



THE OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE

Patron: H.E. Lee Hsien Loong
Prime Minister of Singapore



21st Dec 2020

My dear friends,

I want to thank each one of you for the honour and privilege it has been to serve as your President for the past four and a half years.

Many kindly asked why I am stepping down. Although there is no Constitutional requirement to do so, there is a custom of a four year term, started by my predecessor Dr Michael Hwang SC. Customs are often stronger than law, and rightly so, as they enshrine the principles of respect and collegiality. We likewise have a tradition that we rotate the Presidency between Cambridge and Oxford.

I will complete my term and step down at the end of today, knowing that the Society is in fine fettle and good hands.

Many of you will recall that some six years ago, I invited Dr Melanie Chew to step up from Committee to VP, Oxford, in the hope that she would become the first lady President of the Society.

Ours is a Society that has been at the forefront of the ebbs and flows in Singapore's modern history. For close to 100 out of the past 200 years, our alumni have been Governors, Prime Ministers or Colonial Secretaries of Singapore. Indeed, we are no ordinary Society; we punch above our weight of 3000 plus alumni, in the highest echelons of Government including our PM, DPM and Senior Minister, in the admin service, judiciary, armed forces and all strata of the private sector; and also increasingly, in civil society and the community activist space.

So, it is entirely fitting that as a Society of national standing, we be led by a Lady President. It gives me and my predecessor, Michael Hwang, great pleasure to know that we have made this happen. And I will give Melanie my full support in the years to come, in my new Constitutional role of Immediate Past President.

The Society has been an integral part of my life these past 10 years - on Committee, as Vice President, and for the past four and a half years as your President.

The high points have surely been friendship, camaraderie and what I have learnt from each of you. Plus my utmost gratification, to have been able to play my part.

COVID has meant that this year's activities were inevitably curtailed.

But we did still have a number of meaningful events through digital communication, including four fully subscribed zoom Distinguished Fireside chats with eminent persons including a former President of the UN Security Council, a former US Under Secretary for International Trade, and tonight in the finest traditions of UK Singapore cordiality, I have invited HE Kara Owen, CMG, CVO, British High Commissioner to speak about "Global Britain, the next Chapter" post Brexit.

As I mentioned in my letter on 5th May 2020 to all of you, COVID has given us a rare opportunity to take stock and think of what really matters to each of us individually and collectively. Despite the vicissitudes it has created, there have been some silver linings: time to reflect, reconnect with friends via zoom, do much needed personal admin, and in families drawing much close together despite distances of time and space.

And COVID has also allowed me a rare opportunity to send Christmas greetings to you for the fifth time. Our AGM should have been mid year, but because of COVID, the rules governing societies were changed ,allowing AGMs to be held at year-end.

Our successful initiatives these past four and a half years have included:

- A steady stream of elucidating Fireside Chats;
- Launching the Hard Seats S R Nathan Biennial Lecture – as a national event covered by the media and even Channel News Asia on prime time news;
- Introducing Meet the Ambassador Series Firesides;
- A distinguished lecture series with the likes of Michael Milken, Kishore Mahbubani, Professor Chan Heng Chee, Bilahari and Prof Sir Tom Blundell, and many more;
- Glamorous Balls in the finest tradition of our alma maters;
- Introducing wine tasting and casual drinks evenings for members to socialise;
- An Inaugural Careers' Fair for newly returning graduates;
- On the sporting side, the launch of our very own Boat Club, and turning the tradition of our Boat Races into a higher purpose as Row For Hope Races showcasing cancer survivorship in partnership with the National Cancer Centre Singapore ;
- Bespoke Cultural and outdoor events for our members, such as a special guided tour of the Gardens by the Bay and the National Gallery.

We have been fortunate to have been trusted by Government and the establishment, giving us considerable access, enabling us to make a difference for our members and also for Singapore society at large. Thus we have had a tremendous run in the national arena on many levels. The introduction of the Hard Seats lecture portrayed us as a Society of reason, a voice of conscience and a proponent of interesting ideas which benefit Singapore as a whole, whilst remaining steadfastly apolitical.

And of course, last year we had the singular honour of conceptualising a Bicentennial Service of Carols and Thanksgiving at St Andrews Cathedral attended by our Patron, PM Lee Hsien Loong and Mrs Lee, Cabinet Ministers, plus the great and good of Singapore, as well as Ambassador-level representatives of over 20 countries.

To get there, from a nascent idea which we mooted in December 2018, we had to discuss and convince PMO to support the event. We then had the privilege of working in conjunction with the Anglican Diocese and National Council of Churches in co- driving the event organisation on a multi-agency basis, securing the support of the inter-religious organisations of Singapore, Ministry of Home Affairs and multiple government agencies. It was a matter of great honour and privilege that the event was so well-subscribed, that it had to be repeated over two successive days. And we were able to get a leading Oxbridge choir flown down to participate alongside a national choir drawn from all denominations. The event showcased Singapore's unique multi-racial blend, demonstrating the unity, tolerance and cohesiveness as one nation, showing mutual respect for each other, regardless of faith, creed or persuasion.

