

Motion

By Mr Viswa Sadasivan (Nominated Member)

NATION BUILDING TENETS:

That this House reaffirms its commitment to the nation building tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge when debating national policies, especially economic policies.

Amended motion: Zainudin Nordin

That this House acknowledges the progress that Singapore has made in the 50 years since it attained self-government in 1959, in nation building and achieving the tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge, and reaffirms its commitment towards achieving the goals and ideals of our Pledge when debating national policies.

1. I am glad that the NMP moved the motion – An appropriate occasion on the 50th anniversary of self-government to remind us all about the tenets – the goals and ideals - in our Pledge upon which we build this nation. I was cheered to hear how the member, his wife and daughter and even his business partner felt a surge of warm emotions during the National Day Parade, to feel connected to this home we call Singapore. These stories make up for all the hours and hard work that our organisers and participants put in.

2. I listened intently to his speech, eager to hear more. And there were many aspects I could easily agree with: we must improve our National Education and ensure that all citizens from young understand our Pledge beyond the words; be committed to NS through Duty, Honor, Country; do more to root citizens, care for them, especially the poor and disadvantaged; create a Singapore identity which binds all people of different race and religion; provide more avenues for public feedback in crafting public policies and make greater efforts to explain policies. We can always improve on these aspects and should never be satisfied with status quo. These must always be works in progress.

3. But like my Parliamentary colleagues before me – MPs Sam Tan, Michael Palmer, Zainudin – I struggled with some arguments in the NMP's speech. So, I was glad that Zainudin proposed amendments which more accurately reflect Singapore's journey so far, which I fully support. I would also like to share my perspectives on NMP Viswa's key assertions.

4. I do agree with the NMP that our pledge is a vital and powerful tool that teaches national values to our children and unites us as one people. We treasure this pledge, simply and elegantly crafted, as it embodies common virtuous ideals and aspirations that serve as guide posts and moral bearings upon which we have built this nation and progressed. But the power and resonance come only when our actions

match those words. Because a set of words, no matter how beautifully crafted or ideals conceived, no matter how noble, alas provide no certainty that that nation will survive or prosper. Ideals are necessary but insufficient conditions for progress

5. Other countries too have National Anthems and Pledges, some so gloriously and exquisitely composed, that they can make grown men weep. And they have, in their despair when dire circumstances contrasted hopelessly with all they had aspired to in their pledges. Let me provide a few examples to illustrate.

“My Rwanda, land that gave me birth,

Fearlessly, tirelessly, I boast of you!

When I recall your achievements to this very day,

I praise the pioneers who have brought in our unshakeable Republic.

Brothers all, sons of this Rwanda of ours,

Come, rise up all of you,

Let us cherish her in peace and in truth,

In freedom and in harmony!

Let the victory drums beat throughout all Rwanda!

The Republic has swept away feudal bondage.

Colonialism has faded away like a worn-out shoe.

Democracy, take root!

Through you we have chosen our own rulers.

People of Rwanda, old and young, citizens all,

Let us cherish her in peace and in truth,

In freedom and in harmony!

Home-born Rwandans all, beat the victory drums!

Democracy has triumphed in our land.

All of us together we have striven for it arduously.

Together we have decreed it- Tutsi, Twa, Hutu, with other racial elements,

This hard-won Independence of ours,

Let us all join to build it up!

Let us cherish it in peace and in truth,

In freedom and in harmony!

Come let us extol our Flag!

Long live our President, long live the citizens of our land!

Let this be our aim, people of Rwanda:

To stand on our own feet, in our own right, by our own means.

Let us promote unity and banish fear.

Let us go forward together in Rwanda.

Let us cherish her in peace and in truth,

In freedom and in harmony!”

6. This was Rwanda’s former National Anthem. The pristine ideals within, expressed so eloquently and passionately, could not prevent the Civil War between the Hutus and the Tutsis[1] which started in 1994 where 800,000 were reportedly massacred.

7. Let’s go to France next, the land of liberty, equality and fraternity.

(French Constitution Article 1)

“Article 1

France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a decentralised basis.

Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to professional and social positions.”

8. Like our pledge, the tenets have been clearly articulated and “enshrined’ in the constitution and implemented rigorously because you are not allowed to state the race in any official document in France. NMP Viswa asked if this was a better way, because in Singapore, race is recorded on our NRIC

and self-help groups are organised along racial lines. His argument is that if you don't draw attention to differences, perhaps they would disappear.

9. Well, in Oct 2005, a series of riots, believed to be incited by racial tensions, started in poor housing projects in various parts of France. A state of emergency had to be declared and extended for months. You can have constitutional tenets but these do not prevent racial and social discrimination against people, as they have discovered in France. According to the BBC, "Those who live there say that when they go for a job, as soon as they give their name as "Mamadou" and say they live in Clichy-sous-Bois, they are immediately told that the vacancy has been taken." The nonprofit organization SOS Racisme, associated with the French Socialist Party (PS), said that after they sent identical curriculum vitae (CVs) to French companies with European- and African or Muslim-sounding names attached, they found CVs with African or Muslim sounding names were systematically discarded.

