

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech on Aug 17, 2008 - Part 4

And we will enhance these schemes. I don't have the details tonight so you watch the next instalment but for the baby bonus, we will improve it for the first-time parents; for the tax incentives, we will do more in order to encourage mothers to work.

The fourth thing which the women asked me to focus on are early childhood arrangements. This is a major concern of parents, especially if both parents are working. The critical period is from birth to six years when they go to school because after they've gone to school, they are in Primary 1, well, they're mostly taken care of and also a little bit bigger, able to look after themselves. But before they reach school, the first six years, those are critical and you want to have the peace of mind that they are being looked after well.

Most families take care of children at home. Either the grandparents keep an eye on them or they have extended family or they have maids.

But many working mothers depend on formal childcare arrangements and one-quarter of children of this age are in childcare centres and the most popular centres have got queues. You wait one year, sometimes more before you get in.

So I visited one, NTUC Childcare in Jurong, which is one of the popular ones. I'm very impressed with what they were doing, talked to some of the parents who came in the evening to pick their kids up and to meet me and they were very happy to have their kids there. Good environment, they will socialise, they learn social skills, dancing, they were preparing for National Day, they were making models, learning to interact with other kids, get along with other kids and the parents had peace of mind while they were working.

So I think that we should do more to build up the childcare sector. It's important. I think we should do three things: make it more accessible, that means more centres; make it more affordable, that means bigger subsidies per child; and then make it higher quality, raise the standard so that we can work with this. So that way, we will have a better quality childcare centre and we will be able to work.

The kindergartens are another thing which we must do to improve. Not everybody goes to childcare centre but nearly everybody goes to kindergarten. And we have a very lively kindergarten sector in Singapore.

At the high end, I think they can look after themselves. At the middling end, mass market, the PAP Community Foundation centres, standards have improved but I think they can do better. I think that we should put a lot more effort into enhancing the kindergarten sector as well because it's important for our kids to have a good kindergarten preparation when they go to school. We don't want the kindergartens to be a pre-pre-school so when you go to Primary 1, you are already pressured; before you reach Primary 1, you are pre-pressured. You have competition to get into the kindergarten but you want a good kindergarten environment. And I think that we should be able to do that.

We've got already Government spending money on the kindergartens because qualifying institutions are getting subventions and help from MOE (Ministry of Education). I think we should push this up substantially so that we can raise the standard, we can raise not just better teachers which we are doing, we can have better syllabuses, better run institutions, higher quality environment so the kids grow up much more confident & particularly for those whose backgrounds aren't so ideal at home, they will be able to make it in kindergarten and start from a more equal starting point when they go to school.

This is a big move. We have deliberated this over a long time, we didn't decide because our cut-off point was at Primary 1. I think our cut-off point mainly should still be at Primary 1 but we should begin to do more before kids reach Primary 1 so that we can prepare them for life and for school.

Those are four big things which we need to do. There are two more small things which we will also do which don't affect a lot of people but which I think we should do. It's right.

One, couples who have children but can't conceive. They go for IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) but it's expensive. So we will offer financial support to lower the costs of the IVF. Secondly, couples with many children. There was a letter in The Straits Times, I think there were five mothers, each of whom have five kids who said, remember us and we have five children, your incentives stop at four. So I think we should remember them and I think we should extend most of the incentives like tax reliefs, childcare subsidies and so on to the fifth and the subsequent child. There are not many of them but I hope the incentives will encourage those who can afford it to have more.

These measures all add up to a very significant package. We are talking about maybe \$700 million a year. If more babies are born, it's going to be more than \$700 million a year but even that is about double what we are spending today on child incentives and altogether we'll have about \$1.6 billion spent a year or 0.6% of GDP.

