

# **Decreasing Familial Welfare: The Fluid Welfare State in post-COVID Singapore**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Singapore's post-COVID social policies and argues that its welfare state has evolved into a fluid welfare state. The fluid welfare state is defined not by fixed institutional forms but by its anchoring in legitimacy and core governance values. Rather than expanding traditional welfare provisions, Singapore reinforces its longstanding emphasis on rationality, leanness, and effectiveness through a multirole approach: acting as a wise technocrat, a responsible redistributor, and a loving family member. This shift has involved a retreat from the paradigm of familial welfare, allowing the state greater flexibility to respond to demographic, economic, and technological change. The fluid welfare state offers a distinctive model for how legitimacy, rather than generosity, can sustain public trust and policy adaptability in a rapidly changing global landscape.

**Keywords:** Fluid Welfare State, Welfare Legitimacy, Singapore, Post-COVID Social Policy, Tripartite Governance, Active Labor Market Policies, Multirole State

## **1 Introduction:**

In 2021, Paul Krugman wrote in his New York Times column that Biden's American Rescue Plan was an "end to the end of welfare" (Krugman, 2021). The American Rescue Plan was a US\$1.9 trillion stimulus bill to help the economy recover post-Covid and in it, there was a reinstatement of children welfare benefits, which harkens back to the time when Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was in force. AFDC was replaced because of the perennial issue dogging welfare states – over-reliance. Somewhat surprisingly, Singapore, long being hailed as the anti-welfare state which demonizes over-reliance on the government, also drew down its reserves to pump US\$30 billion to its economy in handouts. In terms of GDP to Covid handout ratio, both Singapore and USA spent roughly the same size, but Singapore is not known to be a welfare state. Thus, in this paper, I ask the question – what is the state of Singapore's welfare state post-COVID?

When one mentions Singapore's welfare state, one never strays far from its founding father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Under Lee's watch, Singapore has been described as "clean as Disneyland but runs like a Swiss watch" (Fund, 2015). Mr Lee's method of ensuring that one generation "won't bankrupt future generations by selfishly living beyond its means" (Goodman, 2015) cemented a form of anti-welfare state (Teo, 2013; Ng, 2015) that shunned the idea of "free handouts" and "dependency on government", but in fact, cultivated a unique welfare system that worked (Fund, 2015).

The welfare state is at a watershed moment in recent years. The National Health Service ("NHS"), once crowned as Britain's pride and jewel of the welfare state, is at a breaking point

after years of neglect (Hiam et al, 2020). Denmark, ranked consistently as one of the top welfare states globally, has come under fire for using its welfare policies to conduct surveillance on its citizens (Geiger, 2023). Even the US is not spared, with criticisms that it has not done much to reduce child poverty at all (Bruenig, 2022). Beyond these challenges, welfare states continue to grapple with the enduring question of long-term sustainability.

As a member of East Asia, Singapore is most often compared to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea. In Holliday's (2000) seminal work, he categorized these 4 "Asian Tiger" economies along with Japan into a group known as the "productivist" welfare state, where social causes are secondary to economic growth. Much of the literature on welfare in East Asia has also revolved around concepts of problem-solving and pragmatism, where financially lean yet effective policies dominate the welfare system (Aspalter, 2006). However, the concept of welfare state and its manifestations has been substantially changing due to global major economic, social and political developments (Laenen et al, 2020). Singapore's original welfare intentions set by Mr Lee to avoid the problems of state over-reliance has long been entrenched in the Singapore system but its form continues to evolve (Lee & Qian, 2017)

Much of prior literature on the welfare state in Singapore has focused on the classification of the policies into the theories proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990) and Holliday (2000). While these theories sort welfare states into different groups, the institutional design of welfare states should also be examined. Rothstein's 1998 seminal work argues that in any institutional program, there are three issues to consider – design, organization and legitimacy. For any program to work, all three categories must receive a "green light". Design and organization can be understood literally, while legitimacy refers to the buy-in from its people of the welfare stance (Rothstein, 1998). If legitimacy is absent or declining, the state's welfare policies will break down regardless of whatever classification or orientation it is. This is often the case in Western welfare states such as USA, where differing partisan views of redistribution of taxpayers' money reduces the legitimacy of social policies.

In this paper, I argue that Singapore's approach to welfare prioritizes legitimacy before design and organization. Singapore's legitimacy-first approach is entrenched in three key values of rationality, financial leanness and effectiveness. It achieves this through playing a highly-polished actor that takes on a simultaneously but strategically overlapping mix of three roles. The state fulfils the role of a wise technocrat, a responsible redistributor and a loving family member. It is precisely because Singapore is guided by principles and not functional forms of design and organization, that its fluid welfare state handles changing times much better. This results in a fluid welfare state that has buy-in from its people before it announces policies, and should be viewed as an evolution of the welfare state.

Furthermore, the fluid welfare state is a responsible and sustainable welfare state. However, this system constantly requires constant effort and is borne through many years of foundational work set by the dominant political party that has been re-elected continuously since 1959.

I contribute to the literature by building on Teo's (2013) work on the Singapore familial welfare state and characterize the current Singapore welfare state amidst changing global trends. I also bridge the gap in Lee & Qian's (2017) work where it positioned the Singapore government as a mix of welfare types but in fact, the fluid welfare model captures their argument more efficiently. The Singapore government cannot afford to continue idealizing the "paradigm family" without seriously damaging its credibility as a rational government and thus, the familial welfare state has taken a backseat result of this legitimacy-first, fluid approach.

