

Budget 2023: What to look out for, given Forward S'pore movement

The opportunities afforded by platforms like citizens' panels and alliances for action should be strengthened so Singaporeans can give voice to values in co-creating a shared future.

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The Singapore Budget 2023, to be unveiled today, is set to boost the ongoing Forward Singapore national conversation.

It is expected to be the first expression and concrete demonstration of how governance can evolve as part of the Singapore Government's stated commitment to improve people's lives despite global turbulence and shifting aspirations.

Following Forward Singapore efforts that have engaged 14,000 Singaporeans in over 140 sessions on a wide range of topics, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said last week that the Government will update policies based on feedback and ideas received, at Budget 2023.

Many will therefore expect immediate responses to feedback gathered to be provided in DPM Wong's fiscal statement. Observers will also be watching for signs of the Government's longer-term plans to strengthen Singapore's social compact through the co-creation of policies and their implementation.

WEIGHTY ISSUES

Yet, beyond the quick-fix policy solutions and stop-gap measures that can be measured in dollars and cents, what lies at the heart of Forward Singapore's efforts is a much deeper question. It concerns the kind of society Singaporeans want, the responsibilities and roles of each stakeholder – citizens, Government, businesses and civic society groups – and the sacrifices each must make in order for this social compact to work.

There are weighty issues here – wealth redistribution, social mobility, employment resilience amid job disruptions, supporting vulnerable Singaporeans, and appropriately recognising care and heart work – requiring a shared strategic vision, reorientation and novel thinking.

Singapore's past, with the emphasis on economic value, material affluence and consumption, and top-down prescriptions of what constituted success, had little input from most average Singaporeans with a different definition.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a stark reminder of how much more needs to be done for vulnerable groups and the benefits of taking a broader view

of challenges and pooling resources, enabling society to emerge with greater solidarity and more confident to face new threats on the horizon.

With more speaking up on recognising the contributions of workers in occupations such as cleaning, security services and healthcare that were once shunned but whose value is now recognised, surely Singapore's definition of success has shifted.

Concerns over essential workers, low-income households and migrant workers, and actions taken by civic groups have also demonstrated how attitudes in Singapore have become more inclusive and collectivist.

The future must embody the growing importance of transcendental pursuits, post-material values, and a quality of life in which the opportunities to voice viewpoints and be engaged are critical.

WHY VOICE MATTERS

As a global city and nation-state, Singapore cannot be contented to be a place to stay like a hotel. It must be a home inspiring loyalty. While economic vibrancy remains essential to societal well-being, the growing desire of Singaporeans for a home with heart and hope patently must go beyond rhetoric, and help Singaporeans develop a deeper sense of identity and rootedness.

This is why the deliberative voices of Singaporeans must play a bigger part in national life. Having Singaporeans devote time and energy in debating and advocating for causes and values they believe in can give them a stake in the country.

This involves speaking with one another to understand diverse concerns, uncover blind spots and discern deeper anxieties, instead of talking past one another to get our points across and "win" the debate.

Perhaps for these reasons, platforms like the Citizens' Panel on Work-Life Harmony, formed as part of the SG Together movement in 2019, have been on the uptick, soliciting public feedback and involving civil society in policymaking.

Meanwhile, specific groups formed under the Alliance for Action umbrella, which includes youth, focused on technical issues such as improving the lives of lower-wage workers, strengthening the practice of youth mentoring, and recommending actions to tackle online harms.

Such platforms give meaningful expression of a personal stake vested in the larger good, and



Having Singaporeans devote time and energy in debating and advocating for causes and values they believe in can give them a stake in the country, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

opportunities for people who see their well-being and concerns for fellow countrymen as an integral, intimate and indivisible part of the nation's.

Deliberative voices can also energise individuals and society, and give them skin in the game. Meaty discussions in recent years have focused less on what the Government thinks is best, but rather, how comfortable citizens are in managing competing, and even conflicting, interests and values.

Take, for example, the concerns over social mobility and traditional yardsticks of success, the stark disparities in rewards and recognition in the job market, support for mental health and wellness, and the adoption of environmentally resilient behaviours. These civil society-led discussions and actions brought these concerns to the public, spurring collective action and avoiding trade-offs wherever possible.

In offering powerful opportunities for active citizenship to engage, deliberate and co-create solutions in the delivery of public services or formulation of policies at the municipal and national levels, they practise partnership of the state, society and the private sector to tap the social capital and local knowledge of a community.