Wong Kan Seng is in charge of population policies so he will have a press conference later this week and he will give you the full picture, including the numbers which I think many parents will be anxiously waiting for but please don't wait for the press conference to pay attention. This package will make a difference to many couples but I can't guarantee that it will solve our problem. Because this is a deep problem, we have to come back to this, revisit it periodically. Finally it's about mindsets, personal choices & values. Please put emphasis on marriage, on family, make these your priorities, have a full and happy life.

I've got a message. We have lost 0-3. We were up against a very strong China team. I think they've done us proud. We should congratulate them and we should rejoice and celebrate.

Our children will grow up in a completely different world and we have to prepare them and prepare Singapore society for this world. One of the biggest changes that would affect us is the Internet. And new media is pervasive and fast-moving. Everyone is plugged in and connected. People are blogging, engaging one another, organising themselves online, doing politics online. We used to talk about grassroots. Now we have to think about net roots, people on the Internet.

And it's happening worldwide. You look at America, the current election campaign. John McCain says I don't know how to use the computer, I have no email. But he has a website on the Internet. He has to. JohnMcCain.com. Barack Obama, this is John McCain's website.

Barack Obama, he uses a Blackberry, constantly texting, communicating, emailing and the Internet is a key part of his campaign. He's got a powerful simple home page – change we can believe in. And he's used it effectively to reach out to younger Americans to get them highly energised and participating and rooting for him and helping him to run the system.

So he's got Chris Hughes. Chris Hughes is one of the founders of Facebook. Twenty-four years old, I suppose must be worth a few hundred million dollars now, dropped out of university, who has joined Barack Obama to help Barack Obama use Facebook technology to organise his campaign; his volunteers, his events, his donations, his activities, his appearances, his emails, the whole lot.

And therefore Barack Obama has a Facebook presence which you can see and like all of his pages, there's one very interesting button on it which is black red: donate now. And very powerful because people are taken up by this and 1.5 million people have clicked that button and each one small amount but altogether adding up, I think, to about \$100 million, maybe more by now. Cumulatively a huge boost to his campaign so much so that he can say, I don't want government money. I am going on my grassroots money. But it's still money.

But Barack Obama also runs into trouble on the Internet because all sorts of stories go on like he's a Muslim or he didn't do this or he did that and he can't go around fighting untruths all over the Internet everywhere. So what he has done is to collect all these untruths together to make one website which is called Fight the Smears.

So John McCain attacks him for not visiting wounded troops and then there's a rebuttal. And if you go in, whole list of all the things which are untrue and all the explanations according to Barack Obama's campaign. So he is using the Internet but he's also running into some of the difficulties of using the Internet.

This is America. Let me take another country nearer here, Korea, in Asia. It's the world's most wired country, mostest broadband, mostest usage, people do everything on the Internet and it's had a huge impact on Korean politics.

It's empowered new groups because they mobilise and they activate on the Internet. So it helped President Lee Myung-bak in his election campaign last December to win a resounding victory because on the Internet people could mobilise and new groups could form. But on the Internet, we also have rapidly changing moods in the population. So within a few months, after being elected, President Lee was under siege. And there were mass demonstrations. They said million-men demonstrations, maybe a slight exaggeration but if you look at the picture, it looks huge. This is a candlelight picture, in Seoul.

What were they agitated about? Mad cow disease. Facts? Actually rumours. Fantastic rumours. First rumour, 94 per cent of Koreans have a special gene. When they eat beef, they will get mad cow disease. So that went around. Everybody got excited. Calm down. Next rumour. Cow products are used to make pampers, babies wear pampers, babies will get mad cow disease. So videos & pictures circulated online. This is a real event.

Here's another one. There are some even ruder which I thought I shouldn't show you tonight but you can find them. And then from the Internet, it comes back, people get agitated, demonstrations go back on the Internet again. So President Lee Myung-bak calls this 'infodemics', anonymous false information, create discontent and unhappiness, spread like an epidemic in the real world. But President Lee calls it infodemics, one Korean newspaper who doesn't have to be so careful with its words calls it mad cow madness. That's Korea, that's a negative example.

