

I believe in Singapore

Ahead of the Prime Minister's most important political speech of the year, **Andrea Ong** and **Phua Mei Pin** speak to seven Singaporeans about their hopes and their sources of confidence. The National Day Rally has always been a way to inspire Singaporeans, especially in tough times.



PM Lee at the 2007 Rally. This year's Rally is expected to be a turning point, as the "inclusive society" theme now has to contend with issues like the foreigner influx. ST FILE PHOTO

MR LEE Kuan Yew's first National Day Rally in 1966 was a mix of stark honesty and grand vision. Coming in the wake of separation from Malaysia and communal riots, Mr Lee acknowledged in his speech that these were tough, precarious times for the nation. "We suffered setbacks... we do not pretend to ourselves that they were not communal riots - they were. We face facts," he said. "That is one of the greatest strengths about Singapore: Its

willingness to face reality, including the 9th of August." But he also made a clarion call for Singaporeans to look relentlessly ahead to the future, like "man reaching out for the moon and the stars". The main goal then was to give everyone, regardless of race, language and culture, an equally satisfying life. Today, with Singapore facing new, complex challenges and a more diverse, vocal electorate, it seems timely for Prime Minister

Lee Hsien Loong to once again fire people's spirits for the future. Veteran MP Inderjit Singh says: "Last year's elections probably marked the peak of unhappiness with the Government. Now, people are waiting to see what is next... It is a good time for PM to talk about the future." Mountbatten MP Lim Biow Chuan notes that as a small country, it is all the more important for the nation to come together and aim for a common future.

Indeed, that is what the National Day Rally is for, says Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. "It is about describing the promised land, selling dreams and visions to the people to tell them that the best is yet to come." This works by making citizens feel special when the Prime Minister looks directly at them through the television screen, adds Dr Chong. The rallies, which were first televised live in 1971, are

"necessary statecraft" to humanise the leadership. President of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises Chan Chong Beng recalls how Mr Lee Kuan Yew's fighting spirit came through. It made people feel a sense of patriotism and belonging when they heard him speak, Mr Chan says. The prime ministers who succeeded him had big shoes to fill, and did so in their own way. Mr Singh recalls Mr Goh Chok

Tong's speech in 2001, when Singapore was in a recession. Mr Goh spoke of a "New Singapore" with a new social compact that involved redistributing Budget surpluses to help the lower-income and elderly, and changing Housing Board rules to help older singles own their own homes. Dr Reuben Wong of the National University of Singapore (NUS) recalls Mr Goh's last Rally in 2003, which took place after the Sars public health crisis. "It was a

period of crisis and leadership transition, and the people were waiting for a signal," he says. Mr Goh paid tribute to the heroes of the Sars crisis, thanked Singaporeans for walking the "hills and valleys" with him and expressed confidence in their ability to pick themselves up and reach their destination. In 2004, PM Lee took over the reins. His Rally speech, delivered with pop culture references and celebrating the achievements of

ordinary folk, built on the theme of an inclusive Singapore. He first articulated on that theme in his inauguration speech in May 2004, which inspired many, including social entrepreneur Kuik Shiao-Yin. "It was an open and direct call to all 20- to 30-somethings to step up, now is your time, you can be a part of building this nation," she says. "For the first time, I saw the national work that was needed." This year's Rally is also a turn-

ing point as some believe the old narratives which used to unite Singaporeans are wearing thin. The "inclusive society" theme of recent years now has to contend with the "elephant in the room" - namely the foreigner influx and widening income inequality, says Professor Chua Beng Huat of NUS. He hopes the Government seeks a new narrative. Agreeing, Dr Wong says this year's Rally must be pitched not only at the Internet-savvy crowd,

but also reach out to lower-income families and individuals. "PM must convince Singaporeans that... there is dignity even for the bottom 20 per cent, who will not be left behind," he says. Singapore Management University law professor Mahdev Mohan, however, thinks Singaporeans do not need a big vision, a pep talk or the usual "rah-rah nationalism". Play to the Singaporean spirit of being a "little bit cynical" and realistic, he says.

"The more the message we are given is one we have heard before, or one that seems to be overly nationalistic... a lot of people are just going to be sceptical," he says. His view is that the Government needs to take a step back and give Singaporeans more of a chance to be themselves. "As strange as it is going to sound, you just have to jive with the people," Prof Mohan says. ✉ andrea@sph.com.sg ✉ mpphua@sph.com.sg

What do Ms Tin Pei Ling, Mr Brown and Mr Siew Kum Hong want to hear at tomorrow's National Day Rally? And can the colour of the Prime Minister's shirt tell us anything about the Rally? Find out at www.singapolitics.sg