

**Christopher de Souza
Debate on The President's Address
27 May 2009**

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Mr Speaker Sir,

I support the motion standing in the name of the Member for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, Mr Michael Palmer, to thank the President for his Address.

In the first global 'stress test' performed by Swiss business school IMD, Singapore was ranked second, after Denmark, to be among the best prepared to withstand the economic stresses of a recession. Second out of 57 nations surveyed. We are deemed to be well-placed to weather the financial crisis and improve our competitiveness in after we emerge from it.

However, the President's Address underscored the fact that the global environment is capricious and that we can ill afford to be caught wrong footed to our economy's detriment. I agree and wish to speak about five main points arising from the direction the President set in his Address.

**(I) JOBS – ANALYSIS OF SPUR, WIS & 18,000 NEW
PUBLIC SECTOR JOBS**

First, JOBS:

The President stated:

“We must keep up the effort to up-skill and re-skill our workers to become more employable and productive, in a changing economy” and that “NTUC is at the forefront of these efforts, working shoulder to shoulder with Government and employers.”

It is against this backdrop that I wish to discuss the SPUR Programme, the 18,000 Public Sector Jobs the Government released into the labour market and the need to tweak and fine tune the WIS scheme.

According to the latest Kelly Global Workforce Index, five out of six local professionals believe they could become irrelevant if their skills are not upgraded within the next five years. Workers are more pressed than ever in the present age to keep upgrading their skills. The Government’s willingness to drive and sponsor this is the right move.

- SPUR

It is heartening to note that as at the end of March 2009, the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (SPUR) which was launched last December, has already assisted 77,000 workers. By the end of February, 43,000 workers had begun SPUR training.

However, I understand that the jobs bank at the Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) and Community Development Councils still has over 20,000 vacancies. 16,880 workers were made redundant in 2008. May I ask the Minister for Manpower where does the mismatch lie? Is it industry-based? Do we have an update on how many of the unemployed who have undergone SPUR training have in fact found jobs following retrenchment?

- 18,000 PUBLIC SECTOR JOBS

The Government announced in Budget 2009 that it would be making available 18,000 public sector jobs over the next two years. How many of these 18,000 jobs have been taken up? How many people

have applied so far? And how successful have the advertising campaigns been to generate a good response to these recruitment drives? I ask because I have met constituents who have the requisite skills to serve well in government jobs but are still unaware of the Government's recruitment drive.

- **WIS**

Currently, if a worker's monthly income is less than \$1,500, he will receive the Workfare Income Supplement from the Government. Workfare was introduced to encourage an increased rate of employment and to signal to Singaporeans that the government will, where employment policy is concerned, walk shoulder to shoulder with Singaporeans if they make the effort to work. Therefore, we should reward those who work harder. On this note, I ask why not offer WIS to workers who have a basic salary of \$1,500 or less even if their over-time pay tilts their monthly pay cheque to beyond \$1,500. This way, to echo my fellow Member Mdm Halimah Yacob, we will not be discouraging the diligent workers from working hard. The government would have to pay WIS based on \$1,500 and not on the

accumulative figure of basic salary plus overtime pay. What is the harm in that?

(II) MAS SELAMAT

Next I would like to discuss issues relating to national security.

The President had stated:

“ Mas Selamat’s recapture is not the end of the terrorism threat.”

And in a later part of the address, the President stated:

“Maintaining a safe and secure Singapore is a basic precondition for our people to pursue their dreams.”

With these two statements in mind, I would like to compliment the Home Team and ISD, in particular, for playing an active role in the recapture of Mas Selamat. It has been a trying and difficult year for

ISD. But, its resilience has paid off – to me, ISD’s perseverance in tracking down Mas Selamat displayed true tenacity. They overcame adversity.

Indeed, MHA’s own statement in the addendum to the President’s Address sums up the ever changing parameters in the anti-terrorism business:

(QUOTE)

“How we achieve safety and security will change over time as our operating realities and society change...

The operating environment today is complex and challenging.”

(UNQUOTE)

Therefore, the recapture of escaped terrorist leader Mas Selamat has set many minds at ease.

Nonetheless, the question on the top of many Singaporean minds is how he managed to cross our border with Malaysia? Consequently, Singaporeans are concerned about the fact that he may have had sympathizers in Singapore who helped him travel to Malaysia.

It is encouraging that the security forces of regional countries, in particular ISD and Malaysian Special Branch, continue to work closely together to combat the threat of terrorism. In the case of Mas Selamat, the cooperation has borne fruit.

When the time is appropriate, I hope the Minister for Home Affairs will answer the questions on the minds of many Singaporeans – i.e. how he escaped, whether there were JI sympathizers who helped him and if so how many?

Now that he has been re-captured, how should we deal with him going forward? What measures do we have in place to prevent a repeat of such an incident?

(III) REDUCING LOAN SHARK ATTACKS

The third point I would like to address is the issue of the prevalence of loan shark attacks in Singapore.

The President had stated in his speech:

“**C**hallenging times will put stresses on our society and our families, but we must manage these stresses and meet the challenges as one people.”

On 22 May 2009 The Straits Times reported:

“Sales of CCTV cameras, alarms jump – More residents fear crime, loan sharks.” I quote from the article:

“Police also received nearly 4,000 complaints of loan shark harassment ... in the first three months of this year, up from 2,066 complaints in the same period last year.”

