

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AT EUROCHAM ON
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Openness in the COVID Era

Friends, ladies and gentlemen

1. COVID-19 has underlined a fundamental reality about Singapore: We are too small to survive on our own. We need to tap into global markets.
2. We have only two advantages: a good geographical location, and a people that is responsible, resourceful and reliable, willing and able to work hard to make miracles happen.

We Shall Be An Open-Economy

3. From time to time, these truisms about Singapore and Singaporeans are questioned. I accepted your invitation today so I can assure all our international partners that Singapore's approach to running our economy has not and will not change – for the simple reason it *can't*, for our reality has not changed and never can.
4. We will continue to welcome, facilitate and protect foreign investments. We will continue to complement local with foreign talent. We will preserve, buttress and expand our network of free trade agreements.
5. We will continue to value the technology and expertise the world can offer us. We will persist in learning from all. We will continue to be a hub for manufacturing, trading, maritime, aviation, financial services, ICT and R&D.
6. Singapore will also continue to be the interchange between East and West, Europe and Asia, China and India. It will continue to be your springboard to connect with the ASEAN region.
7. There are two reasons why all these long-standing understandings of our reality has been called into question recently by some. One is internal, the other external.

The Discomforts of Globalisation

8. The internal reason is the domestic debate we have been having, on whether foreign manpower and free trade harm the interest of Singaporeans.
9. This is not a new debate. We have had this debate before in Singapore. Indeed, such a debate has occurred elsewhere in the world with greater ferocity. In

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America and Europe we have seen the rise of anti-globalization, populist, far right political groupings.

10. In Singapore, there have been attempts to use free trade agreements — especially CECA, our partnership agreement with India -- to whip up anti-foreigner sentiments and seed xenophobia in our society.

11. That is why the Prime Minister and cabinet decided recently that my colleague Dr Tan See Leng and I should deliver Ministerial statements in Parliament and openly debate the issue.

12. We presented the facts, explained the importance of free trade to Singapore and proved that while our workers are facing challenges, their problems were not caused by free trade agreements, let alone CECA.

13. The PAP government is prepared to confront this issue, because openness is a fundamental value for us. We are confident the great majority of Singaporeans understand the need for us to stay open, including the need to continue welcoming foreign expertise to complement local talent.

14. However, we must and will address the genuine concerns of some Singaporeans. As in other advanced economies, globalisation does have downsides.

15. In our case, some segments of our workforce are concerned about the heightened competition for jobs from foreign manpower; the over-concentration of foreigners in certain sectors, companies, and locations on the island; and the unfair and discriminatory hiring practices of a small minority of employers.

16. We will deal robustly with these problems. If we don't, resentments will grow, and there will be fertile ground for far-right populist politics to gather strength. We are determined to never let such politics take root here.

17. By addressing the problems some in our workforce face, we will continue to maintain broad support for our open economic model. The solutions we adopt to address these problems will not depart significantly from the measures other developed countries have adopted.

18. The larger challenge we face now is an external one – arising from COVID-19.

The Real Economic Threat of COVID-19

19. Economies around the world have gone through upheavals because of COVID-19. In Singapore, a very visible marker has been the F&B industry.

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20. We had to suspend dining in at F&B outlets each time there was a significant rise in infections, because restaurants are high risk settings. Each time that happened, it affected the daily lives of Singaporeans in tangible ways.

21. However, though F&B is an important barometer of domestic well-being, the single biggest factor that will profoundly affect Singapore's long-term attractiveness and competitiveness is the openness of our borders.

22. Hence, when COVID-19 disrupted cross border activities, we stayed true to our long-standing commitment of staying open, and tried various ways to overcome the disruptions. Let me recount a few key episodes.

23. First, manufacturers were concerned supply lines were disrupted. We did whatever we could to keep supply lines open, and the Port of Singapore and air cargo operations uninterrupted.

24. Throughout the pandemic, we continued to service the world as a major transshipment and bunkering hub. When queues built up at our Port, the PSA used automation, artificial intelligence and advanced planning to clear them as quickly as possible. We never locked down; we never closed in.

