

TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS BY EMERITUS SENIOR MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES (IPS) SG 50 CONFERENCE ON 3 JULY 2015 AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

Democratic Governance in Today's World

I shall speak as a practitioner of democratic governance and in the context of Singapore, and not as an academic or in the esoteric abstract. A US senator, Thomas Philip O'Neill, was reported to have said, "It is easier to run for office than to run the office." The corollary of this is also true: "Good people who can run the office may not win when they run for office." This then begs the question: How do you get good people to run for office in the first place? This is the conundrum in a democracy: How to produce a stable, good government time and again and not a musical-chair government at every election.

In my view, good leaders must have at least the following seven attributes: integrity – honest, incorruptible and morally upright; competence – able, practical, innovative and effective; compassion – fair, just and look after the weak, the poor and the vulnerable citizens; think ahead – anticipate challenges and strategize for the long-term while attending to current problems; conviction – prepared to introduce necessary but painful measures out of conviction and eschew populist policies; selflessness – serve and not exploit power for personal and party (political) gain; and plan for leadership succession; and adaptability – adapt to changing political and social environment and are in tune with people's aspirations, especially the young's and the new middle-class'.

It is easy to spot good leaders on hindsight. But it is much harder for voters to judge leadership and character in the fog of election campaigning. Universally, the ballot box tradition has more misses than hits in picking the best leaders. The number of democracies is at an all-time high, yet trust in politics and politicians is collapsing, and perhaps at an all-time low. It will get more challenging over time to pick good leaders. Hence, Singapore should think ahead, to the next 50 years, to see how it can continue to do so. A good starting point is to debate whether and how the Singapore democratic model, developed by the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, can be adapted to the current and future political and social environment. Will it continue to produce good governments in the next 50 years? This is an existential question for Singapore as we know it.

Two Key Features in our Future Landscape

I see two key features in the future landscape that governments will have to deal with in order to succeed – higher and changing expectations of the citizenry and the impact of technology and social media. Singaporeans' standard of living is at an all-time high. Many of us own homes, enjoy good healthcare, have a job and travel widely. Our children have a good education and bright career prospects.

But human nature is such that whatever we have merely becomes the new springboard for higher expectations. Indeed, this is how human society progresses. And it is not just higher expectations but also changing expectations. For example, when I first became an MP, expectations were 1, 2, 3, 4 – one wife, two children, 3-room flat, four wheels. For the generation after me, it was 5Cs – cash, car, condominium, credit card and country club. I do not know what the current mantra is but ‘work-life balance’ seems to be a priority. The family has made a comeback.

In the past, our mountain of expectations was Bukit Timah Hill. We climbed it easily, just 537 feet high. Now it is Mt Everest, not easy to climb. The nearer you are to the peak, the harder it becomes. Not only must you be on top of your game, you also need luck on your side. But the government must hold out hope that everyone who tries can make it to the peak of his expectation. Everyone has his own Mt Everest of expectation and the task of the government is to encourage and help him scale it.

The second key feature – the Internet and social media – is value-neutral. These technologies level the playing field and democratize information in the hands of the people. They play a significant role in the way information is processed and consumed. Social media allows leaders to get closer to the people. They can share their thoughts with a wider group of people more easily. It also enables leaders to consult with citizens in a more timely fashion, rather than communicating decisions only after they have been made. But social media also adds another layer of complexity to governing, a job which is already challenging. For example, the government’s voice is not as dominant as before. To get its messages heard, read or seen is a challenge.

Effective Democracy in Today’s World

The twin drivers of growing expectations and social media mean that politicians will face increasing challenges in both running *for* office and running *the* office. How then does democracy produce a good, effective government?

Singapore has managed to maintain a virtuous cycle of good governance over the past fifty years. Initiated by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, we have managed to select and elect good leaders. The people have trusted their elected government to run the country well and returned them in successive elections. How do we keep this virtuous cycle going? I cannot speak for other democracies, but I hope that I can at least state the necessary and sufficient conditions for Singapore’s continued success. The responsibility of democracy producing good governance lies with the citizens and the political parties which contest to govern them. This is stating the obvious but what is not obvious is the difficulty of discharging this responsibility.

This is the challenge of democracy – the most difficult political system to operate successfully.

I see two basic conditions for producing good government. First, the necessary condition. Those Singaporeans who can best run the office must step forward to run for office. The rest of us must be prepared to support them, because they represent our best hope for collective success. If they go down, Singapore goes down along with every one of us. These candidates and the people must see political leadership as both a noble calling and a worthwhile profession. It has to be a calling, first and foremost, because political leaders must have the conviction and the passion to work for the people and the country and be willing to sacrifice their time and lucrative careers. But it must also be a worthwhile “profession” for them, like medicine, law and directors of corporations. Here, I certainly do not mean for us to have professional politicians, as that would be a disaster. I mean political service must be highly respected as a profession and devotion. If politics is just a calling, in good times, Singapore will see fewer and fewer people in their prime prepared to make the sacrifices. Many do not just see the need. The task for all political parties then is to seek out and encourage good people who can govern to run for elections. Then, at the end of the day, whichever party wins, it would be in a position to form a Cabinet which is exceptional.

Second, the sufficient condition. Singaporeans must vote for the party that they believe is best able to govern. They should not treat elections like circuses, auctions, beauty contests, or *tikam tikam*. On the evidence of past GEs, Singaporean voters are astute in their collective vote, choosing when and how to calibrate between showing approval and unhappiness. May they remain rational and wise.

To sum up, the answer to whether Singapore can maintain its current virtuous cycle of good governance lies in each and every Singaporean. In our hands, rest the power and responsibility to make a positive difference, some to lead and others to support. Thank you.