The rest of the paper is arranged as follows: the next section discusses the current literature on East Asian welfare states and Singapore's historical welfare state approach. Section 3 discusses the mechanisms of the multirole legitimacy-prioritizing approach, fluid welfare state and social media leverage. Section 4 provides concluding remarks.

## 2 Welfare in East Asia: Productivist Anti-Welfare Singapore's position

What are the traits of a welfare state? Scholars often go back to Esping-Andersen's (1990) classic "The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism", which classifies eighteen welfare states into three categories: liberal, conservative or social-democratic. Esping-Andersen argued that the twin trends of (1) decommodification of people i.e., governments beginning to treat workers not as labor inputs but humans entitled to social rights and (2) stratification in society i.e., the different classes of status in society, resulted in the natural separation of welfare states into the three categories. Esping-Andersen did not incorporate Asian countries in his study, which led to Holliday's (2000) characterization of East Asian countries – Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea into a fourth category – the "productivist" welfare state, where social welfare was secondary to economic growth (Holliday, 2000). The typical "productivist" model is a relatively low social expenditure with an orientation towards economic growth, education, role of the family, and limited commitment to welfare (Holliday, 2000).

Hudson and Kühner (2011) further break down the "productive" and "protective" aspects of welfare policies among Western and Asian nations. In particular, "protective" refers to the extent of welfare benefits that a state sets to protect its citizens from social contingencies, which substitutes for one of the dimensions used by Esping-Andersen (1990). Lee & Qian (2017) characterize Singapore's welfare state as a mixture of "protective" and "productivist", pointing out several central elements of Singapore's social policy – the Central Provident Fund (CPF), Housing Development Board (HDB) public housing, the three Medis (Medishield, Medisave, Medifund) and the stellar education system. CPF is a compulsory savings scheme where employers and employees contribute a percentage of salary income to an account that can be used for housing and retirement. HDB is a public housing scheme which builds affordable, high-quality apartments and almost 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing. The 3 Medis are (1) MediShield, a voluntary state health insurance plan that highly subsidizes inpatient care, (2) Medisave, a part of the CPF that can be drawn to cover medical expenses, and (3) Medifund, an endowment fund that pays for people who cannot afford health expenditures. Education is also highly subsidized for all levels of study and Singapore has consistently ranked top in

international student assessment rankings such as PISA. While Lee & Qian (2017) discuss these policies in detail and characterize Singapore as straddling the two frameworks, they take an ideal-typical<sup>1</sup> approach and the broad classifications allow for easier comparability with other states but abstracts away the details (Aspalter, 2019). A more detailed explanation of Singapore's welfare regime in the post-COVID era is necessary given the constantly changing and responsive Singaporean regime.

To understand Singapore's welfare state is to understand the anti-welfare state in Singapore. The term "anti-welfare" comes about because the state is heavily against welfare in rhetoric but highly interventionist in its social policies (Teo, 2013). Teo (2015) describes the anti-welfare state as a sum of three policies (1) self-reliance as the ultimate welfare (2) familial preconditions and (3) many helping hands. The first policy is the importance of self-reliance. This refers to the notion that one should have the capacity to generate sufficient income to cover his or her own needs. Such sentiments are reflected both in policies and ideology. The CPF, as a non-distributive, mandatory individual savings system that can be used for housing, healthcare and retirement entrenches the idea that one is self-reliant for all social contingencies (Teo, 2013). From the history textbook narrative of the British army abandoning Singapore during World War II to the constant media barrage of European welfare states drowning in unsustainable lavish welfare policies, Singapore constantly reinforces the idea that state provision of welfare is dangerous and that one can only depend on oneself. Singapore also depends on Malaysia for much of its water needs (Long, 2001) and the constant rhetoric by Malaysia to cut off water supply subconsciously underscores the loneliness of Singapore and the virtue of self-reliance. Further interviews conducted with Singaporeans also point to the idea that wherever possible, it would be better for one to "carry one's own coffin to burial" instead of depending on pallbearers.

The second policy is the emphasis on family support and the paradigm family. While the emphasis on familial support is shared among East Asian welfare states, Teo (2013) takes it a step further and argues that Singapore's welfare state uses family as a precondition to receive welfare. In other words, the state extols a paradigm citizen as someone in a heterosexual relationship and starts a family. Owning a HDB house is only possible for singles from age 35 whereas couples can purchase a HDB as long as they are legally registered, and enjoy subsidies that singles do not. This has acted as a strong disciplinary mechanism in a state where housing is a very significant social/public good (Teo, 2013). Other scholars also allude to the deep-rooted conservatism that underlies other Singaporean social policies and the idea of safeguarding of "Asian values" in a globalizing world. (Wong & Yeoh, 2003)

Lastly, the "many helping hands" approach is the position that welfare support cannot be solely the state's responsibility. Instead, the government emphasizes an interconnected web of

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<sup>1</sup> The ideal-typical method examines the larger international and historical picture. The real-typical method examines at a lower level of institutional details the social security provision, legislation, and administrative operations (Aspalter, 2019)

citizens, firms, community organizations, non-profits, religious organizations, public, friends and family to provide welfare to Singaporeans. The President's Challenge is an annual, long-running campaign since 2000 that garners the support of Singaporeans from all walks of life and it is one of the policies that aim to foster the sentiment of a shared responsibility in advancing Singapore. Mandatory community service hours are clocked by students at all levels in the education system, which serves to reinforce the idea of a shared communal responsibility.