10. We come closer to our region. Thailand.

Thai National Anthem

English translation

Thailand unites flesh and blood of Thais.

Nation of the people; belonging to the Thais in every respect.

Long maintained [has been] the independence

Because the Thais seek, and love, unity.

Thais are peace-loving;

11. We all know of the turmoil and the deep political divisions between the "yellow-shirts" and the "red-shirts" in recent times, that ruined this image of peace-loving Thais.

12. We treasure our National Pledge but it can only resonate when the Government and its people have adhered to its goals and ideals. Our national pledge would ring hollow if Singaporeans could not see and believe that we practice on a daily basis what we pledge. A set of ideals by themselves are not sufficient to ensure stability, security and progress for this nation. Singaporeans do, by their commitment, their daily attitudes, actions and key choices that make. This is why the Prime Minister spoke about this at length in his NDR.

13. In the past 50 years, Singaporeans have chosen and supported a PAP Government that has in turned strengthened vital institutions of State - in the Parliament, Civil Service, Education, Home Team, Defence and Judiciary. We set high standards for key appointees and through the President and the Public

Service Commission, ensure that good and able people are appointed who can discharge their duties impartially and uphold the key elements of our pledge - justice, equality, meritocracy, regardless of race, language and religion. Sound policies of the elected Government and a hard working population provided stability and economic growth that allowed our people to achieve happiness, progress and prosperity. NMP Viswa talks about substance and form. The substance comes from these key institutions which are the building blocks which enable our progress. A nation's success depends ultimately on the quality of people who helm these key institutions and who determine if the lives of citizens will be improved. The Pledge takes its substance and form from the realities that people experienced each day. If what our citizens experience daily is very different from the ideals we pledge, we will all become cynical. But when ideals and reality match, citizens will gladly and resolutely reaffirm the Pledge. And thousands in many corners of Singapore did, including NMP Viswa, at 8.22 pm on National Day.

14. The PAP Government has adhered to the tenets, as elected guardians and stewards of Singapore in the past 50 years. Far from compromising these ideals in the pursuit of economic growth, we have been defenders of these ideals in building a nation. Indeed, the founding fathers of PAP set out these ideals to ask for the mandate to govern – the people chose them on this basis and both fates became inextricably inter-twined.

15. How do we ensure that we continue striving towards these goals and ideals? What path do they lead us in the future? Mr Viswa's prescription for Singapore's future is this: - Multiple Parties; More newspapers that can print what they like so that people will think they are independent and check the Government; Re-politicise our schools and Universities – so, let them have public rallies whenever they want on whatever topics they like; Increase welfarism – first start with the PA recipients, but surely you cannot stop there; When political leaders are impugned or maligned, relax, take it in your stride, don't defend yourselves. Ditto, Government policies. Be thick-skinned. Have faith in people. If you don't defend yourself when wronged, people won't think it's because the accusations are true or policies wrong! But why would you not defend your integrity or policies if they are right?

16. NMP Viswa's prescriptions have elements taken from other democratic models – predominantly those in the West. We have forms of it here too in Asia – in Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand. But before we adopt them, we need to ask critically – have they done better than us? Why are these countries struggling with problems which have hindered progress?

17. I respect the fact that the NMP has stated his views clearly. And there are others like him who believe that this is the way forward for Singapore - if we only had faith in that model, it will lead us upward. In fact, NMP goes further and claims that we have short-changed ourselves, or at least sold out this better future they envisioned – benefits of a true democracy - for economic gains. But now that we have arrived economically, let's work at becoming a real democracy, they exhort.

18. But I find it difficult to square the NMP's claims and prescriptions with the reality we see each day in Singapore and countries around the World. As Michael Palmer wryly noted, NMP Viswa has been free to move a motion, say what he believes, even while saying freedom of speech here is limited. Indeed, he has been able to do so only because we have evolved and modified our Parliamentary system to introduce the NMP scheme, so as to enable a wider representation of independent views in Parliament. Indeed, in a few months time, when our new fibre-optic networks are up, NMP Viswa would be happy to

note that Singaporeans will be able to post whatever they are afraid to do so in super quick time – in gigabyte per second speed!.

19. What justification does the NMP offer for these prescriptions for a better future? He simply calls them “conventional practices of democracy.” But is it so blindingly self-evident that they will work magic for us? If multiple parties and newspapers ensure stability, then how do we explain the problems of India, Philippines, Taiwan or Thailand, who have an abundance of them – (parties, newspapers and problems)? They have not moved faster, often paralysed by the politics and factionalism of coalition or competing parties. Singapore has progressed because we did not seek to be like others, but chose our own paths. Why is the NMP so sure, that if we adopted these practices and conventions, that we will continue to progress?

20. Let me be unequivocal about Govt’s signals here. We cannot afford to stand still, rooted complacently but precariously in status quo. We must move with the times, and respond to changing circumstances, needs and challenges. But each time we make a move, we must not do so unthinkingly, but consider carefully each step forward, carving our own path towards a better society and a more vigorous economy. Singapore and Singaporeans cannot afford to ape any model, but must choose or create a solution that which is best suited to our nation. Hence the changes we are making to the elections system as recently announced by PM which will provide the best of both Worlds to Singaporeans. A competent Government that will take care of the needs of this country and constituencies; and a wider representation from disparate groups in this House. This same approach in choosing what is best for us has served us well in many fields including health care, CPF, education and housing. What persuades us to deviate from this path that has produced good for Singaporeans?

