

**SPEECH BY MR SAM TAN, MP FOR TANJONG PAGAR
GRC, ON THE MOTION OF THANKS TO PRESIDENT'S
ADDRESS AT THE PARLIAMENT SITTING ON 25 MAY
2009 AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

1 Mr Speaker,

Thank you for allowing me to speak.

2 In his address, the President says that we “must take steps to emerge from this global crisis stronger economically, socially, and politically”. He also says that an important part of this effort is to ensure that we strengthen social cohesion.

3 The President observes that challenging times will put stresses on our society and our families. Globalisation, while benefiting Singapore as a whole, also widens income gaps and puts pressure on lower-skilled, less-educated workers. He says “The Government has done much to help this group upgrade, and to supplement their wages. In this downturn,

lower-income Singaporeans will not be left to fend for themselves.”

4 Sir, it is true. We have done quite a lot to help workers prepare for new jobs, take care that children from vulnerable families have opportunities to reach their full potential in schools. Our Education Minister just yesterday announced another \$67.5 million to help students and their families cope with the recession.

5 In the light of these points, I would like to pose a simple question for the House to consider – do the members feel that somehow, despite all the doom and gloom coming out of the US, that there is a recession in Singapore? Or is it, really, business as usual, with people still spending and being as cheerful as ever? And second, do the members feel that this buoyant optimism is our fault? Sir, I use the word “fault” purposefully, because it will come clear that I do not consider this unbridled optimism an altogether good thing.

6 Let me elaborate.

Recession? What recession?

7 Today, as we go to some of the mid-priced restaurants like Crystal Jade, and Ichiban Boshi, do we feel that there is a recession? Even at MezzaNine in Hyatt Hotel, a fairly upmarket place, there remains a sizable lunch crowd on most days. So, what recession?

8 Today, if you were buying a property, you would have agents telling you that the market for the mid-and- lower-range properties is getting hot again, and sales are moving. You would read from the newspapers that sales remain strong, and that buyers are still snapping up new launches. So, what recession?

9 I feel Sir, that this time, the recession is worse on paper, but much less on the ground, compared to 2003. Perhaps in

2003, it was SARS and everyone was huddling at home. May be it was due to a psychological fear, the “Kia-si” symptom.

10 This recession is every bit as severe as the ones we have experienced in the past – in fact, it is the worse one yet, since we have never had to draw down on our reserves before, and we are doing so this time. Jobs are lost, and growth remains very very sluggish. The economic growth rate was forecast at -6% to -9%.

11 Yet, people are still spending.

12 On the one hand, this is good because it adds to the economic multiplier, it prevents a downward spiral where liquidity is sucked out of the economy. On the other hand, it is worrying because this spending could have come about because of a false sense of security.

Safety net or a padded cell?

13 Sir, this government has been through many recessions with its people. In the early days, we had recessions once every 10 years or so. Nowadays, shocks have been coming more often. So, we have become “practiced” at the craft of recession-cushioning. Each time the economy shows signs of slowing down, we have the NTUC and e2i coming out at the forefront to job match, get training, reduce retrenchments. We have MND pump priming with infrastructure projects, we have of course the MCYS and its numerous help schemes.

14 Sir, I am not diminishing the efforts of our civil servants and union partners. I am however, wondering what the true impact of these efforts are.

15 Suppose you are the father of an eight-old-year boy who wants to learn how to cycle. Do you line the streets with cushions so that he will not hurt himself if he loses his balance? Do you brace his knees, and every conceivable part of his exposed body, with padding? You might, if you were an extremely protective father. But the commonsensical approach would be to let the boy have a go at it himself, and

take the knocks and spills as they come. A boy who is mollycoddled is a very different person from the one who is physically tough and to take spills without fear and whining.

16 The latter, I think, could be the approach that we take towards helping Singaporeans during tough time. Recently I have seen many residents, especially the elderly, come and see me for help at my MPS. The difference is that while in the past, many of them would be hesitant to do so, and would rely on their children. Today, many see Government help as an entitlement, something that they should tap on as a first port of call, rather than a last resort.

17 “I want to spare my children the burden of caring for me,” they tell me. I am frankly astonished and dismayed, for my traditional Confucius values tell me that it is the natural obligation for children to look after their parents, and for the parents to be cared for by their children when they grow old. I would sometime tell them “You *should* let your children care for you, not the state, not because it is good public policy

(although it is), not because society expects it (although it might), but because it is the right thing to do". It is filial piety, one of the most fundamental values of the human race.

- 18 Now, it is difficult I think to put out ethical, foundational arguments like these, in defence of policy issues such as financial assistance, but isn't this the bottom of what we all do?

The President says that the Government is able to provide well for the people in this recession because it has cared for its finances prudently. He says: "We steered clear of excesses during the boom years. We strengthened our revenue base, budgeted within our means and accumulated reserves for a rainy day. We supervised our banks to be prudent, and avoided a credit bubble. When the financial crisis struck, we were in a strong position."

- 19 Sir, I am happy that these words were true of the Government, but can we say the same of our people? Have we, as sons and daughters, as responsible parents, steered clear of excesses? Have we worked hard, saved enough and

accumulated reserves for a rainy day? Have we taken care of our parents, our families, and become self-reliant so that in a financial crisis, we do not ask for handouts? Sir, I think we have not.