However, a criticism of the Singapore welfare regime is that social welfare is used as a means of social and political control. Chua (2000) contends that due to the almost 80% of population living in public housing, the citizens become "clients of the state" and are emasculated during elections. Tremewan (1998) contends that Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) government uses cheap public housing to generate political loyalty. However, such views have become increasingly irrelevant as public housing has become the norm instead of the exception. Although Singapore does not officially publish poverty data, key statistics show that Singapore's welfare system is high-quality<sup>2</sup>.

Singapore's approach towards welfare may lie along the spectrum of "productivist" and "protective" but it has continued to stick to its three core guiding principles of rationality, financial leanness and effectiveness. I argue that instead of the "anti-welfare" theory, if we look at the bigger picture of institution design as a precursor before talking about the welfare state, Singapore's welfare state is characterized by a legitimacy-maximizing approach. In turn, it is a fluid welfare state because the strong legitimacy gives it freedom over the design and organization of its welfare state. I provide evidence using the declining familial narrative.

### 3.1 The Legitimacy-Prioritizing Approach - The Shift Away from Familial Welfare

A few factors have brought about the change in the paradigm familial narrative in Singapore. Firstly, since the 1980s, Singapore's fertility rate has continually declined and stabilized at severely below replacement rate (Worldbank, 2020). As Singapore evolved into a global economic powerhouse, women are increasingly prioritizing career and education over early marriage and childbearing. This is reinforced by changing gender roles, with empowerment leading to women seeking individual fulfillment beyond traditional family roles. Another factor is the high cost of living (Tan et al, 2019). Indirectly, this has added on to the financial demands of raising children and has dissuaded couples from having children. Coupled with climbing divorce rates, declining marriage rates, complexity of online dating sans human interaction, #MeToo movement, shifting views on premarital sex, etc., the Singapore dating trend mirrors the US and global trend that dating has become harder in the last ten years (Brown, 2020). A continued, blatant push for the paradigm family model would be an affront to various groups including young professionals wishing to excel in their careers, feminists supporting the

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<sup>2</sup> In 2022, SPOR (2023) revealed that in a population of 5.5 million, 460,000 low-wage workers benefitted from income-supplement programs, 97% of each cohort progressed to post-secondary education programmes, and 70% of CPF members set aside the Basic Retirement Sum at age of 55. Gini Coefficient continued to fall in 2022 to 0.437

decommodification of women and those pursuing the Singaporean Dream and taking a longer educational route.

Secondly, the global mental health crisis during and post-COVID has also proven to be a force in reshaping Singapore's policies. COVID has resulted in a surge of depressive and anxiety disorders worldwide (WHO, 2022). The uncertainty stemming from the pandemic has forced the world to rethink many existing structural norms such as transitioning from physical work in the office to remote work. 86% of Singaporeans are also reported to feel stress in their lives (Cigna, 2022). These combined trends have increased potential backlash that the government could face if it continues to heavy-handedly push the paradigm family model.

Thirdly, the push to market Singapore as a cosmopolitan hub for top talents to work in and a premier education destination for regional scholars mean that Singapore has to position itself more liberally to accommodate different groups of views. The 2013 Population White Paper has also made its position clear that an increase of foreign workers is necessary to maintain Singapore's ageing labor force. An overly restrictive policy of idealizing the family may deter immigration and turn away foreign talents (Atac & Rosenberger, 2019).

Further evidence of the shift away from the paradigm family is subtly reflected in other social policies. In the past, the paradigm family has been idealized not just as a precondition to welfare, but as the only, golden way of life. The recent trend of policies in Singapore have started to emphasize that there is more than one path to the Singaporean Dream. The slogan "Every School a Good School" was popularized by Singapore's Education Minister from 2011 and is an attempt to dispel Singaporeans' obsession with elite schools. There has also been increased media reporting of younger Singaporeans becoming food vendors, food-delivery riders and normalizing traditionally frowned-upon jobs. These policies have precipitated the "many routes lead to success" notion, breaking away with the tradition of a well-paying job and stable family as the only pathway in life.

The continual and latently increased easing of restrictions on housing for singles has also been a subtle nod to the declining familial narrative. Previously, first-timer singles could not buy HDB apartments but this changed in 1991. Following a slew of easing in policy for singles (Appendix 1), it has culminated in the most significant 2023 changes, where singles are now allowed to buy HDB apartments in all areas of Singapore, including prime areas compared to in the past when they could only purchase apartments in less premium areas. This points to a trend of penalizing singles less in housing, which continues to be an important social good (Teo, 2013).

These forces have given the continuation of the paradigm family policy a reality check. In fact, I contend that Singapore can no longer continue to extol the paradigm family at the risk of going against its core welfare principles of rationality. As more and more people choose paths to achieve their individual goals, the paradigm family approach is increasingly unsustainable. In response to this, Singapore has chosen to go back to securing legitimacy before functional form.

Rothstein (1998) identifies three conditions for welfare state legitimacy. Firstly, the public should believe that goals and substance of policies are just and fair and that the government must justify these policies under these conditions. Secondly, the redistribution process must meet a just distribution of burden, meaning that the public must believe that their fellow citizens contribute to these policies and that there is equal sharing of the burden. Thirdly, there should be procedural justice, meaning that people believe that the implementation of policies follows their goals and is effective and efficient. Such implementation should be cost-effective and efficient, and make welfare fraud difficult. In essence, Rothstein combines the questions “what ought to be” and “what can be” in the analysis of welfare state design (Roosma et al. 2012). Using this as the conceptual framework for legitimacy, I now discuss how legitimacy is sought in the Singapore model.

