society based on justice and equality**”.
33. I am very thankful that my father chose to make Singapore his home when he came here with a few dollars in his pocket in the 1940s. Yes, it is far from perfect here. I certainly have issues with many things in my country, but would I wish to raise my 10 year old daughter anywhere else given today’s realities? The answer is a clear “no”.
34. Yes, I do lament our lack of freedom to express ourselves, and the government’s seemingly unmitigated grip on power and what appears to be an inconsistent willingness to listen to public sentiment that does not suit it
35. Yet, how can I not appreciate what I have received from my country in spite of these setbacks, and in some cases because of them. Equal opportunity, meritocracy, and pragmatism were the underlying principles of governance that allowed us to grab opportunities and prosper.
36. However, even as we hold on to these values, we need to recognise that the lay of the land has changed, and drastically, in some ways. The freedom for citizens to express themselves, a free press and a truly level playing field in politics for a credible multi-party system to evolve – all of which are fundamentals of democracy – were placed on the backburners to make way for progress and prosperity. Perhaps we needed to accept the trade-off as part of the social contract. The outcome of progress was affluence, and an educated and sophisticated populace whose needs have gone several notches higher. A roof over the head, a clean living environment, a good education and good healthcare system – today these are for many Singaporeans nothing

more than basic factors; things any good government is expected to deliver. In short, the government has created conditions for success, which in turn today gives it the challenge of managing the success and the expectations that come with it.

37. Accountability requires the government to go beyond lip-service in addressing the call for greater democracy, civil liberties and choices. In the Political arena – a more level playing field especially in the management of elections and media coverage. What is increasingly demanded is fairness and justice, not just in form but substance. Yes, it is ridiculous to expect the incumbent party in government to facilitate the opposition parties to win more seats in Parliament. But what is asked for is that the government desist from making it difficult in an unfair and undemocratic manner for the opposition to gain success – through last minute changes in electoral boundaries, or a lack of media coverage or what can sometimes be seen as biased coverage. In my view, it is the duty of a responsible government to help evolve a political climate that encourages greater interest and participation from the people. If not, people are likely to feel increasingly alienated and disenfranchised resulting in apathy and, worse, cynicism. I fear this is already happening.

38. But thanks to the advent of the internet and new media, there appears to be a resurgence of interest in the people to engage in debate in issues. I sense there is a growing sense of restlessness and even helplessness with what is viewed as a media that is aligned with the government. Many in this group are now vacillating towards cyberspace, seeking out and contributing contrary viewpoints, often explicitly anti-establishment. This is gaining momentum, given the ubiquitous nature of the internet, and the growing number of net savvy Singaporeans and PRs. While some illuminating and thought provoking ideas are raised in the cyber sites, it is not uncommon to find misinformation and at times, I suspect, even disinformation circulating. The tone can be angry and sometimes downright caustic

seasoned with a good doze of vulgarities! What is giving this new ‘movement’ life and momentum is essentially the perception that the mainstream media tows the government’s line because it is required to. We can sit here and debate whether or not this is true. But for me that is not what is critical. What is important is for us to acknowledge that there is a challenge here – the mainstream media needs to gain greater credibility in the eyes of the people, and must not be seen as functioning to serve the interest of the establishment. The current situation is certainly not healthy for the government or the country as it nurtures a “them versus us” climate that could become unnecessarily adversarial.

39. Pragmatism as a *modus operandi* may have worked well to get us here, but going forward, the government has to accept that the end will not always be seen as justifying the means. Especially with the triumphant advent of the internet driven new media, there is bound to be greater scrutiny of inconsistencies between societal ethos as enshrined in the National Pledge and the Constitution, and actions and statements on the ground. This is an inevitable outcome of success and being plugged into the international grid. As we continue to strive for economic progress we must be guided, and where necessary even constrained, by the fundamentals of our National Pledge spoken through the words “democracy”, “justice” and “equality”. Underscoring the sentiments of these words would be respect, accountability and fairness.
40. The notion of justice is intrinsically linked to fairness. When justice, especially in the way it is meted out, deviates significantly from the common man’s sense of fairness, questions of legitimacy arise. This, I believe, is the basis and value of Common Law. In this regard, the government needs to listen more carefully to the ground and address disquiet and unease in response to specific policies and practices. Examples would be the ground sentiment about the string of libel suits filed by PAP leaders against various opposition party leaders, and the second round of increases in the pay of ministers and senior civil

servants soon after a 2 percentage point increase in GST. I am not suggesting that the government be populist and adjust good policies to pander to popular sentiment. This government has earned the respect of many – here and abroad – for coming up with effective policies and being decisive in implementation. My point is that the government can do more to find out why for certain policies and practices there was a strong reaction from a generally accommodating people. Just as important is for the government to take pains to address the key causes for the reaction by going the extra mile in persuading on the rationale for the policy in question and, where necessary, review the policy.