Malaysia is another interesting example where the Internet has become an active space for information and engagement. There's lively debate, serious contributions but also more doubtful stuff and there are blogs, chatrooms, there are alternative news sites like Malaysiakini which is very popular and I know many Sporeans visit it. And it has quite a lot of news.

And the politicians themselves actively participate in cyberspace. So Dr Mahathir has a blog now. He uses the name Che Det.

He started in politics and he went in to have a blog. Other people start with blogs and then go into politics. We have heard about Jeff Ooi, famous blogger, stood for election, elected. So in the recent elections there was a mass of materials circulating, blogs, SMS (short message service), YouTube and the public went to cyberspace to get what they couldn't get from the mainstream media.

The opposition was there, all over. I show you Anwar Ibrahim's website. Pictures of him. Videos of him, pictures. BN (Barisan Nasional) also has a website, like that. And so the battle went on in cyberspace. It wasn't just cyberspace of course. There was also real-life politics in Malaysia because the opposition raised many hot issues in their ceramahs, in their meetings: rising cost of living, poor public service delivery and perceived inequalities in the government's policies, to put it delicately.

But these were issues which were picked up in the new media and then virally distributed, one shares with two, two shares with four and it multiplies. And everybody gets the message and the result was March 8th

when the elections were held.

Even in China which has the world's largest number of Internet users now, more than America, the Internet has become an important factor.

After the Sichuan earthquake, netizens mobilised to raise funds and to show support for the victims. So I show you one slide. (Chinese phrase) and it had an impact on the mood and the sense of patriotism and unity which the Chinese developed after the Sichuan earthquake. So their leaders are now engaging on the new media and President Hu Jintao had his first web chat recently, answered a few questions.

So these are other countries. In Singapore, the new media is also quite a big thing. I talked about this two years ago but in two years we've moved on since then.

Today more than 80% of households have broadband. There are six million handphones in Singapore. You think about that, 4.5 million people, six million handphones. More handphones per couple than babies. No wonder no time to have babies.

But the young people are totally immersed in this medium. They are reading the print newspapers less. They are getting the information, discussing issues online so the ST website, people are participating, CNA website, the same, Zaobao has Omy, ST means the Straits Times website. Zaobao has Omy, also a very interesting new approach to presenting the news and engaging the audience. And people are writing their own content, sharing it with others, organising interest groups.

All this has changed the way the Government works. Our services have gone online, 24/7. You want a passport renewal, you can do that. You want to incorporate a new business, set up a new company, 20 minutes, it's done. You want to pay your taxes, IRAS (Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore), no trouble. And the Government is also communicating and engaging with Singaporeans online.

We are not just pumping out stuff. We have some quite interesting stuff which we are pumping out. We have some video clips. I think MDA (Media Development Authority) showing the way. Some of you may remember Christopher Chia who's the CEO (chief executive officer), turns out he's a very good hip-hop dancer.

But also two-way engagement & participation. And REACH (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home) is at the forefront of that because REACH, Feedback, they need to engage people. So they've got a website which is popular and they've got blogs, online chats and so on.

And they also participate on Facebook. And you get quite a lot of participation. For my rally today, I got a lot of feedback from REACH and the subjects which I'm talking about are the subjects which are hot on REACH. So you look at this, their homepage, what do you find? Rising cost of living, hot topics.

So that's the way the Government works, that's the way Singaporeans work and that's the way we will have to adjust in order to conduct our politics.

We have to adapt to this, get used to this, turn it to positive effect, use it to inform, to educate, engage people. And each of us has to learn. It's not something which you learn to mouse-click you are there, you must learn how to be savvy cyber-citizens.

Don't get taken in. Be discerning about what you see on the Internet. When people say click here, check first before you click. When people say this is true, don't just send it to all your friends. Ask first, is this true? Set prudent limits so that we can flag problems and we know where the dangerous ground is. Participate actively by all means but don't get swept away. And please don't catch mad cow madness.