I propose that in seeking legitimacy, Singapore emphasizes three core values - rationality, leanness and effectiveness. Rationality refers to policies that can be understood using common sense. Leanness refers to policies that are simple to understand. Effectiveness refers to policies that see the most effect, regardless of popularity. These three values are embodied by the three roles that the government plays.

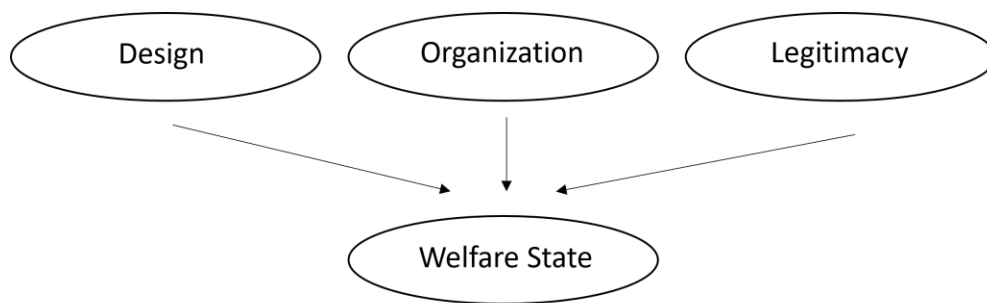


Fig 1a: Rothstein 1998 Institutional Design Prerequisites

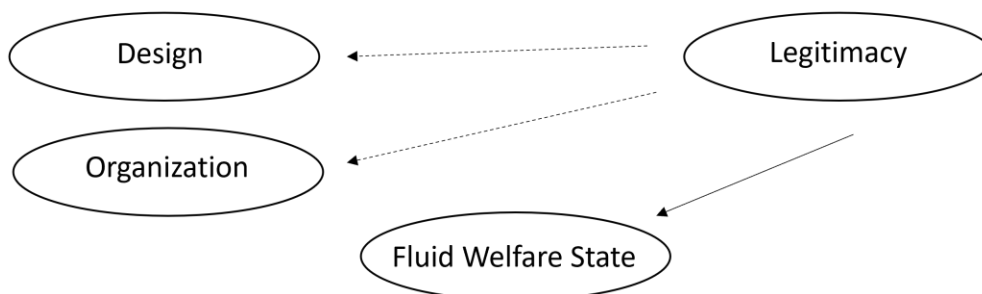


Fig 1b: Singapore's Welfare State, characterized by prioritizing legitimacy, and in turn, granting freedom in design and organization

### 3.2 The First Role: Wise Technocrat

The fluid welfare state is an inevitable consequence of two things – (1) unchanging guiding principles and (2) priority on legitimacy. Although the legitimacy of welfare policies is ultimately dependent on the functional form of the welfare state, Singapore has expertly cultivated a lasting relationship with its people that is based on unchanging principles of rationality, leanness and effectiveness.

Firstly, the government plays the role of a wise technocrat that has safeguarded taxpayers' money from the vagaries of the world. In fact, I argue that this role has allowed the government to mentally remove the idea of taxpayers' money from Singaporeans and instill in them the thinking that taxpayers' money in the governments' reserves is money painstakingly safeguarded by an imaginary, loving, stately grandfather. In other words, this mental distancing of taxpayers' money as their stately grandfather's money makes Singaporeans grateful to the Singapore government's judicious use of the country's reserves.

This sentiment is not only spread through hearsay, but has also been repeatedly brought up in Parliament. In a famous speech by former Member of Parliament Lee Bee Wah, she told the story of two characters – Ah Seng and Ah Kong. In the Singaporean English vernacular, Ah Seng refers to a young boy while Ah Kong refers to an elderly figure.

*There's a boy who lives next door to me. His name is Ah Seng. He has an "Ah Kong" (grandpa) who loves him very much. Ah Kong would always scrimp on himself. Even when his clothing is torn, he would mend it over and over again. He saved every cents, one cent at a time. Every 3 or 5 years, Ah Kong would take out a sum of money to give to his dearest Ah Seng. For example, when Ah Seng went to the university, Ah Kong gave him a sum of money. When Ah Seng wanted to go overseas to participate in immersion program, Ah Kong gave him a sum of money. When Ah Seng wanted to get married, Ah Kong gave him a sum of money. When Ah Seng and his friends wanted to start a small business, Ah Kong also gave him a sum of money. One day, Ah Seng asked his Ah Kong, "Ah Kong, Ah Kong, why did you always give me money only every three or five years? Why didn't you give me money every year?"*

*At this moment upon hearing this, Ah Kong was deeply disappointed and also extremely angry. Ah Kong using his Hokkien dialect scolded: "你這死鬼仔, 你这败家子, 不知死 – (You dead ghost, You black sheep of the family!) "You have such a good Ah Kong and you still don't know appreciate what he has done "Ah Kong stays frugal because of you. " "Is other people's Ah Kong also so good to them?"*

*(Lee Bee Wah, 2019 Parliament Speech)*

The simplicity of this story reminds Singaporeans to be grateful, but ultimately creates a mental distancing that the government's money is no longer taxpayers' money but instead, money that has been judiciously safeguarded. One of the problems with welfare is that the people and state spend lots of energy back and forth debating the scrutinizing the use of taxpayers' monies on different projects. Through this mental distancing, effort is not wasted on debating where to use taxpayers' money on but to appreciate the rationality of the Singapore government and trust the rational government's decision making. Because the collective effort can now be



redirected towards more useful purposes such as making these policies work, this has also led to the success behind Singaporean social policies.

