

SPEECH BY CHAIRMAN, PUBLIC HYGIENE COUNCIL, AT THE LAUNCH OF “KEEP CLEAN, SINGAPORE! 2021”, 25 APRIL 2021

Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Ms Grace Fu, Permanent Secretary for Sustainability and the Environment Mr Albert Chua, PAP Town Councils Co-ordinating Chairman Mr Lim Biow Chuan, NEA CEO Mr Luke Goh, distinguished guests, friends from the media, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. Thank you all for being here, either in person or virtually. I would like to share a few points with you.

This is the 10th anniversary of the Keep Singapore Clean Movement. As part of the Public Hygiene Council’s mandate, we have conducted many outreach activities including the Keep Clean, Singapore! Campaign which we started in 2014. But after years of public education, engagement and communication across the main sectors of society, the “three deadly sins” as I call them remain. These are littering, not returning trays after a meal at public eateries, and dirtying public toilets. I don’t have time to go into the data, but believe me, it leaves much to be desired. I can put hand to heart and say, it is not for want of effort on our part. But I am here today to tell you that we need to take the bull by its horns and tackle this problem head on.

The PHC’s mission is to create a culture in Singapore where good hygiene and cleanliness habits are second nature to us. I would put it this way – the mission is to restore that culture which, for some reasons I will explain later, has been lost. So, starting from today, as part of “SG Clean Day”, cleaners in all 17 town councils, who would normally be cleaning the public spaces even before we wake up, will cease sweeping at open areas and ground levels of housing estates, from 6am to 12 midnight.

Then we can see how much litter we leave around and what it will be like if there was no one to sweep it all away. At the same time, the grassroots organisations will encourage their residents to volunteer picking up litter around their neighbourhoods. They will also carry out their own plans to acknowledge the cleaners, at their own time, own target. The longer-term plan is for the Town Councils to conduct “SG Clean Day” once every quarter this year, and then once every month in 2022. The PHC is in talks with the Town Councils to help make this happen. Doing this nationwide and frequently may sound onerous, but it is only when we do it often that it will become a way of life. To support these ground-up efforts, the PHC will re-activate the litter-picking activities which are part of the “Sustainable Bright Spots” programme that aims to encourage residents to be responsible for cleaning up after themselves.

But this endeavour to make hygiene and cleanliness habits a way of life needs to be a national endeavour, taken on by other important stakeholders such as premise and business operators, cleaning services providers and governing authorities, to name just a few. These are the main players whose support and cooperation are critical. They need to look at these issues more seriously, commit to higher standards and take actions that have more impact. For instance, operators of hawker centres and food courts need to design their physical space and work processes in ways that make it easy for patrons to return their trays or bin their rubbish. I am very happy that things are beginning to move under the Clean Tables Support Scheme (CTSS). It was recently announced that co-funding will be provided to the operators to purchase more trays and install more tray-return stations where they can be clearly seen and easily reached. This is most welcome. And if the shelves in the tray-return stations are regularly cleared, patrons will have no excuse not to use

them. As for the cleaning industry, it needs to upgrade its level of professionalism, increase efficiency and productivity, and depend less on low-skilled foreign workers and elderly Singaporeans. The supply of these workers cannot be sustained forever.

But even if these big players are fully on board, I will remind ourselves that this effort to restore the culture of civic mindedness in Singapore is still not going to be easy. According to a behavioural insights littering survey that we conducted in late 2020, there are Singaporeans who are indifferent, or who think it is not their job to clean. Those mindsets are most difficult to change. And when, once upon a time, students and pupils had no problem returning their plates in their school tuckshops or participating in school-cleaning activities, we now have parents questioning why their children have to do such menial chores. We have become victims of our economic success. I intend to re-start the workshops that the PHC organised for parents where we encouraged them to be role models and reinforce the right behavior in their children. We had about 40 successful sessions before COVID-19 struck and I look forward to meeting and talking to more parents in the months ahead.

The school scenario is representative of the national syndrome we now face where Singaporeans have come to depend on the 59,000-strong army of lower-skilled workers to clean up for us, both at home and in the public. The PHC has reiterated countless times that our addiction to this cheap cleaning workforce is not sustainable. There will come a time when the numbers of both the migrant workers and our senior citizens will dwindle. We need to be ready to do the job of cleaning ourselves, and we better start getting used to doing the job ourselves now! We had better start training ourselves now!

Many people have written in to the press complaining how dirty public toilets are, how people don't return their trays and so on. And they ask what the PHC has done, why is the situation still so bad? Yes, PHC has conducted many educational and public outreach but PHC alone cannot solve the problems. Let me say that we can't. This abundance of cheap labour has also hindered attempts to change mindsets through education and persuasion. It has become difficult to make any significant improvement except in little pockets here and there. I have been told by some people that they miss the time when Singapore was known and praised for being such a clean city, Indeed, other countries in the region came to learn from us. Now, we are known as the "cleaned" city!

These people also tell me that the government needs to bring back the stricter fines and enforcement rules. They say that there are not enough deterrence measures and negative consequences for bad behaviour. I agree. Looking ahead, it is time to stop using kids gloves to deal with this problem. We need to employ common sense, simple observations, plain talking and back-to-basics bold measures in a persuade-and-penalise approach to make keeping Singapore clean a way of life.

In conclusion, let me leave you with this thought – that the solution actually lies within each of us. The solution is me and you, and you and you Because if each and every one of us, individually, throw our litter into the bin, return our tray, or flush the toilet, we are doing our part in this nation-wide endeavour to keep Singapore clean. Thank you.