

REMARKS BY EMERITUS SENIOR MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE'S BOOK LAUNCH ON 5 APRIL 2017 (WEDNESDAY) AT THE POD, NATIONAL LIBRARY BUILDING, AT 6.30 PM

The Stressful But Fulfilling Life of an MP

I have known Peng Kee for some 26 years now, ie, from the time he became an MP in 1991. He proved to be a dedicated, effective and trusted MP and office-holder. I congratulate him for capturing his 20 years' experience in his book, "My Journey in Politics". It is a useful contribution to the story of Singapore politics. It contains insights and practical lessons for new and future MPs.

2 The life of an MP is indeed stressful. But it is also fulfilling.

3 The stress begins when you are invited to tea by a Minister. It mounts should you be invited to appear for a formal interview by the Secretary-General's committee (PAP).

4 Unless you are a grassroots leader or a Branch activist, you will be helicoptered into a constituency to prepare for election. At best it will be a couple of years and at worst, a matter of months. It will be stressful because the ground is unfamiliar and you have to gain acceptance and confidence of the old hands in the constituency quickly.

5 Then you have to fight and win elections. You have to knock on every door, shake as many hands as possible, make speeches at rallies, and hope that you have made an impact. Winning is not a given. A loss can be cathartic.

6 The real stress begins when you become an MP. You have to balance your time between four main responsibilities – constituency, Parliament, work and family. You cannot neglect any of them without painful consequences.

7 Well, Peng Kee is certainly a successful example of how to handle stress as an MP. He was elected MP soon after I became PM. He retired as Senior Minister of State in 2011, the same year I retired from Cabinet. I commend his contributions as an MP and office-holder.

8 Chapter 7 of his book detailed his electoral battle in Nee Soon East in 2001. Yes, there were concerns that he might lose to the Workers Party candidate because of unhappiness among some temple leaders. Then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew decided to weigh in to help. To quote from Peng Kee's book, "... he (SM Lee) had heard that the odds at Nee Soon East had evened

out to 50-50, from the original odds of 'eight to nine in favour of PAP" (pg 122). Peng Kee was stressed, more by Mr Lee's intervention than the thought of losing. Earlier, I had joined Peng Kee in a block visit, and felt the warm response of the residents. So on the following day after SM Lee's remarks, I told reporters that I was confident of Peng Kee's victory. I wanted to boost his morale.

9 An MP's life may be stressful but it is also satisfying. However, it is fulfilling only when you have a genuine desire to help improve the lives of others and make Singapore a better place. If you are in it only to have a feather in your cap, you will find it tedious and burdensome.

10 In a mature electorate like Singapore, our voters can tell when an MP is out for self-interest or public service. They can also tell between authentic leaders and pretenders. The bar has been set very high for successive generations of MPs and office-holders. We must maintain this high standard.

11 Singapore is probably the only country in the world where an MP spends so much time in his constituency. Besides the weekly MPS, he attends block parties and community events, visits the markets, makes house visits, breaks fast with Muslim residents, attends Seventh Moon dinners and holds dialogue sessions. Some MPs even make it a point to attend funeral wakes! That is not all. He is also a town councilor attending to municipal matters. He is judged on whether his constituency is clean and the lifts work. All these are necessary to establish rapport with his constituents and win their support in elections. But it takes up an inordinate amount of his time. It saps his physical and mental energy.

12 In other democracies, MPs are legislators first and constituency advisers second. Their main responsibility is to pass laws and shape policies which have an overarching impact on peoples' lives. MPs are consulted on policies in party caucus before they are made. That is where they can speak freely and candidly to Ministers. They then debate bills and policies in Parliament to ensure the best outcome for Singaporeans. Every MP must have the courage to lead, persuade and cohere the electorate to support policies which are right but require painful adjustments, even if it means some loss of votes. That means looking beyond their own short-term self-interests and the immediate demands of voters. This is where, I think, a shift in balance from time spent in the constituency to time spent in thinking through policies, formulating, debating, explaining and implementing them, will be more beneficial for Singapore. But even for this responsibility, spending time in the constituency will be important, as proposing policies that will improve the lives of Singaporeans will require a keen understanding of voters.

13 What more must an MP do in future? Is it good enough to be doing the same things over and over again? What will Singapore's democratic politics be like, especially in the age of social media? Many western societies have been fractured by democratic politics. Will Singapore go down the same road? These are questions for the present and future generations of MPs and Singaporeans to ponder and answer.

14 Ho Peng Kee has served and contributed to Singapore. That is why I am here to launch his book. Peng Kee, I wish your book the success it deserves.

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