Another important dimension of the wise technocrat role is Singapore's unique tripartite, symbiotic relationship among the government, labor unions and workers. Nowhere is this more evident than in the state's heavy and enduring investment in skills upgrading and labor adaptability, primarily through initiatives like SkillsFuture and the Workfare suite of programs. These are not positioned as traditional social assistance, but as long-term national investments that empower individuals to remain relevant and economically mobile amidst technological disruption.

Launched in 2015, the SkillsFuture movement marked a paradigmatic shift towards lifelong learning and personal ownership of one's career trajectory (Appendix 2). With a starting credit of SGD 500 for all Singaporeans aged 25 and above, SkillsFuture built an ecosystem that included course subsidies, employer engagement, and mid-career support. Uptake has expanded over the years, with over 500,000 individuals and 14,000 enterprises participating by 2019. More recently, the 2024 introduction of the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Top-Up and Level-Up Programme—including financial allowances pegged to prior income—demonstrates how the state continues to evolve the policy to ensure both effectiveness and legitimacy through tailored, targeted support.

In parallel, the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) and its complementary Workfare Skills Support (WSS) program represent targeted redistributive technocracy (Appendix 3). These schemes provide both direct cash payouts and heavy training subsidies for low-wage workers, reinforcing the government's promise that growth will be inclusive. The government also raised the income ceiling and enhanced payouts in the 2023 and 2025 budgets, not as a shift toward welfare generosity, but as a calibrated productivist response—reinforcing its anti-welfare stance by channeling redistribution strictly through work, skills upgrading, and demonstrated effort.

Rather than offering blank-cheque welfare, these active labor policies illustrate a clear logic of rationality and leanness—training is subsidized only when tied to verified upskilling efforts or job transitions, and unemployment benefits are explicitly conditional on demonstrated job-seeking effort.

In sum, these policies reinforce the wise technocrat role by demonstrating the state's commitment to judicious, not generous, intervention. Social spending is framed not as entitlement, but as a calibrated investment. It is deployed selectively to safeguard national resilience through productivity and upskilling. Rather than dispensing handouts, the government acts as a gatekeeper, ensuring that support flows only to those who act, train, and strive. This reinforces public trust in the system's rationality and fairness, allowing legitimacy to persist even in the absence of expansive welfare. The fluid welfare state thus evolves through a tightly controlled, tripartite-led system where economic logic and long-term planning prevails.

### 3.3 The Second Role: Responsible Redistributor

Secondly, the government also plays the role of the responsible redistributor. When the wise technocrat approach risks appearing too rigid or impersonal, the responsible redistributor steps in to convey that policies—while firm—are grounded in concern for citizens' long-term interests. In this role, the government positions itself as willing to take difficult, sometimes unpopular decisions, rather than rely on populist measures. It reassures Singaporeans that every policy is designed with both economic logic and social responsibility in mind.

A key example is the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), Singapore's sole national trade union center, which functions within a tripartite system involving the government, firms, and workers. NTUC caused Singapore's labor movement to gradually lose relevance and shrink, but concurrently promoting a pro-worker and pro-growth stance (Kai, 2019). This stance gives the government credibility as a champion of workers' rights and salaries. NTUC also runs NTUC FairPrice, the largest supermarket chain in Singapore. The founding mission of NTUC FairPrice was to serve a national market and pass down cost savings nationwide. The government is consistently depicted as the paragon of responsibility in taking action that always places Singaporeans at the front of its mind.

This tripartite model is not symbolic but institutionalized through bodies like the National Wages Council, which sets wage guidelines through consensus among the three parties. Redistribution under this system is neither automatic nor unconditional. For example, as previously explained, the WIS scheme offers support only to low-wage workers who are actively employed, linking aid to labor market participation. Likewise, the SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit requires employers to co-invest in workforce training before accessing public funds, reinforcing shared responsibility. Even FairPrice's cooperative structure channels profits into price moderation rather than cash transfers.

These programs reflect a shift in posture from the strict rationalism of the wise technocrat to the more adaptive, responsive stance of the responsible redistributor. While the technocrat safeguards national resources and resists handouts, the redistributor recognizes that long-term resilience requires selective, well-calibrated intervention. Redistribution is not used to equalize outcomes, but to keep individuals economically relevant in a changing environment. Support is tied to effort, participation, and shared responsibility

*At the national level, the PAP Government is focused on twin priorities: First, growing and developing our economy; and Second, – at the same time – enabling the workers to benefit fully from the economic growth that we create. So you grow the economy, at the same time we make sure it grows in such a way that the workers can benefit fully from the prosperity which is generated. So every Singaporean can enjoy good housing, healthcare, education – all subsidized heavily by the state. We not only create good jobs, but we educate and train workers to enable them to perform these jobs. That is why Singaporeans can look forward to better wages, higher standards of living, and brighter opportunities. With Forward SG, we will be doing even more to uplift workers, and especially to help those at the lower end to catch up.*

Lately, Singapore's welfare policies have broadened its preconditional welfare approach to other important groups – the current elderly born before 1959, with a slew of measures such as the “Pioneer Generation” and “Merdeka Generation”. By placing particular emphasis on the elderly who have contributed immensely to the success of Singapore today, it achieves two purposes. Firstly, it is a universally virtuous concept to respect one's elders. No proper person would be opposed to such a natural redistribution of aid to these groups. Secondly, the government is portrayed as a loving and caring figure that loves your grandparents, and by default, Singaporeans. This alleviates the burden of maintenance by younger generation, which indirectly adds to the rationality of the government's redistribution policies.