Our rules governing politics also must keep up to date. First of all, party political films, that means films about political matters. Right now they are totally banned and for a reason. Because politics is a serious affair, we want voters to consider issues rationally, coolly, detached, think through decisions which affect your future and make a considered judgment.

And our worry is that films are an emotive medium. The impact of seeing something on a film is quite different from reading something in cold print. It hits you viscerally. It engages your emotions before your thinking processes can kick in and if you are watching it in a crowd, even more powerful. Then passions can get stirred up and people can get carried away.

I think this is a valid concern but I don't think an outright ban is still sensible because this is how people communicate on the Web in daily life. They make videos, they pass clips around.

You saw the clips just now from the Flying Dutchman. Even my NDR,, National Day Rally, NDR speech is now NDR multi-media super show. Has to be because that's the way you'll have to communicate & after the speech, videos, blog responses & people make these things. Anybody can do this any time anywhere. Let me show you.

I have a handphone here, it's an ordinary Nokia handphone. It's a handphone which has a little programme loaded in it called Qik. And what Qik does is to turn this handphone into a video camera. If I click it, it will turn on, become a video camera and furthermore it will stream the picture immediately onto the Internet, onto my website.

So if I turn on the camera now and I'm filming you now, you look on my website, you can see yourself. And I think we must make sure we see the upstairs people too. Slow, delay but it works. So please wave, you're on Candid Camera. There you are, simple as that. I've just made our first non-political video.

So we've got to allow political videos but with some safeguards. Some things are obviously alright – factual footage, documentaries, recordings of live events.

I think National Day Rally, surely no problem. But I think some things should still be off limits. If you make a political commercial so that it's purely made-up material, partisan stuff, footage distorted to create a slanted impression, I think those should still be off limits.

In between what is ok and what is not ok, there will be grey areas. But I think we can deal with this. Just as we deal with it for non-political films, we have censorship, we have classification standards. It depends on subjective judgment but we've worked out a workable system, a panel applies their minds, they make a judgment. I think we can work something out but the overriding consideration is to preserve the integrity & the quality and the honesty of our political discourse. Keep it straight, keep it serious, think carefully about serious matters which concern our lives.

The second thing we should change are the rules for political material which can be put onto the Internet during elections. The rules we now have were settled before the last GE (General Election) so for example, they are very restrictive. No podcast, no videocast & most people can't post materials during the election period. Only the parties, only the candidates, their agents can do that.

By the next GE, five yrs would have passed. Now cyber years are like dog years. One year in cyberspace equals to seven years in real life. That's the pace at which things change. So five years times seven means 35 years in the real world, means our old rules are way way out of date, means we have to change to new rules, liberalise, to allow people to participate more actively & flexibly.

So you must allow podcasts, videocasts, must be allowed to post other election materials also but we have to maintain or try to maintain accountability and responsibility somehow. It's not easy to do this. Do not think that other countries do not face these problems, they do. The Koreans are very exercised about this.

Every time I meet them, I exchange notes with them and they ask us how we intend to deal with it and I ask them how they are dealing with it. They don't have an answer but it's a real problem.

We have an Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS). Mr Cheong Yip Seng is chairing it & is studying these issues in detail. We have been thinking about this I think for quite many months now. I look forward to seeing the recommendations.

But let me say that beyond cyberspace, politics is about people's lives in the real world. You can't vote for an avatar on Second Life. We are talking about real life, not second life. We have to get a direct feel for a person, do you trust him, is he capable, is he honest, will he work?

So you got to talk, you got to argue, you got to persuade and then you got to mobilise and work together for what you together believe in. And you can't just do this online, reading emails or even reading, listening to podcasts or watching vodcasts. You have to do it face to face.

And we do this all the time. Grassroots sessions, dialogues, meetings. We are a small society so it's possible for us to interact and get to know one another well. You cannot have make-believe because if your Prime Minister is just an image on the screen, everybody will know he's just an image on the screen.