41. The last tenet I would like to discuss is what it means to “**achieve happiness, prosperity and progress**”.
42. When the National Pledge was crafted in the 1960s, life and aspirations were relatively simple. Common wisdom dictated that economic prosperity and progress led to happiness. And quite often it proved right.
43. Today, the scenario is quite different. Society is more sophisticated. Better educated, travelled, exposed to thoughts, ideas and ideals, people are given to making different life choices. And options are growing, especially with globalisation and greater mobility. Unlike before, there is a growing disjoint between national priorities and those of the individual. It is not unfashionable today for people to take the path not taken, to do what gives them maximum satisfaction even it means economic prosperity is a trade-off. The growing number of successful professionals who have chosen to go into the arts and social work or social enterprise is indication of this trend. Similarly, I see more people being disillusioned with being on the fast track, especially after seeing how “greed” has resulted in the current global meltdown and the suffering that has come with it. Many are vacillating towards a balanced lifestyle, while a growing number is looking to spirituality and philosophy for answers.

44. Consequently, concepts such as “multiple intelligences” advocated by Harvard Professor Howard Gardner, are growing in appeal. People want their desire to choose their paths to success validated. There is a feeling that at the core, the government continues to define success in tangible, economic terms and the singular path to this remains academic ability.
45. While our enduring mantra “society above self” is worthy and has served us well as a nation, given the realities of the day, we need to pay more attention to the needs of the individual. After all, individuals make society and by extension happy individuals with a sense of accomplishment in whatever the fields are, will have a positive, sustainable effect on the happiness quotient of society. This in turn, will have a bearing on prosperity and progress.
46. Perhaps we need to reverse the cause-effect relationship between these desired outcomes. Traditional thinking would suggest that prosperity, defined usually in economic terms, is the cause and happiness is the effect. Now, with research showing that happy people are more productive and driven and therefore have a higher potential for career success, it may make sense for us to pursue happiness as a necessary condition for sustainable economic success. Naturally, this is counter-intuitive but if we are prepared to think out of the box, it may just make sense.
47. Regardless of whether economic prosperity is a cause or effect, one thing is apparent – happiness is a higher goal. It must be.
48. If so, let us now evaluate whether our economic policies have resulted in or at least contributed to happiness. GDP has always been a key indicator of economic performance. Our per capita GDP has risen exponentially over the past 44 years. According to figures from the department of statistics, in Sing dollar and nominal terms, Singapore’s per capita GDP grew from \$1, 567 in 1965 to \$53, 192 in 2008, certainly

one of the highest in the world. Without doubt, this is something we should be proud of and thank the PAP government for.

49. But when we look closer at what constitutes the GDP, there is cause for concern. According to data, profits take about 46% of Singapore's GDP, which according to economists I spoke to, is extremely high compared to other developed economies. And from what I understand, half of this high profit share goes to the coffers of foreign-owned companies with operations here. What is left in the GDP pie to directly benefit Singaporeans is therefore a relatively small amount. According to a recent article in the **Edge** by economist Manu Bhaskaran, and I quote: *"...This could be why even though Singapore's per capita GDP is roughly 11% higher than Hong Kong's, our per capita consumption is about 21% lower than Hong Kong's. If we take per capita consumption as a better indicator of welfare, then simply going for high growth per se does not guarantee that we will achieve the best possible welfare outcome for Singaporeans...."* Unquote.
50. I am not saying that per capita consumption should replace per capita GDP as the leading indicator for economic well being. What I am highlighting is that per capita GDP or GDP for that matter, as indicators have limitations. Perhaps the government should look at a bundle of indicators to get a better picture of how economic performance is benefiting the people.
51. On the point about happiness, there is another observation I would like to share that should be a matter of concern to all of us – income inequality. According to figures from **CIA World Factbook**, Singapore ranks as one of the highest in the world in terms of income inequality. The Gini Index is the measurement of income inequality – the higher the Gini coefficient, the worse the level of inequality. Based on 2008 figures, Singapore has a Gini coefficient of 48.10 – which is much higher than other countries in Asia including China, Malaysia

and the Philippines. In fact, it would appear that Singapore is closer to many under-developed countries in the Gini Index.