Furthermore, the recent drawing of national reserves during the Covid period was also portrayed as a prudent and responsible use of taxpayers' money. The Singapore government has to seek approval from the President, who is de factor head of state, before any withdrawal of funds can take place. The President and the government consistently mentioned the “very intense process” of questioning in what ways the reserves are used and that there was a need to leave enough in the reserves “to support future generations” (Ang, 2023).

In building up the personality of a responsible redistributor, the Singapore welfare state legitimizes its policies, while the strong and transparent rationale behind every step receives buy-in from the entire nation. In this sense, Singapore now achieves an image built on wisdom and rationality, which is very difficult for opponents to argue against. The fluid welfare state.

### 3.4 The Third Role: Loving Family Member

Lastly, when one gets tired of the wise technocrat and the responsible redistributor, the loving family member comes into play. This role portrays the government as a loving, caring brother and this “love” goes deeper than loyalty, patriotism and nationalism (Viroli, 1995). This concept shares the same origins and intentions of the original welfare state concept (Briggs, 1961) but avoids the trappings and semantics of welfare that are linked to over-reliance on the state. Instead, it is a unique love and understanding that only the Singaporean government has for its people, one that is irreplaceable.

This loving image is fostered in many nation-building efforts and is comparatively easier in a smaller state such as Singapore. The National Day Parade is an annual parade that commemorates its independence. Politicians, the Prime Minister and the President sit in the audience, in close proximity to the general audience and interact with parade-goers in a nationalistic and friendly manner. Weekly “Meet-The-People” (“MPS”) sessions held by Members of Parliament (“MP”) garner support for the government and draws on a large volunteer base (Michelle, 2015). The MPS has been argued to connect residents and the government on a genuine level of emotion where national, local and personal issues are engaged on. All Singaporean politicians also keep an active social media presence, which further confers intimacy and constant connectivity with residents.

The endearing popularity of the current Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, also speaks volume to the image of the state. YouGov's 2021 worldwide survey revealed that Mr Lee was the second most admired man in Singapore after Barack Obama, and he was the only Singaporean to top the chart (Yougov, 2021). Mr Lee's social media platforms are also one of the most popular in Singapore and his Instagram consistently features him as a humble, loving, down-to-earth leader. Interviews for this paper also revealed that many Singaporeans would specifically look for him during MPS despite not being in his constituency and cite Mr Lee's loving image as a reason for making the travel.

*Often, when I meet foreign leaders, they tell me how impressed they are by Singapore. They admire our ability to think long-term, set ambitious goals, and steadily achieve our aspirations.*

*I tell them – this is only possible because the people and the Government work closely together. This is what gives Singapore the edge over others. This is what makes us exceptional. We must never let this bond weaken.*

*This National Day, as we look back on how far we have come, we can also look forward with hope. The best chapters of the Singapore story are yet to be written. Let us continue to dream boldly, work hard, and move Onward as One. Together, we can face the future with confidence.*

*(Lee Hsien Loong, 2023 National Day Speech)*

These policies cross-pollinate each other and result in a loving, connected image that Singaporeans have of the government. Against the backdrop of smaller families and an increased interaction with friends, this role is perhaps the most powerful of the three because the government acts as an omnipresent family member who is always there to hear your needs. It cleverly offers familial solace where family dependence is declining and should be viewed as the government's reinterpretation and acceptance of the declining familial paradigm. The state now wants to become your closest family member and this potentially legitimizes the welfare state in Singapore.

### 3.5 Power of the Social Media Channel

The multirole legitimacy-prioritizing approach goes back to the core principles handed down by Mr Lee Kuan Yew of rational, lean and effective governance. As a result, the fluid welfare state has been Singapore's answer to the constantly changing, globalized world and continues to keep in tandem with its economic and technological advances. In 2015, Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita amounted to approximately US\$52,000, contrasted with US\$32,400 in Japan and US\$27,200 in Korea. To add on, Singapore workers are the world's fastest in adopting AI skills (Goh, 2023). The progress in both economic and technological aspects succeed only because of a successful welfare approach, and guided by its core principles, has found form in the fluid welfare state.

Singapore executes its multirole approach expertly through social media. Singapore boasts the highest smartphone adoption rate in the world, with an average of 3.3 connected devices per

user (Low, 2014). The government has been effectively and ingeniously leveraging social media and influencers to maintain its multiple personalities. Although it does not keep track of advertising spending, a total of S\$150 to S\$175 million was spent in fiscal year 2019 (Wake Up Singapore, 2023) on advertising, constituting about 0.2% of an estimated S\$80 billion budget for the same fiscal year.

Content from social media influencers or popular channels is usually subtle, light-hearted and have no resemblance to any advertisement. For example, a video “Emergency Nurses React to Medical Dramas” on the OGS YouTube channel is sponsored by MOH Holdings, a holding company for Singapore’s public healthcare institutions (OGS, 2023). The video never once mentions the government but it portrays the nursing profession as a fun-loving and rewarded career, which is an extension of the “many paths lead to success” policy.

