

The Burden of a Legacy



27 AUGUST 2015, 6:00AM SGT, By Sean Tan

“We’ve been successful, wildly successful. Otherwise we would not be sitting here today. But we can’t stand still because the world is changing, our people are changing and so must Singapore and so must the way we govern Singapore.”

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke these words at his first National Day Rally as leader of the Republic of Singapore on 22 August 2004.

He urged a change in mindset as the country embarked on a quest to take risks and remain relevant. He felt a rigidity and undue level of comfort creeping into the spine of Singapore that he identified as a glaring weakness at the time.

Some 11 years on, PM Lee recently addressed the nation at the Jubilee National Day Rally. It was a pre-election National Day Rally message. It raised some of the voters' concerns but largely asked Singaporeans to vote him and his team into power. The rhetoric and messages conveyed have understandably changed over the years, but on the whole, how well has Singapore fared under his leadership?

Undoubtedly, Singapore remains one of the foremost success stories in the region, if not the world. The government has maintained the course of stable economic growth, while steadying the ship through troubled times. But troubled there have been — an influx of migrants, a transport system that could not meet this growth and hence the people's expectations, and a cost of living that has soared over the years leading to a widening gap in income.

Policies and initiatives have been drafted and implemented; ideas and ideologies have been sown and sold.

The Integrated Resorts, one of PM Lee's first controversial decisions, was a bold step forward. Looking at the skyline in Marina Bay, one can ponder if it has been a worthwhile, future-driven implementation. Forbes Magazine describes it as a "risky bet that has paid off handsomely".

There was a noticeable shift in direction and tone in the 2011 rally after the "watershed" elections held that same year. Our Singapore Conversation concluded, the switch in emphasis to softer, social policies that will seemingly placate our struggling lower-middle class aging population were in turn mooted and set in motion.

Tough changes such as CPF minimum sum modifications, hiked GST rates and unpopular projections of Singapore's future population needs have been made.

In this digitally globalised world, with increasingly informed citizens armed with the cutting edge of social media, PM Lee's government indeed faces a changed and more demanding populace. Has he adequately dealt with the voices of the people, or is the slide in winning share of the popular vote to 60.1% the biggest blip on his report card?