52. Income inequality is not a desirable thing – it certainly can't be a contributor of happiness in society as a whole. But I didn't realise that in fact studies have shown that income inequality has a strong bearing on happiness and mental well being of individuals and societies. According to **Equality Trust**, a London Based organisation, studies have shown that, "...inequality makes life more stressful...(it) divides people by increasing the social distances between us and the widening differences in living standards and lifestyles..." Unquote. In a study conducted by Equality Trust of more than 23 countries all over the world, Singapore has the highest level of income inequality but second lowest in terms of trust amongst the people.
53. One can argue that the figures I quoted may not be accurate or that it is one out of many studies with different findings. That may be the case, but can we or should we summarily dismiss these findings. What if there is truth in what is stated? If indeed happiness and quality of life are higher order goals and economic growth and jobs are a means to achieving those goals, then we should ask ourselves if we need to rethink how we are managing things. We may not need to do a complete turnaround, but it looks like some adjustments are warranted.
54. The final point I would like to make about happiness and sharing of prosperity pertains to the plight of two groups of people in society: the very poor, and the elderly who may not have the financial means to enjoy the golden years of their lives.
55. Financial aid for the poorest of the poor in society is not a fresh issue. Members in this House have argued for Public Assistance to this group to go up. According to MCYS there are about 3,000 families who fall into this category – defined as people unable to work due to illness or

disability, with little or no means to finances. The latest upward revisions to the Public Assistance rates are, for example, for an individual – from \$330 a month to \$360 a month, a \$30 increase! For a 4 person family, the Public Assistance increased from \$830 a month to \$950 per month, a \$120 increase.

56. Yes, we don't want to become a welfare state. But what has that got to do with an elected government's responsibility to provide the basic needs of a small group of citizens who, it has been established, cannot fend for themselves because of illness or disability. The government's response to calls for increasing Public Assistance grants has been that we should avoid creating a dependency on handouts which in turn could become a disincentive for working for a living. As such, the government's view has been to provide a very basic level of assistance which will be supplemented by what the community and grassroots organisations can provide. Yes, this is possible, but why should it be an expectation imposed on them, when government does appear to be in a strong enough financial position to provide the necessary assistance directly. Even if we talk about doubling the Public Assistance for a 4 member family from \$950 per month by \$1,000 – it would amount to \$36 million to benefit 3,000 families or 12,000 needy Singaporeans for a whole year! Our GDP for 2008 was \$257 billion and Foreign Reserves officially estimated to be in excess of \$250 billion. It is not just about providing for their welfare per se, it is about allowing them a measure of dignity as they struggle with poverty. It is about ensuring their children get good, nutritious meals and a decent level of comfort and security at home to have a decent chance at doing well in school and making it in life. It is a small investment in happiness and dignity for our citizens. I do hope the government will relent on this issue. I am confident that this is something most Singaporeans desire.
57. The other group that deserves special attention and appears in deficit of happiness comprises those in their 70s, 80s and 90s – Singaporeans who worked hard to lay the foundation for what we are enjoying today.

Veteran journalist, Mr PN Balji, in a comment piece in TODAY recently referred to them as the “Merdeka Generation”. He laments the plight of those in this group who are “bed-ridden...breaking their backs cleaning up after us in food outlets and even being pushed in wheelchairs by the maids at some of our parks.” Unquote. Do we not feel, as an affluent society, a conscionable people, a good government, that these senior citizens – our grandparents – deserve better? Do they need to fend for themselves in this manner? We owe them dignity and respect. I echo Mr PN Balji’s call: “It is time to start thinking of another pledge, this time for our Merdeka Generation: We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge to look after our Merdeka Generation by taking care of their needs and wants in a way that they can live their golden years in happiness and look back at the nation they helped create with joy and pride.”