21. We cannot ignore our vulnerability as a small city state. NMP Viswa speaks of economic and socio-political progress as if they were trade-offs – one requiring a sacrifice of the other. This divide is artificial as surely both must be judged by the ultimate test of whether it has led to the betterment of society and its citizens. They are in fact not mutually exclusive domains but linked. If we did not have reserves which have been prudently built up in past decades of economic growth, the global financial crisis would have tripped us up. We would not have the means to provide the Resilience package, to keep businesses afloat and stave off retrenchments, to provide and maintain social good. There were no demonstrations or fiery speeches by Unions or concerned students on campuses when workers were asked to take pay cuts or enforced leave to save jobs. Newspapers took a responsible line and did not play up stories to aggravate negative sentiments. So would the NMP consider these placid outcomes a sign of a dysfunctional or weak democracy in Singapore, even though it was good for all of us? Or are we a strong and functioning democracy?

22. Because of our vulnerabilities, we constantly scan the environment for uncharted threats. This is why we need and are willing to remunerate fairly for high quality people in positions of Government office and public service, who can plan ahead and avoid mishaps. Singapore has avoided many pitfalls because we usually plan ahead for 15 to 20 years. This is a cardinal national strength because other countries can only plan for one election cycle before the system has to reset itself.

23. We aim to become a jewel in Asia, an exciting global city, with a standard of living that will be the envy of many. We will provide a safe home in an active, beautiful and clean environment. We want to be a gracious and caring people. We will ensure that all our citizens can have a good education, affordable health care and enough for their retirement. These are “higher order goals”, to use the NMP’s phrase. But

we do not pretend or tell Singaporeans that it will be easy to achieve them. We must do the hard work or arguing through issues, working out policies, taking tough decisions, and carrying the people with us as we make the policies work and deliver results. Only then can we remain competitive and have the means to improve the lives of our citizen.

24. This Government has presented to Singaporeans a frank accounting of our vulnerabilities and the stark reality, as we see it. We provide a clear vision of our future and what we must do to attract the best people into Government, the policies and even uncomfortable decisions to make if we want progress. We have been transparent. The NMP asks if we have been accountable. Every five years or so, Singaporeans decide if we have kept our promises and vote – that is the greatest accountability in our system. If the PAP Government is corrupt or incompetent, I can assure the NMP that re-politicisation of Singaporeans will spontaneously occur very quickly and we will be booted out. Indeed any citizen, including the NMP if convinced that this government is failing Singaporeans, is free to organise a group and form a political party, to offer Singaporeans a better alternative to the PAP. This is how our system works. For finally the test of which way the country should go is through the ballot – what policies, and which party, do the electorate support. That way, all who claim to have a better team and plan to lead Singapore are accountable to the people. But we are thankful and humbled that Singaporeans have voted us in 12 successive General Elections since 1959.

25. We did not get re-elected in successive elections by ignoring the views of Singaporeans, or by conducting unfair and undemocratic elections. Singaporeans including older “Merdeka generation” would not have voted the PAP Government, if we had not taken care of them. But they have seen their jobs and wages improved, homes increased in value, their children and grandchildren going to better schools and Universities here and abroad. They have witnessed the renewal and upgrading of their estates, and improvements to health and other social services. These are tangible outcomes that as the NMP says, citizens can “live, breathe and feel” and decide for themselves if the pledge we say each day adds real meaning to their lives.

26. We have been open with our policies and this House has debated many times thorny or sensitive issues related to Ministerial salaries, ethnic housing quotas, FW policy, Malays in SAF, ISA. The NMP is free to raise questions or put up more motions if he feels more debate is needed. We welcome it.

27. How do we maintain this commitment to our ideals in the pledge? For this PAP Government, it means scouring the land for men and women of integrity and ability who can represent the needs of all Singaporeans to take us forward. As we have said in the past, we start preparing for the next elections, the day we have won the last one. MPs and supporters serve the people continually, and not only when elections are around the corner. I am glad that Opposition parties have become more active in between elections. I hope too that the opposition parties will allow Singaporeans to examine what alternative policies and proposals they have to offer. This would be good and must be the level of the playing field which all political parties must prepare at, for the sake of Singapore and not short change Singaporeans.

28. It is through this rigorous process of leadership renewal, that we will continue to abide by the tenets which the founding fathers of Singapore and PAP crafted and implemented. One founding father is still here in this House, and I can assure NMP Viswa that he has not lost the art of story telling. Indeed, the master story teller has diligently inculcated these same values that have guided this nation into the present

generation of leaders. We will do the same for the next so that Singaporeans can exercise their freedom to decide if we are the best team to serve them in Government.

29. Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the amended motion.

[1] This National Anthem was adopted from 1962 to January 1, 2002. The National Anthem was changed to a new version in 2002.