

Govt responding to 'heartfelt concerns' of Singaporeans

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IT WAS a phrase that became a promise. In 2011, amid the hotly contested General Election, political leaders used the phrase "we will listen" as ordinary Singaporeans explained the challenges they faced.

That promise signalled a shift in the way the people and Government engage each other.

Two years on, and after a journey that involved 50,000 people from students to professionals, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, having listened, announced a slew of changes.

During his National Day Rally speech on Sunday, Mr Lee rolled out plans on everything from an eventual end to T-scoring for PSLE – a bugbear of many parents – to medical protection for life.

The underlying message: Everyone matters and nobody will be left behind.

Mr Lee explained the shifts in the Government's approach: "One, to level up people; two, to share the risks, to make sure that whatever happens in life, you will not be alone. And three, to keep our system open, mobile so that if you have talent, you can rise."

The reaction was swift. Mr Lee's Facebook page alone garnered more than 32,000 likes and more than 2,000 comments both good and bad.

But buried amid the positive comments online were also cynical charges that Mr Lee had delivered an election speech.

Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan said he did not see the Rally "as an election tactic even though it can be used to the ruling party's advantage during the hustings".

"The Government is responding to the heartfelt concerns of Singaporeans with significant policy shifts in the areas of health care, public housing, and education – the three hot-button areas," he said.

"The Government has acknowledged that it has to ring the changes to enable Singaporeans to manage the changing realities and reasonable expectations."

Genuine concern

Sure, politicians will always have at least one eye on the next election, said former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, but he added: "I have no doubt that PM Lee is genuinely concerned about these issues and is making the changes because he thinks they are in Singapore's best interests."

Even Workers' Party (WP) chairman Sylvia Lim acknowledged the shift, saying the WP had long advocated the need for it.

She added: "We are thus pleased to hear of the 'shift' towards a nation where 'we are all in this together'... The Workers' Party hopes to see the realisation of the Government's promises so as to create a society where mutual care and concern is a hallmark."

"We await the concrete implementation of the directions announced at the National Day Rally 2013."

So the promise to listen, and to deliver the results, was sincere.

But were the policy changes a populist move?

No, said lawyer Stefanie Yuen-Thio.

She said: "If the PM wanted to be populist, he would have announced more popular policies. I don't think the changes he announced will be universally popular. Health-care costs will go up; schooling will take long to fix and the parents who are used to the T-score system may well hate any change."



SPEECH: Some of those who attended the National Day Rally on Sunday with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.
 PICTURE: THE STRAITS TIMES

POLITICAL WATCHERS SAY:

Rally is not election tactic

"What the PM announced spoke of our values system and went to the heart and soul of the country. For that reason, I think this will be remembered as one of the watershed moments of his career," she added.

But some think Mr Lee could have done more. Sociologist and WP member Daniel Goh wrote on his Facebook wall that he was "disappointed by the high expectations that this would be a turning point speech".

He wrote: "The daring expansion plans for the airport and southern waterfront trump housing, health care and education tip-toes."

But it's a start, said Ms Yuen-Thio, who confessed that she did have doubts about how seriously the Government would take suggestions made at Our Singapore Conversation.

"This speech put a lot of those fears to rest. So I think it is apparent that the Government is listening. But while PM's speech is a good start, the real challenge will be in the implementation of these

policies and how, and to what extent, existing stakeholders will embrace the changes," she said.

And those changes include the way Singaporeans and the Government communicate.

Said Associate Professor Tan, who is also a law lecturer at Singapore Management University: "The Government recognises that it needs to spend more on issues that connect intimately to Singapore and who we are as Singaporeans."

"But it is not just higher financial outlay that points to the Government that is listening, or trying its best to. It's the recognition that the social compact has to be refreshed to maintain its relevance, effectiveness and legitimacy."

He put it this way – the shift is real with the Government finally listening and responding by not pandering.