### **3 suggestions to align policies and practices with the Pledge**

58. Mr Speaker, Sir, if we agree that the National Pledge is the document that comes closest to capturing who we are, and what we stand for as a nation, then it behoves us as Members of Parliament to give it due importance – as a primary reference when we debate major national policies and practices. It is important for us to ensure alignment of policies with the key tenets of the Pledge. For this to happen instinctively, which is what we need to aspire to, we need to develop a stronger collective reflex that is faithful to the Pledge.
59. To facilitate this, I would like to make three specific suggestions for consideration by this House.
60. First, I believe it would be useful to have a **review of all existing major policies and practices** to check for significant contradictions with the key tenets of the Pledge – resulting in mixed signals being sent to the ground which in turn could create confusion and disengagement

or worse, cynicism. This is an important exercise that should involve participation of the public, private and people sectors. We will benefit not only from the outcome, but the process itself which will help us build a better national collective reflex. I can see an organisation such as REACH spearheading this initiative, together with the CDCs and OnePeople.com.

61. Allow me to highlight a few areas where we may find these mixed signals that I am talking about. First, over the years we have, I feel, become very race conscious as a people. In almost everything we do we are reminded of, asked about our race. Starting with the NRIC, and in almost all application forms – school, job, marriage, clubs and even when signing up for a cooking course at a CC. Then, the creation of ethnic self help groups such as Mendaki, SINDA, CDAC and the Eurasian Association inadvertently exacerbated the problem. Even media reports on crime see the need to highlight the race of the criminal and go a step further in describing him as dark or fair in complexion. Don't get me wrong, I do see value in some of these initiatives and actions. I am currently serving as Vice President of the Executive Committee of SINDA and have been an active contributor for more than a decade – I can see the practical need for such an organisation and the contribution it makes. I can also understand that for data collection and study of trends it is useful and sometimes necessary to capture the race of the individual. All I am saying is that we need to study this practice carefully and in an open minded manner, with a view to finding ways to amend or tweak the practices to better manage mixed signals that confuse. Many young people I have spoken to have highlighted this apparent contradiction with the “regardless of race” tenet of the Pledge. Principals and teachers too have raised this issue.
62. Another example of an area that the review could look are policies pertaining to foreign workers. We understand the economic and business justification for this, but there continues to be the undesirable

effect of wages of Singaporean workers in this category getting depressed. I understand the NTUC is trying to address this issue, but from what I have gathered from talking to lower skilled Singaporean workers their wages have come down. This can't be a source of happiness for these workers even though there is prosperity for the nation.

63. The second broad suggestion I have to help align policies with the tenets of the Pledge is that we need to urgently **address the issue of rootedness and commitment to nation**. I view this as a time-bomb ticking in our midst. There is enough evidence that there is a lack of a sense of rootedness on the ground, especially in younger Singaporeans. This could be attributed to many factors which would include a lack of knowledge and understanding of our history and current affairs, a lack of meaningful engagement on matters of national concern, and easier prospects for leaving the country. I do not believe our youth are apathetic. In fact, when effectively engaged they can have strong and constructive ideas and often the commitment to walk the talk. What puzzles me is how come we are in this situation even though we have had national education, and before that, when I was in school, civic education, for decades now? It cannot just be because the young of today have not experienced the difficult times in the earlier years of nationhood.
64. I suspect it could partly be because as a society we seem to have lost the oral tradition of sharing experiences and telling stories. We need to revive this, and fast, while we still have enough people of the older generation who have the stories and are in a condition to share them. The other contributing factor could be that those assigned to “teach” national education may themselves not be sufficiently motivated to do so. Perhaps our teachers are too bogged down with work to have the bandwidth necessary to impart national education with conviction. Also, I suspect that a subject like national education is best conveyed through informal activities and not through formal lectures with the

indispensable power-point slides. There could be other more salient reasons or challenges. I feel it is necessary for us to do a systematic review of how we can increase the sense of rootedness and commitment especially of our younger brethren – and this would need to include an open-minded review, and rethink if necessary, on how national education is taught, and how NE initiatives could be better coordinated with similar activities by OnePeople.com and the Community Engagement Programme managed by MHA. In terms of improving the knowledge our youths have about our history and current affairs, I would recommend a revival of importance given to subjects such as history and geography in schools, which in the recent past have been relegated as being “soft subjects” that provide less utility than science subjects. And in the teaching of history my humble request is that we pay more attention to local history and more recent history. I remember when I studied history in school I could rattle off the names of all the sultans in the Malacca Sultanate yet wasn’t taught much of Singapore history.

