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**OPENING ADDRESS BY MINISTER FOR DEFENCE DR NG ENG HEN AT THE 15th MUNICH
YOUNG LEADERS' (MYL) ROUNDTABLE ON "A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE", 17
FEB 2024**

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Young Leaders,

- Delighted to be here.
- As Lisa said, this is my eleventh year, just means I am 11 years older, that is all. But first time I spoke in the first MYL Roundtable was in 2013. Each time, I have been really impressed by how the Körber Foundation and the embassies pick the people who come into the MYL.
- To me, you are the cream of the crop. I have looked at your CVs and they are outstanding. But there is a slight trepidation this year. I said you are cream of the crop, full of promise, optimism and capability. You have been given much but of course much is expected of you, if you like marvel comics. But also, you inherit a much more troubled world. So as Ms Vogt said, I started MYL with lectures and quickly learnt that it was pointless. I mean you have so much perspectives and I am of the present, probably of the past too, and you are the future. So I thought some years back, I would switch formats to just frame it and then have an exchange about what we can do. I thought that would be more constructive.
- Let me start. I have said you inherit a much-troubled world. Since 2012, where I attended the first MSC and have been now a government minister for 20 odd years, this is the lowest ebb in my memory – and for me that is saying a lot. This is the worst of times, and I am not sure if there will be the best of times.

Retreat of Globalisation and Multilateralism

- So why the pessimism? I think you know the specific challenges. Pick up a book on the MSC and all the problems are there and this year's tagline is lose-lose. What kind of tagline is that? That just sets the stage. Not even maybe wins, just lose-lose. I am not the only one



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feeling it. I am not only talking about the specific trends that worry me: it is the general trends that concern me more.

- I would start there by saying that each generation is defined by certain critical events that coalesces them. So, if you talk about the post-war generation (post-1945) – what was it that coalesced Europe for the “never again” moment? It was World War I and World War II. Common ravages, devastation and after that, it was their “never again” moment to build a better world and that is where you got the UN, IMF, and the World Bank, General Agreement on Trade and Tarriffs (GATT). All established, they were instruments, but the goal was to build a better world, and a more inclusive one.
 - After the Cold War, the world embraced globalisation. You come from disparate countries but globalisation was a tie that lifted many boats. There was free flow of goods, capital, people, and ideas. But if you ask what that common defining moment (post-war 1945), if you ask the current generation what is it that binds you, it is not common poverty. By any account, globalisation has seen an increase in wealth.
 - In fact, there is a push back against globalisation today. E.g. blue-collar workers in developed economies feel left behind. What binds you is the disparity in wealth distribution, both across countries and within countries. The statistics bear it out so if you just take the five biggest economies: US, China, Japan, Germany and India. Their Gini co-efficient even in these five economies have been widening. Within countries and across countries. Across countries, the relative growth in GDP per capita between the emerging and the developed countries has also stagnated post-COVID, with more government debt post- global financial crisis, particularly for developing countries.
 - Migration, outsourcing, fears of job losses have stoked anti-migrant sentiments in many countries. Each of you will have an experience to share. And because of that, the mood in many countries has turned inward. Yesterday, Vice President Kamala Harris made an impassioned plea about how America must continue to look outward. It was a speech meant mainly for Trump, I think, but delivered in Munich. It was heartening to hear that the Usonian idea of exceptionalism of how turning inward is never the solution, and yet the reality is that if you gauge the needle of public mood and governance, it has turned protectionistic, nativist policies. And even for the US who was the moving spirit post-WW2 for a globalised world, Trump’s electoral platform is to make America great again, and Trump is back. We



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cannot avoid it that in almost all countries, the local politics has been shaped by these reactions.

- ⊖ Here is a thought – the political mood in most countries results in the outcome that the leaders that they choose are not likely to be centrists or inclusive. I remember a US congressman saying to me, “If you are centrist, you will not be elected. If you do not take an extreme platform, you do not get the votes.”
- When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, there was an article by Thomas Friedman. In 2002, he was a columnist, and he asked the question, “Is Iraq the way it is today because Saddam Hussein is the way he is? Or is Saddam Hussein the way he is because Iraq is the way it is?” And to me, it was the latter. Iraq created Saddam Hussein. And Thomas Friedman, of the same mien when he gave out reasons. In the US, political polarisation is rife, within and across states. People vote against what they do not like, even if that results in a more fractured, weaker society overall. That explains, I think, Trump’s support – you can do everything you want to, you can bring him to Court, and he is the front-runner Republican nominee, and he may win, if you believe the polls. Because across both parties in the US and elsewhere, centrist politicians are not electable. So, I am sure some of you have political aspirations in your careers, I am not suggesting to you – do not take a Centrist platform, inclusive or not – I am just pointing out the reality that if you do, you are not likely to be electable. What does that mean for all of us?
 - In Europe, rise of far-right parties – we have the leaders such as Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD), Viktor Orbán of Hungary, and Giorgia Meloni of Italy. The French philosopher Joseph de Maistre wrote in 1811, “Every country has the government it deserves” (In French: *Toute nation a le gouvernement qu’elle mérite*). Luxembourg’s former PM, Jean-Claude Juncker put it more in a pity way, he said, “We all know what to do, but we don’t know how to get re-elected once we have done it”. It is now even, in political classes, called the Juncker dilemma.
- We know what to do but we just do not know how to get elected once we have done it. Governments find themselves having to focus more on short term gains and that’s because the population requires of it. We are the own-makers of our fate. What is the result? It is bound to happen that there is a great sourness against governments and it is not just your feeling, particularly in your group. Because they see this – what is happening to local politics. They see what’s happened to real problems, climate change, poverty, not addressed. It is not just a few. There was a wonderful survey done by Cambridge



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University. Some of you may be aware of it. They surveyed cohorts from 1973 to 2020. They had a chart.

- I do not know of many trends where there is just a loss of faith in governments. The younger you are, the more you lose faith. It is a clear separation. You do not need AI for this – any algorithm will do. Some may say that all young people are like that. I was like that when I was younger, then you sort of move up the curve but not quite. I think that this has some validity. 55% of global millennials across 75 countries said they were dissatisfied with democracy. 75 countries. Lisa said that is what I do every year, I just frame it then then turn it over to you.
- So let me put the questions to you. Do you agree with my assessment? What should we do? What can we do? That is the basis of our discussion.
- Thank you.
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