He has to be here in real life and you have to feel the person and then you will know. So that's how politics has to be done. We have a few restraints because we can't afford to take chances with race and religion but by and large, Sporeans are free to engage, to talk, to mobilise, to influence one another, to do nearly everything, especially indoors where we lifted the limits a few years ago.

There's one remaining restriction and that's on outdoor demonstrations. We still don't allow this and our concern is law and order and security. It comes back to race and religion again because one incident could undermine our racial harmony and confidence in Spore.

But again like political videos, valid concern but we have to move away from this total ban and find ways to allow people to let off steam a little bit more but safely.

How? We have a Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park. Well-defined location, accessible, near the MRT, not so many speakers but if you want to go there, there is place. Just put your name down & you can speak. So I think that we should allow outdoor public demonstrations also at the Speakers' Corner.

Still subject to basic rules of law and order and still stay away from race, language and religion. I think we'll still call it Speakers' Corner, no need to call it Demonstrators' Corner.

But we will manage it with a light touch. So I think there's no need for the police to get involved. We will hand this over. Mah Bow Tan has agreed, NParks (National Parks Board) will take over. And NParks, you know their green fingers, everything will grow nicely, it will be well in hand and I think we should look into online registration for Speakers' Corner so you don't have to go to their office.

The overall thrust of all these changes is to liberalise our society, to widen the space for expression and participation. We encourage more citizens to engage in debate, to participate in building our shared future and we will progressively open up our system even more.

If you compare today with five years ago or 10 years ago, it's much more open today. And we will continue to feel our way forward. We can't just progress by copying others blindly.

We've got to think through our own problems ourselves, find the right path for Singapore. Crossing a river by feeling for the stones, step by step, as Deng Xiaoping said. But please remember, even in the cyberage,

some things don't change.

In 50 years' time, Spore will still be a little red dot. To thrive as a nation, we will still need the cohesion to stay united, the ability to outperform others and the will to survive and excel and occasionally win medals. And that means a hardworking and well educated population, a capable effective Government, outstanding people at all levels, totally committed to Spore. Then however the world changes, our children will still have a bright future.

Before I leave this subject on new media, I want to do one more demonstration.

Hello, team Singapore.

Good evening, PM.

Hello, Eng Liang.

Yes, I'm the chef de mission of the Spore Olympics team in Beijing. Sorry, PM, we just lost the gold medal to China. They are a better team with better skills and techniques but our paddlers tried their best and they did play well.

Thank you, we heard the results earlier. I shared it with my audience earlier. Our paddlers have done very well and they have done Singapore proud. Please thank them from us, Jia Wei, Tianwei, Yue Gu but also the whole Team Singapore in Beijing, you've done us proud, you've carried our flag high. (applause)... (unclear from Eng Liang) ... flag of Singapore and I think with this silver medal, we have achieved the objective. Thank you for your messages.

Thank you. Send our greetings & congratulations to the team.

Yes, I will do that.

Good night, Eng Liang.

Good night, bye.

That was my last special effects for tonight.

I've discussed some key issues that affect our future, immediate concerns like inflation and cost of living, long term issues, living graciously, raising families, opening up our society. We've got to get these right to keep our economy growing, year after year.

Sometimes people criticise us for putting too much emphasis on economic performance because GDP (gross domestic product) growth, employment, productivity, so on, they appear just as so many statistics, so many numbers, decimal places. But actually growth is critical.

It gives us the resources to solve our problems. It creates opportunities for our workers to secure better jobs, for our young to receive a first-class education, for all of us to improve our lives and fulfil our dreams. So it's not just abstract numbers, it's changing people's lives for the better. It's about the Singapore story, as lived in the lives of all of us.

The older generation of Singaporeans have experienced this. So, take for example Mr Arumugam Jeyapal who works for PSA.