65. More than teaching these subjects, I hope we can find a way to inject curiosity, interest and fascination in our youth, so that they would be motivated to find out more as a lifelong journey of inquiry. Recently, I met a young lady who had a good honours degree from a local university who didn’t know the difference between the President of Singapore and the Prime Minister. It is not just confounding but upsetting to be confronted by such realities! Something is very wrong here. Whatever the case might be, one thing is clear to me, what we have right now has not worked well enough, and if we don’t intervene promptly and creatively the tenet of being a united people will not happen in substance.
  
66. My third and final suggestion seeks to help **align our current policies and rules with conventional principles of democracy.** From the late 1960s there were stringent rules that discouraged active political activism, even participation. Detention of political activists

under the ISA and media controls, whether real or perceived, rightful or not, created a climate of fear that inhibited political participation. Over years, in my view, this crystallised into a political culture of apathy and disinterest. This in turn exacerbated an already fragile sense of rootedness and a lack of patriotism. Our senior political leaders have been highlighting the challenges they have been facing in persuading the best and brightest to serve in political leadership, and why salaries had to be significantly high to help them make the decision to come on board. This situation does not augur well for Singapore on many fronts – it poses problems in succession planning, retards socio-political resilience and could result in a brain drain the moment we face a serious enough crisis.

67. For these reasons, it is imperative that we consciously and proactively start the process of re-politicisation – to get people, especially the youth, interested and involved not only in social work but political matters. A good place to start this would be our universities, which have been the traditional base of political interest and activism. Political associations should be encouraged, and campus rallies should be allowed once again. I know that for some of us in the House, especially for Minister Mentor Lee, this suggestion could be somewhat heretical as unpleasant memories of the 1960s and 70s are still fresh in the mind. But we are indeed dealing with a very different Singapore today: people are generally politically apathetic, risk averse, we are more educated, affluent and so stakes are higher. Regardless of the changed circumstances, there is, as always, the residual and potent energy of youth which today is channelled increasingly towards activism in cyberspace creating an underground culture that may not always be constructive. If we read the content in the blogs and internet sites we can sense restlessness, frustration and even anger. It is my firm belief that if the mainstream environment comes across less sanitised and more politically engaging, we will, in due course, see a healthy migration of these energies. This is good because in the mainstream there is a greater level of transparency and accountability.

But this will only happen if there is real and discernable relaxation of rules pertaining to political participation and activism. Today there is still is a climate of fear though less prevalent than before. This will change if the right signals are given, clearly and unequivocally. And only the government can do this.

## **Conclusion**

68. Mr Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by saying that we are at a point of inflexion – an opportunity to change; to reverse some trends and attitudes that are detrimental to our progress, indeed survivability, as a nation. This government has time and again demonstrated the ability and will to change course when it is deemed to be in the best interest of society – the 1987 reversal of the “stop at 2” policy, the introduction of the IRs and then the F1 grand prix are just some examples. We now need to demonstrate the same will and courage in other areas that have a strong bearing on our resilience as a people, a nation – specifically, areas I have taken the time to elucidate.
69. Yes, in recent years especially, we have seen the government opening up and paying more attention to some of the points highlighted. But there have been mixed signals which are confusing to the ground and this does not incentivise sufficient positive action. Incremental change is generally prudent and less disruptive, but I fear this is not enough to address the issues I raised. The clock is ticking. We need to act fast and radical changes may be called for to get the desired outcome.
70. Yes, there are risks. There will always be risks in change. But that has not and should not now stop us from doing what is right. I put it to the House that in this instance inaction is not an option.
71. We need faith. Faith in our people’s capacity for good judgment. Faith that Singaporeans will not abuse what’s given to them, the privileges,

the choices. Faith that we will value the increased space for expression and action and use it well, and appreciate the support given to us in time of need. Yes, there will always be some who will go the other way, but let us not punish the rest of society for this. This government has good reason to trust the people – Singaporeans have stood by the government through thick and thin for 50 years. To a good extent this is demonstration of faith in a government that has, by and large, been upright, effective, responsive and consistently delivered on promises. It is time for the government to reciprocate – by demonstrating faith in the people.

72. I say to the government and to this House, let us take a chance on our people, on ourselves. Let us act on the firm belief that our National Pledge will serve as a bright shining light that keeps us on track. We have reason to believe that we will succeed if we are faithful to the Pledge that was crafted 44 years ago with passion, conviction and foresight by our founding leaders in their infinite wisdom.
73. Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank you, once again, for the opportunity to move this motion.
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