

**DEBATE ON DPM'S MINISTERIAL STATEMENT  
SPEECH BY MELVIN YONG (RADIN MAS SMC) ON 14 OCT 2020**

**Staying Safe and Sane in the New Normal**

1. Mr Speaker, I stand in support of the Ministerial Statement made by DPM Heng Swee Keat, which provides a clear path forward for our nation to reopen our economy safely and emerge stronger from this crisis.

**Saving jobs**

2. Since DPM first presented the latest set of relief measures on August 17, Singapore's employment landscape has experienced another sharp contraction. According to the latest labour market report published by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), 11,350 jobs were made redundant in the first half of 2020. This figure does not include the large-scale layoffs recently announced by Resorts World Sentosa and Singapore Airlines, and we can expect that retrenchment and unemployment numbers will continue to rise in the second half of the year.
3. While the figures from MOM's labour market report are concerning, the reality is that retrenchment could have been a lot worse, if not for the swift and decisive measures put in place by the Government. Many companies have told me that initiatives such as the Jobs Support Scheme, have been instrumental in helping them to retain their workers, while they work on adjusting to the new normal. I am therefore heartened that the Government will continue to provide tiered wage support to sectors that are hardest hit by this pandemic.

**Staying mentally resilient in a prolonged WFH arrangement**

4. Mr Speaker, beyond job preservation, we also need to provide better mental health support to our workers. In his recent address to the World Health Organisation, PM Lee acknowledged the impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health of our population and that protecting mental health takes a collective effort. I fully agree.
5. The Multi-Ministry Taskforce recently announced that more employees will be allowed to return to the workplace, and that the Government is working on a roadmap towards Phase 3 of the safe reopening of our economy. Working from home, will however, continue to remain as the default. In recent Parliamentary

Sittings, I have repeatedly highlighted the challenges faced by our workers who telecommute. They must juggle multiple responsibilities, such as looking after children, taking care of elderly parents, and trying to remain productive at work. To make matters worse, because they work from home, their bosses think that it is easier for them to answer work-related calls and emails, at any time of the day, even after office hours. Workplace burnout has become an issue, as many employees are not well-rested.

6. To help workers cope with workplace burnout, I recently asked in this House, whether it was timely for us to consider a “Right to Disconnect” legislation. Since then, Singaporeans have written to me to share their thoughts and personal experiences, support as well as criticism. Let me first address the criticisms that I have received and explain how I think the Right to Disconnect can be applied to our local context.

### **Addressing criticisms**

7. The three most common criticisms against having a Right to Disconnect in Singapore are:
  - One, it would be too rigid to legislate work hours as every sector is different, and doing so would not be feasible for those working in essential services;
  - Two, productivity would drop if workers are not allowed to work outside of their specified hours and it would erode Singapore’s competitiveness as a global hub; and
  - Three, colleagues who work longer hours would obtain better appraisals from their supervisors. This is after all, a “dog-eat-dog” world.

### What the “Right to Disconnect” is not

8. Mr Speaker, these criticisms, while seemingly valid, show that many people do not quite understand the exact scope of a Right to Disconnect legislation. Let me reassure critics that I am not calling for rigid laws that specify working hours, nor am I calling for Singaporeans to be less productive, and certainly not for Singapore to be any less competitive! It is simply about ensuring that our workers

have protected time to rest. But I can see why some have this misconception about rigid working hours.

9. In France, where this was pioneered, their labour laws were modified in the year **2000** to specify that the length of their work week was 35 hours, exceeding which overtime had to be paid. When the country implemented its Right to Disconnect legislation in **2017**, people got confused between the scope of these two separate pieces of legislation, and mistakenly thought that it was forbidden to send work emails outside of 6pm.
10. But the reality is that many French workers still choose to work beyond their official work hours and get paid overtime. The difference is that they now have to respect their colleagues' personal time and cannot expect them to work past official hours for non-urgent, non-critical tasks that can be completed the next working day.
11. For those worrying about the delivery of our essential services, our frontline officers have actually been practising protected time for years. When I was with the Police Force, my officers and I would be on call 24/7. We would receive phone alerts on incidents happening throughout the day. But between the "silent hours" of midnight to 7am, these alerts were restricted only to a specific list of critical, sensitive cases. This was to ensure that we were sufficiently well rested, even while always on standby.
12. On the criticism that a Right to Disconnect would erode our competitiveness and productivity – research provides evidence to the contrary. According to a 2014 study by Professor John Pencavel from the Stanford University, **overworking beyond 55 hours per week causes a sharp decline in productivity per hour**. He also observed that overwork led to increased workplace accidents and injuries. Professor Pencavel's findings are not unique, and other researchers have also found that well-rested employees are more productive, more careful and are better able to contribute creatively at the workplace.
13. There were also some who were concerned that a Right to Disconnect would disadvantage them as they felt that bosses tended to favour those who worked longer hours. This is fundamentally an issue of presenteeism at the workplace, which a growing body of research has found to be detrimental to a company's performance. According to a study by the Global Corporate Challenge, presenteeism reduces productivity and many employers have been moving away from using time spent at the office as a proxy for good performance. Staff's

performance should be measured by the outcomes achieved against clear goals set, not by the extended hours spent.