PM Lee said that we had made a difference on a national scale, and he asked me to ensure that we keep up the good work. That was for us the moment, when, I believe, we could justifiably say we had come of age.

So I am somewhat teary-eyed at relinquishing the day-to-day leadership of the Society, but better to go at one's prime than to be pushed. And I am pleased and honoured that Melanie has asked me to continue (in the finest traditions of many organisations such as leading Chambers of Commerce and professional bodies such as the Law Society) to chair external affairs and some of our dialogue sessions. And also to look at the establishment of a small Council of Advisors amongst our senior alumni and others to see how we could as a Society add value in promoting stronger ties between our alma maters and the leading Singapore universities.

A small Council of Advisors will not require amendments to the Constitution, nor replace or supplant our Executive Committee, as it will be an informal group of well wishers who the President can tap on for the duration of that President. Its terms of reference will be settled by Melanie. I am glad to say that Prof Tan Eng Chye (President of NUS), Prof Arnoud de Meyer (former Head of Judge Business and former President of SMU) and Michael Hwang have agreed to serve, alongside myself and those persons Melanie chooses to appoint.

Before finishing my term, I wanted to pay particular tribute to my predecessor, Michael Hwang. We approached Michael to lead the Society in 2002 when the Society had some fissures. Michael was the consummate leader, empowering those of us serving under him, and yet keeping a firm, steady and wise grip. For me, it was a privilege to learn from him. His wisdom continued to prevail, as I leaned on him for counsel throughout my term.

As a Society, with a disproportionately large number of our members beneficiaries of state largesse as scholars, we felt that it was important that we put back into Singapore society. During a FM 89.3 interview earlier this year, I did say that it would be good if our members could heed Mr S R Nathan's call to each befriend someone facing mental stresses and seek to make a difference to that person's life.

Melanie has initiatives she wants to lead on many fronts, building on what we have achieved and taking us to greater heights. These include, should it be helpful, the programme we launched to train scholars prior to their Oxbridge interviews, which our late Committee member, Tyler Hung played a key role in driving, and also mentorship for new graduates from our alma maters. Melanie will no doubt share her ideas in due course.

Other initiatives to pursue include, getting our Boat Club to do more on a national scale for rowing. Close to eighty of our alumni rowers have participated, turning our boat race tradition into something national, with great coverage in the media for the *Row for Hope* series. For the Boat Club to flourish, it needs a firm footing working closely with Singapore Rowing. I have discussed a potential initiative with Sport Singapore and Singapore National Olympic Council, with the support of all our rowers, if Sport Singapore is prepared to work with us.

We are blessed to live in this remarkable country, by descent or choice, enjoying peace, tranquillity, orderly streets, the ability for women to walk safely at night, the lovely lushness of a City in Nature, a currency that holds its value and has appreciated against other major currencies, an asset backing of several hundred thousand dollars per citizen of State reserves, and the ability for our young people to dream dreams and to see them into fruition.

I want to place on record the immense support, access and warmth that members of the government and numerous Cabinet ministers have offered to us in discussions, in engagement, in attending our events, in sharing views etc. We do not take this for granted. I have also felt it appropriate to reach out to opposition politicians as they too represent Singaporeans and long may our august political independence continue. Our relevance and standing remains as long as we maintain political independence and the ability to contribute for the benefit of Singapore, through sensitive dialogue and inclusiveness.


I want also, if you will permit me, to mention your remarkable, hard-working Committee. Over the past four and a half years, I have sought to make the Committee inclusive, to cover all age-groups, and our expat alumni. Indeed, expat alumni have led the *Future of* series, website update and media subcomm. Special mention goes to Melanie (close to 30 years on Committee) and Ng Yeau Chong (YC), with 22 continuous years on our Committee. I am delighted that YC will be our new VP Oxford, alongside Toh Han Li as VP Cambridge.

May I finally express my thanks to our Patron, PM Lee, whom I wrote to last week informing him of my decision to step down- I updated him on what we had been doing and provided him with some thoughts and suggestions of what I had the privilege of seeing at close quarters as President of this remarkable Society. PM, ever gracious, expressed his appreciation of what we had done and sent his warm good wishes to us all.

Please be assured that although I am stepping down as your President, I will continue to be engaged, as indeed will Michael (on the Council of Advisors), so that the Society benefits, building on the past, maintaining continuity where there are clear strengths, and going forward with new initiatives, refinements and new ideas.

And so with satisfaction, and knowing that I will see you all and remain very much part of the Society, I wish you all great happiness, peace, and safety through Christmas and the very best for 2021. And to Melanie, my successor, God's speed and a happy and fulfilling stint as President of our Society.

Warm Regards,



Paul Supramaniam
President