

**MOTION TO THANK THE PRESIDENT ON  
THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT ON  
MONDAY, 18 MAY 2009  
BY  
SIN BOON ANN  
MP FOR TAMPINES GRC**

**Promoting Growth and Strengthening Social Cohesion**

Introduction

1. Sir, I rise in support of the motion and to join my colleagues in thanking the President for his address at the opening of Parliament.
2. The global economic recession brought on by the financial crisis has not spared Singapore. We are now seeing one of the worst contractions in our economy. There is much anxiety as the people ponder on what the future will hold for them. Will there be jobs for them? Can they continue to enjoy the same quality of life as they know it? Will there still be a future for their children and their future generation. Whatever the concerns this recession reminds us again just how vulnerable we are and how pressing is the task of ensuring that our economy is sufficiently robust to withstand the volatility and the cyclical nature of the economy.
3. The President in his address thus touched on a very basic and fundamental concern of many Singaporeans. How do we ensure that we will be able to find new opportunities that will help continue the growth of the economy to give the good life for all Singaporeans?
4. Much has been said of the strategies that the government has adopted in

ensuring our future economic well being. There are broadly two approaches to this; and I call this the “High” and the “Low” level approaches.

### Greater Involvement in SWF Investments

5. At the level of “high investments”, we continue to rely on agencies such as GIC and Temasek to look for investment opportunities that will give us reasonable returns on our investments. Both GIC and Temasek have been in the news recently, unfortunately for the wrong reasons. No doubt there will be much that will be said in the course of time about the relative losses; although I would like to state at this point that with investments it’s easier to criticize with the benefit of hindsight. This however, should not deter us from continuing to look for good companies to take significant stakes in particularly if we decided that holding it for the longer term, would give us better returns on our money.

6. Sir, while I support the approach of our government in regard to holding investments for the longer term, I am not sure if we should not place more emphasis on how we can make better use of these investments to work harder for us. Let me explain. The government has regularly stated that as a sovereign wealth fund investor, it is in most cases a passive investor. In many of its investments, the government does not ask for board representation; but would often be happy to keep its substantial shareholder status whilst leaving the company to the care of the managers. This is a pity really. We could have used our significant share advantage to provide training and exposure opportunities to Singaporeans. One of the many challenges of being a small country is the lack of opportunity for Singaporeans to find the opportunity to compete on the world stage. We are talking here about exposure to corporate planning and decision making at a higher level and in a completely different cultural environment. Few Singaporeans make it to this realm of seniority; and those who make it are often celebrated as local

heroes. Allowing more Singaporeans to participate at such senior levels, I should add, not necessarily as employees but even as interns, would give more Singaporeans the occasion to build up their confidence and their capabilities and in the longer term, bring our managerial skill sets to international blue chip standards. It is often said, and I believe this to be true, that Singaporeans are by and large, well educated and bright. However, their vision of the world is often constrained in the same manner as the proverbial frog that sees the world from the depth of the well. Given the right opportunity and environment, I am sure we will find more Singaporeans taking their companies from being third rate to first.

### Government Support for Local Enterprises

7. Our significant stake in foreign companies may also be used to provide opportunities for our small and medium enterprises to work with these companies. As with managers, our entrepreneurs do not have the opportunity or the know-how to partner with these enterprises to grow their businesses. However, if our government can trail blazer, a path maybe opened up for them to confidently take their plunge by going into new areas with foreign partners who can now guide and work with them. As a simple illustration, a significant investment in say a pharmaceutical company should help to open the way for local companies that provide laboratory services to work with these companies. The support need not be confined to the operations of the pharmaceutical company in Singapore alone, but any where else in the world where our local laboratory can effectively and competitively set up presence and provide the service. This would be yet another way that we can provide opportunities for our local industries to grow.

Additionally, opportunities may also be opened up for collaboration in areas such as joint marketing and research and development. Singapore provides a strong educational foundation for its people. With an anticipated 30% of the student cohort going into tertiary education, there would be sufficient talent for local

enterprises to engage in more research and development and work with foreign multi-national companies to advance the frontiers of knowledge. Again, leveraging on our government's investments overseas, we would be able to use these investments to help local SMEs to ride on the bandwagon of world class companies to succeed in the international arena. I often wondered if Creative Technology had had the benefit of working with a company like Apple in the area of branding and value proposition, the battle for MP3 might not have had a different outcome.

8. There is therefore, a recognizable need for our government when investing its sovereign wealth fund to consider a broader canvass beyond returns on investment and look at how it can further enhance its strategic value by using it to benefit the Singaporean managers and enterprises.

