



Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies Tharman Shanmugaratnam speaking at the Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture Series at the Singapore Management University on Thursday. Mr Tharman said that a combination of complex and unprecedented events such as climate change and pandemics has led to a loss of optimism globally. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Room to be optimistic amid global fragility, says Tharman

Singapore has to boost social compact, intrinsic capabilities

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In a time of profound global fragility and contestation, there are still reasons for Singapore to be optimistic, to collaborate with others, and to emerge as an even more valued partner, said Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

In a speech at the Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture Series at the Singapore Management University on Thursday, Mr Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies, said the world is entering an era where different insecurities are coming together – geopolitics, energy and food, and existential insecurities such as climate change and pandemics. Social polarisation, too, is leading to insecurities within societies.

This combination of complex and unprecedented events has led to a loss of optimism globally.

In the advanced world, Pew Research survey results show that barely 27 per cent of parents expect their children to have a better future than them financially – a

dramatic change from the advanced world of the 1960s and even the 1990s.

“These are structural insecurities that are going to be with us for many years to come,” Mr Tharman said. “This is not just a perfect storm... it is a perfect long storm.”

In Singapore, the only country among those surveyed where more than half of the parents expected their children to do better than them, there are bases for optimism – by not only refreshing and strengthening the social compact, but also developing deeper intrinsic capabilities for the future.

“But we have to invest more and work harder at social mobility, and what will be critical... will be the earliest years of life, because that’s where so much of life opportunities are shaped,” said Mr Tharman.

Developing a strong social compact is not only about uplifting those at the bottom, he added. Everyone has to move up on the escalator, because it is the stagnation of the middle in many societies that has led to a loss of optimism.

Second, Singapore needs deeper intrinsic capabilities in its people. This is in addition to its well-known “system strengths” such as public health, housing neighbourhoods and education, and a system of governance that has helped build trust and shaped norms.

He cited three such capabilities.

First, depth of expertise and unconventional minds. This will enable Singapore to be a truly innovative nation. The country is moving in the right direction, with discretionary school admissions becoming an important part of efforts to lessen the importance of examinations.

Second, cultural breadth. Singapore society is remarkable in that it is multicultural, multi-religious and multiracial.

It is the Singapore system which preserves this, and there are two key spaces in this system: One allows each community to practise their own religion and culture. The second is a common space where everyone makes some compromises, and which is not defined by race or religion.

But Singapore, said Mr Tharman, can now go further and build a third space in citizens’ identity that is itself multicultural – where each person takes a deep interest in others’ cultures, builds deep friendships, and treats that as part of his own identity. This will hold Singapore in good stead amid religious and racial tensions in the world.

“It’s not a melting pot; we don’t lose our own identities, but it enriches us. I believe we can develop this third space – keep the emotional assurance of our own cul-

tures, and the common space which we protect very carefully – but let’s develop that rich Singapore identity and go further.”

To achieve this, Singapore must plough the co-curricular activity field a lot more actively in schools, by getting people from different backgrounds to train and mingle with one another. Singaporeans must also take conversational Malay and Chinese far more seriously, and at the same time develop a better knowledge of the region.

Finally, the capability to hold civic discourse. Singapore is becoming a more pluralistic society, but it must not be a more divisive one. This requires a culture of civic discourse – a deliberative culture where people listen, think critically, accept differences of views, and try to find common ground.

Mr Tharman concluded that countries can together develop bases for optimism globally by strengthening multilateralism in practical ways, and within their own societies by strengthening the social compact. “I’m confident that it will hold Singapore well in the years and decades to come, and I’m confident that we have what it takes to work together on this to ensure that we succeed, and remain a valued partner for others in the world.”

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