25. And at the height of uncertainty, even when Singapore was about to run short of certain items (like N95 masks), we never imposed export controls. Throughout the pandemic, including during the circuit breaker period, manufacturers in Singapore continued to have access to raw materials and components, and were able to export freely to overseas markets and honour deliveries to their global clients.

26. Second, when a humanitarian crisis was brewing because over half a million sea crew were stranded, not able to disembark when they called at certain ports, the Singapore Government worked with the industry and developed a process to facilitate crew change in Singapore.

27. To date, we have facilitated over 160,000 crew changes – and up to 300 a day over the past five months. We are currently working with the industry on a global effort to help vaccinate sea crew coming through our ports.

28. Third, when the supply of workers became a concern. For example, when Malaysia imposed Movement Control Order at very short notice in March 2020, tens of thousands of Malaysian workers who commuted daily between Singapore and Johor were stranded on both sides of the Causeway.

29. For those in Singapore, if they returned to their home country, they would not be able to come out again to Singapore to work.

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30. Literally overnight, we made arrangements with hotels to help the Malaysian workers find accommodation in Singapore, so that they could continue to work, and operations here were not affected.

31. We worked with our counterparts in Malaysia to make sure that as far as possible Malaysian suppliers to Singapore plants could continue to operate.

32. As for healthcare during the pandemic, we treated everyone equally. Thus far, everyone who was infected with COVID-19 in Singapore, regardless of nationality, has been given the best possible care, at no cost.

33. When we commenced our vaccination exercise earlier this year, we made sure we covered everyone who lives in Singapore. Hence, all foreigners holding work passes, dependent passes and student passes could get their vaccinations and be protected while living in Singapore. We just extended vaccination to short term pass holders who have extended stay in Singapore.

34. We vaccinated in the order most sensible for public health reasons, starting with frontline workers, then vulnerable seniors, and then down the age bands – but always, regardless of nationalities.

Disruption to People-to-People Contact

35. But while we were able to keep supply lines open, facilitated crew change, and vaccinated the great majority of people living in Singapore, we could not overcome the biggest challenge we faced, which was the disruption to travel.

36. Changi Airport became empty, and SIA was grounded. It was a serious situation and remains so, for Changi and SIA are strategic to Singapore.

37. People to people exchanges also dried up. Our businessmen and entrepreneurs have not been able to fly out of Singapore to meet partners and clients abroad; MNC executives, both Singaporean and expatriate, have been unable to visit overseas operations; and students had to forego overseas internships. Many couples as well as multi-national families were forced apart, which is painful.

38. We are a hub and a key node in the world. If people from different parts of the world cannot come here to do business, exchange ideas, collaborate, create sparks and make things happen, we are diminished. COVID-19 dealt us a severe blow indeed.

39. We cannot reverse this simply by opening up our borders, ceasing to quarantine new visitors and let normal travel resume. That would lead to massive outbreaks of infection and deaths, and eventually, another lockdown.

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40. Instead, we tried whatever we could to revive travel, step-by-step. Key personnel, senior executives, board members of major companies, as well as experts needed to maintain, repair or install critical equipment, were allowed to travel in and out of Singapore, with controlled itineraries and frequent testing in lieu of quarantine.

41. However, to manage transmission risk, we had to limit the number of travelers. As a result, as hard as it tried, EDB could not satisfy all the demand. It had to be selective, giving priority to those with a large base of employees in Singapore.

42. Not too long into the pandemic, we developed a plan to revive travel safely. The first step was to open-up, unilaterally if necessarily, to countries and regions which had successfully controlled the spread of the virus. We are the only Asian country to have done this for Brunei, Australia, New Zealand, China, Vietnam, and Taiwan. The scheme has been successful and remains in force today, with countries and regions added or removed depending on their COVID situation.

43. We made attempts to commence a first-of-its-kind Air Travel Bubble with Hong Kong. It would have been a very meaningful scheme, between two international cities and financial services hubs. But the stars were never aligned, and the bubble could not take off.

44. Nevertheless, we plan to open up to countries with moderate risk, by reducing or removing quarantine for fully vaccinated individuals from countries with lower infection rates.