20 We have become accustomed to the largesse of an efficient MCYS whose many helping hands are indeed everywhere doing everything for us – they make sure the poor children do not have to pay fees, the needy elderly have enough food, and even well-to-do children who do not care of their parents have VWOs to turn to, when they want to shunt these old folks out of their homes.

21 Sir, I am in a terrible position of making a criticism without having the foggiest idea of what the solution is. Sir, I do not ask the Government to do less – for that would make those in need terribly unhappy. And having seen many of my residents during the MPS – I know that the need is genuine. I would not want to offer them any less help than I am doing now.

22 At the same time, I do think that our Asian family values and traditional ethics have been eroded. We have periodic discussions and collective hair-pulling about this issue in Parliament regularly. We have often said that schools should do more. But I think this is something that the school system cannot tackle. I suggest that families take this up on their own.

23 Teach their children a core curriculum of five key family values. These values do not have to be the same for all families – after all we do not value things the same way. But we ought to ensure that we do stand for something as parents, as a family collective, and teach these values to our children. In my own family, the Tan value system for example would be:

- (1) Honesty
- (2) Pillial Piety
- (3) Sincerity
- (4) Compassion
- (5) Society above self

- 24 These systems are manifested in the things that we do as a family, and hopefully, will stay with my children when they grow up.
- 25 On a national level, I suggest that this is something that the National Family Council can take up. Organise a campaign to get people to write down their family values. Showcase how different families are living their “dreams” and being true to their values.
- 26 Sir, this for me, is one way to balance the Government's doing more to cushion people against future shocks, and the people learning resilience and coping mechanisms on their own. Sir, it will take a long time to achieve this in any society. However, as the familiar saying goes, a thousand mile journey starts with the first step. If we start this journey today, we will reach the destination some day. When that day comes, we would have built a resilient society with cohesive families.

27 Now, I would like to speak in Mandarin on the need for creativity, innovation in a new world order.

議長先生 ，

28 總統在他的施政方針演說中，全面而精要的從經濟，科學，教育，培訓，政治，外交，內部安全，種族和宗教和諧等領域，陳述了新加坡所面對的挑戰和我們的應對之道。

29 由於時間的關係，我只專注討論“創意思維”這一個課題上。其他關於經濟、政治、教育、培訓等等的課題，就讓我的其他國會同僚去探討吧。

30 为什么要谈“创意思维”呢？原因是过去新加坡 40 的
年所取得的成长，很大的程度上靠的是人力资源，靠的是
无限的创意。所以“创新”是一切发展的推动原力。不只
是蕞尔小国如新加坡需要靠“创新”来奇兵突起，开辟一
片春天，就算是超级大国，也需要靠创意思维来引导各
方面的发展。

31 我去年 11 月曾跟随总理到中国访问。记得当总理拜
会中国的温家宝总理时，温总理就用了六个字来形容新
中的双边关系。这六字真经就是“友好，合作，创新”。中
国拥有一亿三千万的人口，人才更是多如恒河沙数，而
它的领导人和新加坡的领导会谈时，居然把“创新”作为

两国关系的一个重要基石。这说明了中国对新加坡在创意思维这方面的进展高度重视，也同时点出了创新也是大国发展的一个重要基础。

32 “创意思维”虽然看起来像是个抽象的名词，但它并不是可望而不可及。也并不是只有新颖和前所未有的想法和产品才叫做创新。许多旧有的东西，也可以通过独特的改进和变化，成为流行受欢迎的新产品，在新的时代里发挥了新的作用，引领新的潮流。

33 我想用两个例子来简短的说明“创意思维”如何能使陈旧古老的東西重现光芒，风靡一时。

34 第一个例子是中国著名的于丹教授以设立论坛开讲的形式，把记载儒家思想的“论语”，通过非常通俗生动的讲解，吸引了成千上万的听众，带领他们跨越二千多年的时光，接触到孔子的中心思想。

35 第二个例子是目前中国一个非常著名的作家“当年明月”所写的一套书，叫做“明朝那些事儿”。他用生动有趣的手法，把明朝三百年的历史变成一齣连续剧般，掳获万千读者的兴趣。

36 我曾经翻了翻有关明代历史的正史例如“明史”和“明实录”。这两本古书我只读了两行便感到眼皮沉重，实在枯燥到读不下去。

37 但是，上个星期，当我翻开“明朝那些事儿”的第一册，
只读了一段，便情不自禁的一面接一面的读下去，在三
天内便读完了一本。

38 这套“明朝那些事儿”已经印了五百万册，据说是中国近
三十年来最畅销的史学读本。

39 于丹和当年明月成功的因素在哪里？他们成功的地方
便是以创新的演说方式和戏剧性的写作手法，把严肃枯
燥的哲学和历史，变成精彩绝伦的素材，让听众和读者
从现代人的官感世界，进入古人的境界和层次。“创意思
维”和“敢于突破”是他们成功的基石。

40 我希望政府能够继续在注重科研发展之余，也制造有利的大环境，鼓励新加坡人去打破传统，进行思想维新的运动。如果新加坡人敢于创新，勇于突破，不论新的素材或是古老的课题，我们都可以改造，翻造和创造，赋给它们新的呈现方式，与众不同的风采和出类拔萃的形象，新加坡便能够迈向“日日新，日又新”的新层次，这也是新加坡在二十一世纪环球激烈竞争中的求生之道。

41 议长先生，我全力支持总统的施政方针。

42 谢谢。