9. Going beyond, the government can assist local enterprises further by deepening the partnership with the SMEs in its overseas ventures. To be sure, the government is already doing this through IE Singapore, A\*Star, and Spring Singapore. However, the question is whether more can be done and in what areas. Sir, I believe more can be done; and in certain key strategic areas. I shall name two for now.

10. First, our government is at the moment helping our local enterprises break into new markets such as Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa to name a few. These are new markets that will present new and exciting opportunities for our local entrepreneurs to do business. Just the other day, I was having a conversation with Olivia Lum of Hyflux. She told me that although the general economic climate has not improved very much, she is however, receiving steady and strong orders from Africa where Hyflux also operates. These are orders from countries that have natural resources, particularly oil and are prepared to spend to

improve its infrastructure during this time. I do believe that our government tries to bring local businesses along when a minister makes official trips overseas. It is however, one thing to bring them along to make the casual introduction; and another to work with local businesses on how they can effectively seal relationships with key local businessmen to ensure the smooth passage of investment in these foreign territories. How far should IE Singapore go in providing assistance to SMEs in finding the right foreign partner? We know that with a strong local partner, the chances of succeeding in a foreign venture would be that much higher.

11. Secondly, as we move into a higher economic gear, we can no longer rely on traditional manufacturing to ensure our long term survival. Knowledge and intellectual property rights are going to be the key to ensure that we can continue to charge a premium for our goods and services and to enable us to stay competitive. The Americans have been leading on research and like them, we must learn to leverage on technology to remain competitive. However, as a small country with a small population base, we remain realistic about our ability to come up with original and inventive ideas. What we cannot achieve by sheer ingenuity and ability of our population, we can achieve by looking to the world to acquire these rights. Presently the government has done much to provide the incentives and encouragements to our local innovators to not only register their patents, but also to help take these patents from being ideas to commercial exploitation. On the other hand, there is more that the government can do. For example, the government can help local enterprises by working with them to discover intellectual property rights elsewhere and partnering these enterprises to acquire and own these rights or securing a longer term license that would enable them to fully exploit the patent commercially. In so doing, the SMEs can widen the intellectual property pool that they can use to increase their chances of success.

12. We constantly bemoan the fact that we do not have much land and resources to meet even the most basic of our needs. In today's globalised economy, the lack of resources in Singapore need not be a limiting factor. We could exploit opportunities for resource ownership elsewhere to help expand and improve on our capacities. Intellectual property rights that I just mentioned are but one example. Land is another. Just think of the possibilities that acquiring more land overseas will do to our relative insecurity over food supply. If our government could provide funding and create opportunities for Singapore SMEs to own and operate farms overseas on a big scale and then use these farms to channel their produce specifically to the Singapore market, it will give Singaporeans the much needed assurance of constant supply of food, particularly in view of the recent experience of the relative lack of supply of rice following the sharp price increases.

### Social Cohesion

13. Sir, economic progress and prosperity will not mean much to our country if we are not able to maintain our social cohesion. That ours is a fragile democracy of many interest groups is a constant reminder to all of us to be mindful of the need to preserve our national unity through civil discourse and mutual respect of views, even if these are not necessarily shared by all. More importantly our social cohesion must also be founded on the key values that our society has come to embrace; values that define who we are and what we stand for as a people.

14. The recent incident involving the takeover of AWARE by a group of concerned Singaporeans demonstrates how fragile our society is. For a brief period of time, our nation was on the boil. What turned out to be a relatively simple and lawful act of democracy suddenly turned into a deeply polarized and heated debate between the Christian Right and the homosexual and lesbian interest

groups. The spotlight was quick to focus on a few key groups, rightly or wrongly; namely the Church, as seen to be represented by supposed usurpers, the old leadership who were seen to champion the rights of the homosexuals and the lesbians in Singapore, the Ministry of Education who denied all knowledge of the instructor's manual for the Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) in schools run by AWARE, and of course the press.

15. Sir, I do not intend to go into the rights and wrongs of the way in which a group of concerned ladies decided take over the leadership of a voluntary welfare organization, save to say that I find it odd that democracy suddenly takes on a very different meaning when a group of new members decide to legitimately contest in an election to determine a new agenda. I also find it odd that many of the members who did not bother even to attend the most important meeting in the year to elect a new leadership should now decide to raise a howl of protest after the event. If they, meaning the older members, were that concerned in the first place, I believe they should have taken a more active role in the affairs of the organization. Perhaps, AWARE should have been more selective of its membership? The question of who should be given the right to vote has deep philosophical implications that would be applicable not only to AWARE, but for Singapore as well.

