

**DEBATE ON THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
SPEECH BY MELVIN YONG (RADIN MAS SMC) ON 31 AUG 2020**

Are we ready for the future of work?

1. Mr Speaker, I stand in support of the motion. I would like to thank Madam President for laying out the key priorities for this new term of Government, which will help to see Singapore safely through the current COVID-19 crisis, and secure our immediate future in the post-pandemic world.
2. Prior to the crisis, our economy was already facing immense structural challenges and shifts. Examples include an ageing population, the shift towards the gig economy, and the increasing use of automation driven by Industry 4.0. COVID-19 has merely accelerated the pace of this transformation, at an unprecedented pace, causing our future workplace, which many thought would happen in decades to come, to become a reality much sooner.
3. All jobs and all workers will have to transform, or risk becoming obsolete. **No job is safe.** In recent years, much of the work traditionally done by accountants, lawyers, and even doctors have been automated and accomplished with greater accuracy. Real estate agents and financial planners are already starting to be phased out by digital apps. Our work and our workplaces are transforming. But are our companies, our workers, and the Government ready?

What is the future of work?

4. Let me first start with the shape and form of the future workplace. **In my view, it will be smarter, leaner, and more connected.**
5. In the manufacturing sector, artificial intelligence and automation will mean that mundane jobs will be phased out. As technology redefines existing job roles into smaller tasks, more jobs will be increasingly taken over by robots. As Minister Ong Ye Kung aptly put it, "If you work like a robot, you will be replaced by a robot". Our workers of tomorrow will need to learn the latest technologies and be able to work with them.
6. One example is how autonomous vehicles (AV) will drastically redefine our land transport industry. Locally, AV technology is already being trialled in areas with complex traffic conditions, and we will soon see large-scale trials in Punggol, Tengah, and the Jurong Innovation District. What will happen to the livelihoods

of more than 10,000 bus drivers? And the 100,000 Singaporeans who hold a Taxi or Private Hire Car vocational licence, many of whom rely on driving as their source of income? Since 2016, I have been highlighting the impact of autonomous technology on the livelihoods of our transport workers. Every year, we get closer to this reality.

Whole-of-nation effort to transform for the future

7. Mr Speaker, transforming our workforce for the future of work will require a whole-of-nation effort, from the private sector, to the Government as well as our workers.
8. I am glad to see that some forward-looking companies are already taking steps to gear up their workforce for the future. DBS, for example, has partnered with Amazon Web Services to equip 3,000 employees with basic knowledge in artificial intelligence and machine learning. The bank, which was one of the first to embrace digital banking, has also invested significantly in its digital learning tools to enable their employees to upgrade their skills and acquire new knowledge, even while they work from home.
9. While big companies, like DBS, have the resources to plan for the future, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are faced with a different reality. The impact of COVID-19 on SMEs has been more pronounced and many SMEs are operating in 'survival mode'. Some are so focused on their day-to-day business that they neglect to plan for tomorrow. **I urge the Government to do more to support our SMEs in adopting technology and upskilling their workers.**
10. We would also need to move upstream to prepare our future workforce. Data literacy and coding will be important skills that our young will need to be familiar with. **We should make Computer Science a compulsory subject in secondary schools.** I am not suggesting that we train every Singaporean child to be a coder or IT expert, but to understand computers and be able to work with robots in the future workplace. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the UK, have already taken steps in this direction, with coding and programming incorporated into the mandatory education for students.
11. The low latency provided by 5G technology means that working from home will become the default, and remote working possibilities are endless. Competition for jobs will truly become globalised, blurring the divide between local and foreign workforce. While I welcome the recent announcement by the Ministry of Manpower to further adjust the Employment Pass and S Pass qualifying

salaries, my question is – **will our Work Pass and Employment Pass system continue to be relevant when companies no longer need employees to be physically based in one location to perform the work?**

12. Can Singapore continue to compete for investments and bring in the best companies? Can Singaporeans continue to compete for good jobs? As Madam President noted in her Address, we will need to be more resilient and more nimble than others when responding to change in order to thrive in this global world.
13. But how can we better support our fellow Singaporeans to compete in this new world, especially when they already face many challenges? PMETs, particularly those in their 40s and 50s, tell me that it is not easy to juggle between the many responsibilities that they must shoulder every day. Looking after their young children, managing the healthcare needs of their elderly parents, and trying to set aside funds for their own retirement needs. With this overwhelming “sandwiched” feeling, many are unable to think beyond their daily struggles. I hope that the Government will recognise this, and look into how we can better support and alleviate these burdens.

Tackling the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) issues of the future workplace

14. Mr Speaker, I have spoken about how technology has the potential to significantly transform our work and workplaces in the years to come. But can we tap on technology to make our future workplace safer and healthier?
15. With technology, dangerous work at the worksite can be done remotely, in a safe and comfortable location. Smart PPEs¹ and wearable technologies will also reduce fatalities and the severity of injuries if an accident happens. Smarter workplaces must lead to safer workplaces, and **I hope that the Government can accelerate the implementation of these technologies at our worksites**, starting with the high-risk sectors such as construction and manufacturing.
16. As we improve workplace safety, we must not neglect workplace health. These past six months have taught us that blurring the lines between home and office has its challenges. A recent study by the National University of Singapore found that those who work from home faced higher levels of stress than our frontline workers! **I hope that the Government could expand the list of Occupational Diseases under the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA), to include**

¹ Personal Protective Equipment

mental health illnesses related to work stress. I also hope that the **Tripartite Advisory on Mental Health can be expedited**, so that those who are currently struggling with mental health issues related to work can get the necessary support that they need.

17. With more working from home, **is it also time that we consider a ‘Right to Disconnect’ legislation**, which was pioneered in France, where employees can negotiate with their employers on answering work calls and emails outside of office hours? Similar laws have been implemented in other countries like Italy and the Philippines. Having a dedicated break can certainly help to reduce employee fatigue and burnout.
18. We also need to pay special attention to our freelancers, who are inadequately protected under existing WSH legislation. Freelancers do not enjoy the same WSH statutory benefits as employees, such as coverage under WICA, medical group insurance, and medical leave. The lack of adequate WSH protection effectively makes freelancers cheaper to hire, which pushes more companies to adopt such self-employed arrangements to avoid costs. **This is a gap that needs to be plugged!**
19. Finally, **I hope that the Government could revisit my numerous proposals for a mandatory WSH representative in every company.** We are already half a step towards achieving this, as companies are now required to appoint Safe Management Officers (SMOs), as they re-open for work. Let us expand the role of these mandatory SMOs beyond the pandemic so that we can work towards creating a safer and healthier workplace for our workers, today.

Strong tripartism can turn crisis into opportunity

20. Mr Speaker, COVID-19 has accelerated the transformation of many industries at an unprecedented pace. The future workplace may be upon us sooner than many of us expect.
21. In my maiden Parliamentary speech in 2016, I spoke at length about the importance of tripartism – the crucial ingredient of Singapore’s success story. Five years on, tripartism is even more critical now, as we deal with this immense scale of change that is coming our way. The Government will need to support the transformation of our businesses and our workers. Working together, let us turn this crisis into an opportunity. COVID-19 will pass. With united resolve, we can emerge stronger and secure a brighter future for our children and grandchildren.