45. We explained this broad plan earlier this year. Around the same time, we managed to bring forward the vaccine delivery schedule. We were thus able to accelerate the pace of vaccination — with about one percent of our population vaccinated every day.

40. On 24 June 2021, the co-chairs of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce articulated the Government's plan to transit to a new normal, where we live with COVID-19 as an endemic disease. One key component of the transition was the roadmap to progressively re-open our borders, to reconnect with the world again.

41. Unfortunately, just then we hit a snag. The Delta variant infected fishmongers at a fisheries port, who in turn spread the virus to numerous markets across the city frequented by many seniors. Only 42% of our population was fully vaccinated at that point and it would have been reckless if we had doggedly pushed ahead with our roadmap.

42. We had to re-tighten so as to buy more time to vaccinate more people, especially our seniors. As expected, cases shot up, and so too the number of people who were exposed to infected individuals and had to be quarantined.

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43. We needed more quarantine rooms for them, which meant fewer rooms for travelers. Hence, we had to throttle back travel flows, causing a lot of inconveniences to global businesses and their employees.

44. But our responses worked. Numbers of infection cases, COVID-19 patients who fall severely ill, fatalities, are stable and under control. With the time we bought ourselves, we became one of most highly vaccinated countries in the world.

45. About 80% of our total population have fully completed their vaccinations; and the numbers are still rising. In terms of eligible population, our coverage is even higher, at 86%.

46. We have thus re-activated our transition roadmap. The Ministry of Manpower's application window for returning Employment Pass holders and their dependents are opened again.

47. Yesterday we announced a new country risk framework, and a vaccinated travel arrangement. We will start this arrangement in September with Germany and Brunei, expanding to other parts of the world later.

Conclusion – The Other Reality of Singapore

48. It has been a trying time for everyone, including for anyone who is working in a foreign land.

49. Some countries or regions have been very safe with low infection numbers, and very tight border measures. But it is difficult to sustain this for a prolonged period. People are tired of the frequent lockdowns and travel bans.

50. In other countries, there is far more freedom. But it came at a heavy cost, for these countries had gone through massive outbreaks, and had high numbers of fatalities.

51. We adopted a middle course in Singapore. While there were many inconveniences due to social restrictions, by and large, life could carry on normally. Schools stayed opened, restaurants and attractions operated most of the time, people discovered that there was more nature in Singapore than they had realized.

52. More importantly, our hospitals were not over-whelmed and we had relatively few deaths. However, our border controls were quite strict, and were further tightened during periods when local infections spiked.

53. There is no country or region that has been both free of restrictions and safe from Covid-19. Singapore have to weigh carefully between preserving lives and livelihoods.

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54. We believe this approach was right and prudent. People value and love Singapore not because we adopt a laissez-faire attitude about anything, let alone public health. People value us because the city is well-governed; everything works; we are stable, secure and safe; and above all, because we take care of everyone in Singapore, even in a pandemic.

55. This is why we took the measures we did, including painful ones, so as to keep the country safe from COVID19. If we had opened up recklessly, we would not be Singapore anymore. Our experience of COVID-19 would have resembled New York's or London's. People would now be asking to leave Singapore, not asking to return.

56. Today, we are in a new position. Primarily because even without a severe threat of infections and deaths, our population came forward in big numbers to get vaccinated. Everyone — young and old, all races and nationalities – are taking their jabs.

57. This came about because there is strong trust amongst people and between people and government. This trust does not come out of nowhere. It comes from the Government's consistency of action, guided by a recognition of our constraints, a long term perspective, and a strong sense of mission to keep Singapore stable, secure and safe.

59. As a result, whenever we face challenges, people collectively come together to do their part, even making sacrifices, for the larger good and for the long term.

60. That is why throughout the pandemic, Singaporeans were disciplined and socially responsible. I believe we are more united now than before COVID-19 struck.

60. I thank all our foreign partners for bearing up with all the inconveniences and heartaches of the past 18 months. I hope that as important stakeholders here, you will continue to work with us in partnership, as we transit to become a COVID-19 resilient nation.