### Role of the Media

16. Of the few protagonists involved in the saga, I would like to mention the role of the press in reporting this spat. One self evident condition of a free press in a democracy is the need to be responsible, impartial and to present the facts as neutrally and objectively to the readers. One wonders whether the press can be truly called upon to discharge that duty when some of its own members feel rather passionately about the issues in the public domain. The recent saga surrounding

AWARE is one but one example. I will quote one email that I received from one Cheryl Ng. I must add that I do not know Ms Ng and I have not verified the substance of her email. However, I would say that I would not be surprised if it were true and would be very concerned if it is. Her email reads:

“I'm also surprised and deeply troubled that the reporting in The Straits Times has not been honest in presenting the full picture to the public, especially concerned parents following the AWARE saga. There was a concerted effort by both the press and TV coverage not to mention the significant presence of the homosexual community. If I had not been there, I would never have known the truth.

a) In fact, I witnessed the main reporter responsible for blowing up the whole AWARE story....hobnobbing with the homosexual fraternity at the EGM.

b) Some members of the press and TV were candidly jubilant as they celebrated the passing of the 'no confidence' vote by punching their fists in the air and hugging the 'old guard' they were standing with.

c) In the sweep of fervent support, the constitutional amendments were also made to allow men and foreign women full voting rights (in a local women's association that makes the CEDAW report on the state of women in Singapore). In the perspective that such an amendment was thrown out in the previous AGM, the motives may be called into question. The press made no mention of this important development.

I question the cover-up in the press.

In review of newspaper coverage of AWARE developments, I'm also beginning to think that press focus on the sensitive issue of religious involvement was but a calculated red herring thrown out to manipulate public sentiments.

Sir, I am pleading for the authorities to look into this matter as I am becoming increasingly alarmed that minority groups with a political agenda may not have just reached its grasp into a vulnerable women's group, and through it attempt to distort our children's views on sexuality, but has actually infiltrated the press to block out news and prevent the public from accessing the truth. I actually feel frightened that the press in Singapore can attempt to shape my views as it wishes by misinformation or partial information”

17. The accusations brought up by Ms Ng have once again raised the question of whether there should ever be an unregulated press. In reporting the matter, the

editors and journalists could have looked at the issue as one of the conservative group in our society taking on the liberals rather than be quick to frame this in the context of the Christian Right against the homosexuals and the lesbians. True, many of the ladies came from the same church. However, the same may be said of any group who comes from any organization. But that alone does not mean that they represent the organization. I do wonder if the press would have been so quick on the take if it were women from another faith who took up the cause instead. It is unfortunate that by framing this episode as one that carries a religious undertone, the whole debate deeply polarized our society very quickly.

18. Apart from the press, the education ministry in the early days of the AWARE leadership struggle has maintained consistently that they did not look into this matter as no complaint was made by any parent. Not surprisingly, what followed was a deluge of complaints from parents which then prompted an investigation by the ministry. The outcome was an implicit acceptance of the serious nature of the allegations against the CSE programmes run by AWARE. I am grateful to note the ministry has now tightened the procedures on the appointment of course providers in the area of sexuality education.

19. The AWARE saga is as much about the kind of values we want to promote in our society as it is about leadership struggle. To build a socially cohesive society, all interest groups must recognize and accept the fundamental building blocks of our society that have come to represent our values on families and relationships. Our values change if at all by evolution than by revolution. Aggressive proselytisation by fringe groups, whether carried out by insidious means or otherwise, will only invite a backlash from mainstream society. This is not how our society should be run. Social cohesion requires the active participation of all. In this particular episode, one wonders if the education ministry had taken a more proactive stand in the first place by being more vigilant, the leadership struggle

and the ensuing polarization of our community would not have taken place in the manner that it did. The question that some have asked is whether a formal complaint must be made from someone before the ministry will act on a matter which it has heard about and which comes under its purview. Displaying annoyance at being dragged into the sorry saga does not help with the confidence recovery process in the aftermath.

20. Sir, we have done extremely well as a country over the years; and I can say with great confidence that we will continue to do well in the years to come. The President's speech for the new session of Parliament has done much to reinforce that confidence. The question is not whether we will do well, but how much better we will do. I strongly believe that if we are able to pull together and collectively work at overcoming the challenges that lie before us, there will always be a clear blue sky with a rainbow spanning over it for Singapore. With that Sir, I join my colleagues in thanking the President for his speech.

21. Thank you.

Sin Boon Ann