I welcome the Home Affairs Minister’s decision announced earlier this year to seriously consider making borrowing from illegal moneylenders a crime.

Let me explain why.

In January last year, Senior Minister of State, Assoc Prof Ho Peng Kee, informed that there were 10,221 reported cases of unlicensed money lending in 2006. That was a 19% increase over 2005 when there were 8,568 reported cases. Similarly, the 2005 figure represented an increase of 47%, to be exact, over 2004, which had 5,809 reported cases. Multiple initiatives were introduced by MHA to try to solve the problem. These included:

- (a) Enhancing the penalties under the Moneylenders' Act; and
- (b) The formation of the Anti-UML Task Force to increase, among others, the number of ambush operations.

However, the figures show that these measures have not deterred UML syndicates. A look at the statistics for 2007 support this point. In 2007, there were 277 arrests over the first three quarters, i.e., from January to September, which were just 17 short of the total number of arrests for the whole of 2006.

Thus, in the light of the unattractive figures quoted above, MHA is correct to take a different strategy in tackling the very real problem of

unlicensed money lending. This involves simultaneously tackling the supply of and the demand for illegal loans. Currently, the law, called the Moneylenders Act, curbs UML only by deterring the supply of illegal loans into the market. It does nothing to penalize or deter the borrowing, i.e., the demand side. This is clear from sections 8(1)(b) and (c) of the Moneylenders Act. The offences in these sections do not deter the demand for illegal loans. Introducing a new section which makes it an offence if a person secures a loan for himself or on behalf of any other person from an unlicensed moneylender will help deter the demand. The punitive measures which come along with the offence can be calculated based on the harm that the State deems such borrowing creates and based on the level that will best deter such activities. Naturally, the Public Prosecutor will have the ultimate discretion whether to prosecute a borrower, and unique circumstances prompting a compassionate approach would likely merit non-prosecution.

Examples of two prominent pieces of legislation which combat both the supply and demand elements of an offence are the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) and the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA).

The first is the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA). Sections 5, 6 and 7 of the MDA penalize the trafficking, import and export and manufacture of controlled drugs, i.e., the supply of them. But, significantly, section 8 of the MDA also penalizes the possession and consumption of controlled drugs, i.e., the demand for them. By penalizing both the demand and supply, Singapore's drug problem has been contained.

The second prominent piece of legislation is the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA). Section 5(a) of the PCA penalizes the supply of corruption, i.e., it penalizes, subject to other elements being satisfied, the corrupt soliciting or receiving or agreeing to receive for himself or for any other person any gratification as an inducement to or reward for. In order to effectively deter acts of corruption in Singapore, section 5(b) of the PCA penalizes the demand for corruption, i.e., it penalizes, subject to other elements being satisfied, the corrupt giving, promising or offering to any person, whether for the benefit of that person or of any other person any gratification as an inducement or reward for.

Thus, both the demand and supply of elements of corruption are tackled in tandem, resulting in Singapore's extremely low incidence of corruption. We should quickly use the same strategy to combat the rapid growth of unlicensed money lending in Singapore, given that:

- (a) The anecdotal evidence that a significant number of those borrowing from loan sharks are using the loan to pay off gambling debts.
- (b) As a result, innocent residents have to bear the brunt of harassment if a false residential address is given.
- (c) The whole corridor suffers the stigma of graffitied walls even if a false address is not given.
- (d) The continuing Government philosophy that if we continue to work, we will be given an incentive, such as WIS, why not

make borrowing from illegal moneylenders, which causes much harm to the neighbourliness of communities, an offence.

The Public Prosecutor is always in a position to exercise his discretion whether or not to prosecute the borrower based on the unique mitigating factors, if any. The number of reported cases and arrests in relation to unlicensed money lending and related activities over the last three years is of concern. I urge MHA to quickly implement the policy which includes a shift away from supply-centric enforcement to one which also combats the demand. This would be similar to the two-pronged enforcement action taken against drugs and corruption.

Such a two-pronged strategy focusing on the supply and demand forces giving rise to the crime would pressure the offence from all sides, help lead it closer to extinction, and, to quote the President, “manage the stresses” on our society. Would MHA therefore provide an update of when it will introduce provisions which make borrowing from loan sharks an offence.

(IV) EDUCATION – EASING THE LOAD PLACED ON TEACHERS

I move onto my fourth and last point – Education and easing the load placed on teachers.

The President made clear:

(QUOTE)

“Education is our best investment in Singapore’s future. Our education system is designed to give each and every child the best opportunity to stretch his abilities.”

(UNQUOTE)

However, I wish to add, that to achieve this, we need to give teachers the space and time to *teach*.

During the Budget Debate this year, MOE announced that it would make available close to 7,500 teaching positions and teaching support staff for our schools and tertiary institutions.

Given, the high expectations placed on our teachers, a topic I have talked about in this House, I would like to ask the Minister for

Education how many teaching support staff has MOE recruited, what it's target in terms of recruitment of teaching staff is for 2009 and how near is MOE to that target?

(V) CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sir, our GDP is expected to decline by 6-9% this year, with unemployment set to rise. We need to unite as a people to overcome the challenges ahead. But, we should not forget that we have in the meantime a nation to keep safe, children to teach and our social fabric to protect. In supporting the motion, I trust the Government will consider the four points I raised in relation to Mas Selamat, Reducing the incidence of loan sharking, SPUR, WIS & the injection of 18,000 public sector jobs into the labour market and education.

Thank you.