

## 4 CHALLENGES FACING SINGAPORE



**PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE:** Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took his audience on a tour of Singapore's history. He delivered speeches in Malay, Mandarin and English, peppering them with anecdotes and jokes, in the year's biggest political address. (PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES)

### PM Lee focuses on racial harmony, economy, health care and renewal

**T**HIS is a significant year for Singapore, because it marks the 50th anniversary of its self-government, and its most serious recession, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

His opening line of the National Day Rally speech last night underscored the most important points in the nation's biggest annual political address.

Over 2½ hours, he delivered speeches in Malay, Mandarin and English, peppering them with anecdotes and jokes.

In all three languages, he dwelt at length on the need to defend racial and religious harmony in the face of rising **religiosity**. He also spoke on the state of the economy, and the need to restructure the health-care system to serve more elderly patients.

He ended the rally looking back at Singapore's progress in the last 50 years and outlining future plans, through photographs and a video clip.

Here are the highlights:

#### 1. ON RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL HARMONY IN SINGAPORE

The risk of religious conflict flaring up has been heightened with Singaporeans becoming more religious in recent years, Mr Lee said.

Those who become too fervent could **proselytise** too aggressively and offend those of other faiths, he said.

They might also become intolerant of other religions, or keep to those of their own faith.

This could lead to religious enclaves forming and fracturing society, a scenario that Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had warned against two weeks ago.



**NATION'S PRIDE:** PM Lee cited Hyflux as a local company that has done well. It is building the world's largest desalination plant in Algeria. Hyflux staff there is seen above in a National Day video greeting. (PHOTO: HYFLUX)

Mr Lee cited an incident that happened last year to show how easily things could go wrong.

A Malay family had applied for, and received approval to hold a wedding celebration at the void deck of an HDB block.

But a Chinese family set up a wake there without realising that the space had already been reserved.

Initially, neither side wanted to give way. But after mediation by the Member of Parliament and grassroots leaders, the Malay family agreed to use another void deck nearby.

Such sensitive incidents were bound to arise, though they have been rare – about one in 300 cases, Mr Lee said.

“But if such an incident had been wrongly handled, and escalates into racial or religious conflict, then one case is bad enough.”

He thanked the National Council of Churches of Singapore and the Catholic Archbishop, for **averting** religious conflict by issuing statements against churches getting involved in **secular** societies.

They had done so after a Christian group had tried to take over a non-profit group that it disapproved of, the Association of Women for Action and Research.

#### 2. ON THE ECONOMY

The worst of the economic crisis has passed, Mr Lee said.

Singapore's gross domestic product shrank by 6.5 per cent in the first half of this year, but the global situation has stabilised, and some firms have begun hiring in small numbers.

The Government's measures, such as subsidies to help companies keep workers on their payroll, have helped many companies stave off retrenchment.

But recovery is likely to be slow – with no Christmas orders rushing in yet – so firms may have to lay off workers, he said.

“My overall assessment of the state of the economy is that the Resilience Package which we introduced in January is working, no need for a new prescription now. Before the end of the year,

we will review and decide what we need to do for next year.”

#### 3. HEALTH CARE

Fewer residents now go to their MPs for help with paying their medical bills, after the health-care financing system was improved, Mr Lee said.

As the population expands and ages, the Government will build more hospitals – Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Jurong General Hospital, he said.

It will also put more resources into community hospitals, nursing homes and home-care agencies and link them to general hospitals, to care for the elderly with chronic diseases at more affordable rates, he added.

He also urged Singaporeans to maintain healthy lifestyles.

#### 4. SINGAPORE'S FUTURE

Singapore is continuing to renew itself, even in the midst of the recession, Mr Lee said.

It is building new and well-equipped schools, polytechnics, libraries and MRT lines.

The Marina Bay area is also being revitalised, with the building of the integrated resort, a bridge and gardens.

#### HELPDESK 我的字典

**Religiosity:** 笃信宗教  
dǔ xìn zōng jiào

**Proselytise:** 劝诱他人改变信仰  
quàn yòu tā rén gǎi biàn xìn yǎng

**Averting:** 避免 bì miǎn

**Secular:** 非宗教的  
fēi zōng jiào de