So, what is the Right to Disconnect?

14. Mr Speaker, in simple terms, what I am calling for is that we help our employees carve out protected time for them to rest and recharge.
15. In France, the Right to Disconnect legislation makes it mandatory for employers and employees to negotiate on the protocol for non-emergency calls and non-critical emails outside of working hours. Disconnecting is all about creating protected time to rest and recharge – not unlike what the MOE does for its teachers during the school holidays.
16. Even the Germans – **who according to a survey, work on average 5 hours more than their contractual hours each week** – understand the need for clearly defined periods of rest so that they can be more productive the next day. The Germans have a concept called “Feierabend”, which **describes the time after their work day ends and when their rest time begins**. Our German friends understand that they need to have dedicated time outside of work to rest properly in order to have the energy to work hard and be productive again the next day.
17. For those who remain unconvinced, let me share the experience of **Rebecca Wong**, a Singaporean currently working in France, who wrote to me last month. She shared that when emails are sent outside of office hours in France, it is usually accompanied with a disclaimer to state that no immediate response is expected. Alternatively, they can use technology to schedule their non-critical emails to be sent out at 8am the next working day. These are certainly not radical practices, but baby steps which we can easily adopt here in Singapore.

Taking gradual steps to achieve a Right to Disconnect

18. But I do agree with SMS Zaqy Mohamed that we should study in greater detail how a Right to Disconnect legislation could be implemented in Singapore. In the meantime, I hope that the **Tripartite Advisory on Mental Health** – which the SMS had assured last week that it would be published soon – will include aspects of the Right to Disconnect. With clearer guidelines, our unions can start a conversation with employers on the protocol to answer non-critical work calls and

emails outside of working hours, as well as the provision of appropriate help for those facing workplace burnout, while keeping their identities confidential.

19. I also urge MOM to conduct a **yearly survey on workplace mental health**. This will allow us to track how well our workers are faring mentally, what are the best practices among our companies, and guide our collective efforts to provide better workplace mental health support.
20. I hope that tackling workplace burnout will be a key priority in the newly announced **COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce**. After all, a mentally resilient workforce leads to a safer work environment for all.

### **Workplace Safety in Phase 3**

21. Mr Speaker, as we gradually move towards Phase 3 of our safe recovery, we need to pay special attention to workplace safety. The latest WSH report published by MOM found that workplace accidents and injuries fell for the first half of this year. This is not unexpected in view of the suspension of most work activities due to the Circuit Breaker measures. **The number of workplace fatalities had however, remained similar to the first half of 2019.**
22. As more workers return to their workplaces, there is a need to ease them back gradually into their jobs, as many have not returned to their worksites for months. It is imperative that companies implement a structured re-orientation programme for workers returning to work, especially in high-risk worksites. Companies should also conduct refresher WSH courses for all returning workers **so that safety remains at the top of everyone's minds.**
23. Experiences from other countries have shown that workplaces have the potential to become super-spreader events. A factory in Sri Lanka where over 1,000 workers caught COVID-19, a five-star hotel in Hong Kong, and even the White House, are just some of the recent high-profile cases of the coronavirus spreading unabated at the workplace. We need to ensure that Safe Management Measures are adhered to strictly. We need to avoid complacency and prevent virus clusters re-emerging from the workplace. To do so, I hope that the MOM will finally heed my repeated calls for a **mandatory WSH officer at every workplace.**

### **Conclusion**

24. To conclude, I would like to commend every Singaporean and resident who have been involved in this tireless fight against COVID-19. From our healthcare workers fighting hard at the frontline, to every individual who practises Safe Management Measures every day – wearing a mask, using SafeEntry, carrying the TraceTogether token; and simply keeping a safe distance, where possible. It is not easy, and we still have a long way to overcome COVID-19, both as a public health crisis and as an economic crisis. Let us continue to stay united, keeping each other safe and sane as we transit together to a New Normal.
  
25. Mr Speaker, I support the Ministerial Statement.