He's had PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examinatino) plus two years of vocational training, that's all. He started as a prime-mover driver, earning \$250 a month, worked his way up over the years.

Now he's 58 yrs old, mentor to yard-crane operators, earning \$3000 a month and active in the union. And over the years, he's upgraded from a three-room flat to a five-room flat. He has three children and they are doing well, in different fields.

One is a soccer coach, one is a lawyer in the AG's (Attorney-General's) Chambers, a DPP (Deputy Public Prosecutor), a daughter is studying in NIE (National Institute of Education) to become a teacher. He's now 58. So he says, I have lived the Singapore story. I am grateful for what the Government has provided.

Middle-aged Sporeans have also seen this. I give you another example. Mdm Lim Hui Bin who is a wafer fab specialist. Here you see her all toggged up, her face is uncovered because otherwise you can't see but she's working in the clean room. She quit her job a few years ago to help her daughter who wasn't doing well in school.

When her daughter's studies improved, she returned to work full-time as a machine operator at Seagate, night shift OT (overtime) to supplement the wage but her friends told her she could get a better job at a wafer fab.

But she didn't have a lobang so how to find a job at a wafer fab? So she resigned, she responded to an ad for E2i. E2i is NTUC's Employment & Employability Institute. And she went there and the E2i helped her to equip herself with new skills.

And she joined STMicroelectronics as a wafer fab specialist & now she's earning \$1400 a month, more than a third more than before, nearly a third more than before. So at 45, it's not so easy with children but she's made that career switch successsfully to a new job with brighter prospects and her daughter is doing well, now in Singapore Poly studying to become an optometrist. That means learning to measure eyes for spectacles. I think there's a brilliant future in Spore. So many of us are speckies.

Young Singaporeans are writing their own Singapore stories too. They enjoy far more opportunities than their parents ever did. I have this group, Crystaline Tan, Neng Abdul Rashid, David Aw, three of them, SMU (Singapore Management University) graduates, fresh out of school, gone to Dubai, recruited by Fullerton Financial Holdings, Temasek company. And they are taking risks, venturing, seizing opportunities and launched off onto an international career.

Or this young man, Muhammad Fadzuli. He's not here this evening. He's a computer games enthusiast. He was addicted to computer games as a boy so I think he must have caused his mother a lot of stress but he went to Nanyang Poly, he did a diploma in Entertainment Technology, he topped his class.

He applied to Carnegie Mellon University in the US which is the best, one of the best universities for computer games. And they took him, they gave him advanced standing, they waived the undergrad degree, he's gone in to do a Master's. And he got an MDA-ST Electronics scholarship. So now he is on a three-mth attachment at Disney, he's not on holiday there, at least I don't think so. He's in Disney because Disney has a collaboration with Carnegie Mellon and he's helping them to develop a new computer game.

Or take this young lady, Brenda Tan. She's a marketing manager. In school she was playful and lazy. O-level results not so good. But she went to ITE, then she went to Ngee Ann Poly for a Dip. in Business. She got a job at Citibank as a tele-sales officer. She did well, she was promoted, she was posted to Malaysia to set up a new unit there. And she became the manager of the unit, managing 80 people on her staff. And she came back to Singapore. Now she's progressing in her career.

And she says, I should read this because you should hear this: ITE (Institute of Technical Education) has given many opportunities to people like me who are less academically inclined. This is something unique

about our education system and about the openness and acceptance of our society.

They are not all here but several of them are here. Mr Arumugam, Brenda, Madam Lim, some of them are overseas so I think that we should thank them for living the Singapore story. Take a bow, stand.

This is what we mean when we talk about growth, about investing in our people, about thinking long term. This is what drives us to do the best for Spore, whatever the uncertainties and difficulties. So let's look beyond our immediate problems, let's work hard, grow our economy, transform the nation. Then we will create even more extraordinary opportunities for the new generation and together our children will write more chapters of our Singapore story.

Good night.