Many governments around the world also invest in advertising but the Singapore model is one of suggestion and soft influence. This strategic promotion adds to authenticity (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) and coupled with the pervasiveness of technology and social media make it a potent medium to perpetuate the multiple-personality welfare approach.

In fact, the manifestation of strategies to achieve success and legitimacy goes back to the state’s deep understanding of its people. However, such an approach is not easy because it is ultimately built on a relationship between state and its people.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have shown that current social policy changes in Singapore point towards a shift from the historical approach in East Asian welfare states of emphasizing the paradigm family towards a fluid welfare state. Singapore has, to some degree, given up its control of the functional form of welfare and instead, chosen a multirole, legitimacy-prioritizing approach. At the root of this, the core values of rational, lean and effective policy-making has not changed. This natural evolution of welfare state is in a better position to handle the fast-paced, and continues to lay a bedrock for the continued economic and technological success of Singapore.

This paper departs from prior literature that typically classifies Singapore’s welfare state within ideal-typical frameworks such as “productivist” or “familialist” models. Instead of relying on static typologies, it offers a functional perspective centered on legitimacy as the organizing principle. By explaining the state’s dynamic performance across three strategic roles—technocrat, redistributor, and symbolic family member—this approach explains how Singapore sustains high policy responsiveness without abandoning its anti-welfare ethos, offering a more granular and adaptive account than existing typological models allow.

While acknowledging the small number of interviews for the qualitative segment, the understanding of policies from a new perspective offers value in understanding Singapore’s welfare state by steering away from the ideal-typical approach of past literature and refocusing on what precedes functional design - welfare state legitimacy.

Singapore's model is not easily replicable. It is shaped by a unique political culture, a high degree of state capacity, and a population that remains closely aligned with the governance principles laid down by Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Nonetheless, its evolution offers broader insights for states navigating similar pressures of economic restructuring, demographic change, and political trust deficits. The key lesson is not in policy form, but in policy philosophy. It is a welfare system that is fluid, disciplined, and grounded in values that can be both effective and legitimate.

Crucially, the fluid welfare state is not self-sustaining. It requires active, ongoing governance to preserve its balance. As long as the Singapore government continues to embody the core values of rational, lean, and effective policy-making, and adapts through its three strategic roles, it is likely to remain resilient in the face of future challenges.

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## Appendix 1 – Timeline of HDB policies for singles

Year	
<b>1964</b>	The Government introduced the Home Ownership for the People Scheme to enable low income earners to purchase a subsidized flat.  Only families with at least two people are eligible.
<b>1964</b>	The Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC) was set up to cater to buyers looking for a better flat than public flats, but more affordable than private housing.  Singles are eligible.
<b>1974</b>	Central Provident Fund (CPF) can be used to purchase an HUDC flat.
<b>1980</b>	HUDC backtracks restricts HUDC flats such that singles under 40 are placed on a waiting list
<b>1982</b>	The Housing Development Board (HDB) takes over HUDC flats.
<b>1991</b>	The Single Singapore Citizen Scheme was introduced to allow singles aged 35 and above to buy resale flats that were limited to three-room and smaller flats at selected locations.
<b>1998</b>	CPF housing grants were extended to singles who were eligible first-time home owners looking to buy a resale flat on the open market and were earning an average gross monthly household income not exceeding S\$7,000.
<b>2001</b>	Singles can now buy three-room and smaller resale flats
<b>2004</b>	Singles can now buy four-room and larger resale flats
<b>2013</b>	Singles can now buy new 2-room Flexi Built-To-Order (BTO) flats from HDB. BTO flats refer to newly built flats that come with modern amenities.
<b>2014</b>	Enhanced CPF Housing Grant (EHG) given to single first-time flat, up to S\$40,000.
<b>2022</b>	Quota for singles applying for new two-room Flexi flats in non-mature estates increased from 50% to 65%
<b>2023</b>	Singles have a higher CPF Housing Grant of S\$40,000, up from S\$25,000

## Appendix 2 – Timeline of Singapore SkillsFuture (Gathered from Ministry of Finance)

Year	
<b>2015</b>	<p><b>Policy:</b> SkillsFuture Credit (SFC) announced in Budget 2015.</p> <p><b>Implementation:</b> All Singaporeans aged <math>\geq 25</math> receive a SGD 500 credit for approved courses.</p>
<b>2016</b>	<p><b>January:</b> Official rollout of the SFC scheme.</p> <p><b>Institutions:</b> Formation of two statutory boards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) – under Ministry of Education (MOE).</li> <li>• Workforce Singapore (WSG) – under Ministry of Manpower (MOM).</li> </ul> <p>126,000 individuals utilized their SFC in the first year.</p>
<b>2017-2018</b>	<p><b>Policy Expansion:</b> Introduction of employer-facing support via <b>SkillsFuture Mentors, Leadership Development</b>, and sector-specific awards.</p>
<b>2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>500,000 individuals</b> and <b>14,000 enterprises</b> participated.</li> <li>• <b>86%</b> of <b>43,000</b> surveyed trainees reported improved work performance.</li> <li>• Working adult training participation increased to <b>48.5%</b> (from 35% in 2015).</li> </ul>
<b>2020</b>	<p><b>February:</b> Budget 2020 introduced one-off SGD 500 SkillsFuture Credit top-up, valid until end-2025.</p> <p><b>Policy Enhancements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SkillsFuture Mid-Career Support Package launched:</li> <li>• Extra SGD 500 top-up for citizens aged 40–60.</li> <li>• Total available credit: SGD 1,000 for eligible mid-career workers.</li> <li>• SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit (SFEC) launched: One-time SGD 10,000 for eligible employers to support training and enterprise transformation.</li> </ul>
<b>2021-2023</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By end-2019, only ~20% of eligible Singaporeans used their SFC.</li> <li>• <b>Older adults (60+):</b> 16% uptake.</li> <li>• <b>Ages 25–39 and 40–59:</b> 22% uptake.</li> </ul>
<b>2024</b>	<p><b>May:</b> SkillsFuture Credit (Mid-Career) top-up of SGD 4,000 launched for all Singaporean upon reaching 40 years old, no expiry for these credits.</p> <p><b>Launch of SkillsFuture Level-Up Programme:</b> Encourages deep skilling and career transitions.</p>
<b>2025</b>	<p><b>March:</b> Mid-Career Training Allowance</p>