Co-creation acknowledges the inherent limitations of the Government in delivering public services where money is necessary but insufficient in the effective and efficacious delivery of public services with a human touch. Volunteer welfare

organisations in aged care demonstrate this well. But local knowledge and grassroots expertise are often given short shrift when they can instead be a force multiplier in ideational creation and service delivery.

BUILDING HABITS OF CITIZEN DIALOGUE

While most Singapore households and businesses may be looking forward to immediate assistance to tackle an uncertain economic environment, I hope Budget 2023 demonstrates support for measures that enhance citizen consultation and support the co-creation of public policy.

This can focus first on key areas of priority already identified by Forward Singapore, such as the need to bolster employment resilience and desire to support families with caregiving needs. These might not be costly Budget line items worth eye-grabbing headlines, but would represent a greater shift in Singapore's ethos of involving society in its next bound.

Based on the midterm findings of Forward Singapore engagements, Budget 2023 can make an important move on strengthening the skills and training ecosystem to enable the Singaporean workforce to access training support throughout their careers.

In what may be a major shift in the Government's thinking, highlighting his thoughts at an Institute of Policy Studies conference in January, DPM Wong envisioned re-employment support to financially cushion

workers while they reskill and upgrade themselves, rather than them taking the first job available because being unemployed is not an option.

Platforms for deliberative voices and ground-up action should be a feature of active citizenry. In a similar vein, capacity building on how to deal with disputes, co-creating solutions and funding for ground-up initiatives are not typical items funded by the public purse. These should be regarded as social investments rather than expenditures.

Constructing a refreshed social compact from this slow but steady process can help us craft a shared vision, rather than react in knee-jerk fashion with piecemeal policy fixes to allay populist demands of the day.

Even if a meeting of minds cannot be achieved because of great differences, the engagement process provides an invaluable platform to narrow differences, establish commonalities and establish possible ways forward.

This process should result in contending groups and perspectives going beyond co-existence to becoming a community despite deep differences.

We need to look no further than the nurturing of our multiracial, multireligious and multilingual ethos. Although by no means perfect, it provided the foundation for nation-building.

More recently, the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code calls for civil, principled disagreements without requiring contending groups to surrender their deep commitments and

fundamental values.

Singaporeans from all walks of life showed they can accommodate competing interests, identities and values to advance a common ground of shared and purposeful existence.

Ultimately, what defines a nation-state is her shared values that ensure that even if conversations become robust and contested, the nation-state remains intact, clarifying and unifying. Shared values not only discipline, but also inform how we ought to attain society's goals and shared purpose.

A HOME WHERE WE BELONG

In a rapidly changing world and Singapore, Singaporeans must feel they belong to Singapore, which has to remain open to foreign investments and foreign manpower.

A government cannot ignore the weight of citizens' well-informed opinions and reasoned arguments. A society without a platform for alternative voices loses a vital tool in shaping public consensus and developing social solidarity.

To be fair, the Forward Singapore exercise is not a novel attempt at a national conversation, which has happened once every decade this century. There was the Remaking Singapore Committee (2002) and Our Singapore Conversation (2012) which examined how to strongly position Singapore for an uncertain future.

However, Forward Singapore's accent on bottom-up contributions and co-creation of solutions may signal a precursor to more inclusive governance. It must now evolve to become a national movement rather than merely a decennial public consultation.

Forward Singapore's ground-breaking value may be in giving Singaporeans a voice, and can set in motion fundamental shifts in mindsets in the economy, education, social investments and the environment.

This quest for a forward-looking vision for Singapore – one that epitomises opportunity, hope, fairness and dignity – can no longer be merely an exercise in strategic planning. It must be a vision to be discussed, negotiated and reinvigorated.

In this revitalised social compact, the state is unlikely to retreat, but its role will be more of an enabler of the people's collective vision and shared values. To become a nation of deeds, hearing citizens' voices is the golden clasp that binds together commitments, values and actions.

Singapore's first two decades of independence may have focused on moulding the Republic's success, while its next three zoomed in on managing success, but the vision for the next bound looks squarely to be on the remaking and refinement of success.

This entails a bold rethink of policies and mindsets that have served Singapore well. The text of governance must constantly adjust and adapt to the changing context. Budget 2023 may play an influential role in this nation-building rite.

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