- 
- Financial support for full-time, long-form courses.
  - Pays 50% of prior monthly income:
    - Min: SGD 300/month
    - Max: SGD 3,000/month
  - Will extend to part-time courses in 2026 (SGD 300 flat rate/month).

**April: Jobseeker Support (JS) Scheme (Unemployment Benefits)**

- For involuntarily unemployed Singaporeans aged  $\geq 21$ .
- **Eligibility:**
  - Monthly income  $\leq$  SGD 5,000 prior to unemployment.
  - Property Annual Value  $\leq$  SGD 31,000.
- **Benefit:**
  - Up to SGD 6,000 over 6 months.
  - Conditional on active job-seeking activities (tracked via points system).

**Diploma Subsidy Expansion:** Mid-career workers ( $\geq 40$ ) can now pursue a second publicly-funded full-time diploma at ITE, Polytechnics, Arts Institutions

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### Appendix 3 – Timeline of Singapore Workfare Initiative (Gathered from Ministry of Finance)

Year	
2006	<p data-bbox="347 308 1305 415"><b>Introduction of Workfare Bonus Scheme (WBS):</b> The Workfare Bonus Scheme (WBS) was introduced as a one-off measure to boost the incomes of low-wage workers.</p> <ul data-bbox="396 443 1305 512" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="396 443 870 470">• Over 290,000 workers benefitted</li><li data-bbox="396 483 1305 512">• Payouts from SGD 200 to 1,200 awarded based on income and age</li></ul>
2007	<p data-bbox="347 539 1273 646"><b>Launch of Workfare Income Supplement (WIS):</b> The Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) scheme was introduced as a permanent feature of Singapore's social security system, targeting older low-wage workers.</p> <ul data-bbox="396 674 1273 743" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="396 674 1273 743">• Initially targeted workers aged 40 and above, earning SGD 1,500 and below a month. Awards payouts of various amounts</li></ul>
2010	<p data-bbox="347 770 1289 953"><b>Introduction of Workfare Training Support (WTS):</b> The government introduced a three-year Workfare Training Support (WTS) scheme to complement the WIS scheme, providing 90–95% of absentee payroll and course fees to employers who send their older low-wage workers for training.</p> <ul data-bbox="396 980 997 1094" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="396 980 899 1008">• Up to 95% subsidies on course fees</li><li data-bbox="396 1020 997 1047">• Training allowance of up to SGD 4.50/hour</li><li data-bbox="396 1060 971 1087">• Covered over 100,000 workers in 3 years</li></ul>
2020	<p data-bbox="347 1121 1305 1262"><b>Replacement of WTS with Workfare Skills Support (WSS):</b> On 1 July 2020, the Workfare Skills Support (WSS) scheme replaced the WTS scheme, aiming to better help low-wage workers upgrade their skills and boost their career mobility.</p> <ul data-bbox="396 1310 1289 1423" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="396 1310 1289 1379">• For Singaporeans aged 35 and above, earning SGD 2,000 or less a month</li><li data-bbox="396 1392 1175 1423">• Training Allowance of SGD 6/hour, up to SGD 3,000/year</li></ul>
2023	<p data-bbox="347 1472 1305 1579"><b>Enhancements to WIS and WSS:</b> Effective 1 January 2023, the WIS scheme saw increased payouts of up to S\$4,200 per year, and the qualifying income cap was raised from S\$2,300 to S\$2,500 per month.</p> <p data-bbox="347 1604 1273 1673">The WSS scheme lowered the eligibility age from 35 to 30 years old and raised the qualifying monthly income cap from S\$2,300 to S\$2,500.</p> <ul data-bbox="396 1701 1289 1843" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="396 1701 1289 1770">• WIS: May payout of SGD 4,200/year, Income cap raised to SGD 2,500/month, estimated 470,000 workers benefitted</li><li data-bbox="396 1782 1289 1843">• WSS: Minimum age lowered to 30, monthly income cap raised to SGD 2,500, continued 95% subsidy on eligible training</li></ul>

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<b>2025</b>	<p><b>Further Enhancements Announced:</b> At Budget 2024, the government announced enhancements to the WIS scheme, effective from 1 January 2025, including increased maximum payouts and adjustments to eligibility criteria. Ministry of Manpower Singapore</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Higher maximum payouts</li><li>• Income eligibility to rise</li></ul>
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