

## **Singapore's political system must evolve, deliver concrete solutions: Chan Chun Sing**

**Zhaki Abdullah**

**Channel NewsAsia**, 20 January 2020

SINGAPORE: Singapore must build a political system and culture that keeps the country “going, growing and glowing”, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing on Monday (Jan 20).

This would allow Singaporeans to continue to improve their lives and realise their aspirations, he said. But this would not be easy.

As an open society, Singapore faces the major challenge of external forces trying to “penetrate and permeate our society” to influence the country’s choices and directions, he said. However, the country does not have the “geographical, historical, linguistic or cultural buffers” to guard against such forces, he noted.

Mr Chan added that this challenge comes even as other societies face stresses such as the narrow interests of groups fracturing the political centre, as well as both the extreme left and right of the political spectrum exploiting fears.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies’ Singapore Perspectives conference, he noted that the theme of this year’s conference was “Politics”.

“In many places, this (politics) is almost a 'dirty' word, often associated with power contests for one’s personal benefit, or worse, associated with corruption.”

But in Singapore, politics must be about governance, said Mr Chan, who is also Minister-in-charge of the Public Service.

“Governance is fundamentally about improving the lives of our people, to enable them to fulfil their potential and aspirations.”

He outlined three ways in which Singapore could remain exceptional – constructive solutions resulting from a diversity of views, a political system that regularly evolves to remain relevant and political leaders with the right ethos.

### **CONSTRUCTIVE SOLUTIONS BEYOND RHETORIC AND DEBATE**

Democracy, said Mr Chan, is sometimes too narrowly defined as being about either the competition between different ideologies or the number of different voices in the legislature or society.

However, he noted this cannot be the sole measure of success of a democratic system.

“Beyond plurality, any functioning political system must have reasoned debate based on facts that lead to concrete plans and actions to better the lives of our people,” he said.

This is the true test of democracy in action, he said.

Mr Chan noted that consideration for broader societal interests is increasingly giving way to the narrow interests of various sectors, resulting in the longer-term interests of future generations being sacrificed.

He said that everyone, especially younger people, had to ask themselves: "What sort of politics do we want – especially if Singapore is to be around forever, not just the next four or five years?"

## **POLITICAL SYSTEM MUST EVOLVE TO STAY RELEVANT**

No political system can be perfect for all times, said Mr Chan.

However, attempts to change a political system can result in accusations such as gerrymandering to the advantage of the incumbent, he noted.

"But the lack of evolution almost inevitably leads to revolution. The system ossifies and collapses," he said.

Functioning political systems must be viewed as "works in progress", with the structures and rules able to change to respond to the needs of the time, he added.

The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, elected presidency and the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) were all part of efforts to evolve Singapore's systems to "anticipate and pre-empt problems," even when politically inconvenient, he noted.

As its political systems mature, Singapore must avoid the fate of other countries where political systems become outdated and unable to represent the aspirations of people or deliver results for both the current and future generations, he said.

## **ETHOS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

Singapore's leaders must have a number of characteristics, said Mr Chan.

These include being able to uphold its values, being able to make "difficult but necessary decisions", as well as the ability to anticipate challenges and take them on ahead of time, he noted.

The country must have "real political leaders and not just politicians", he added.

While Singapore has been "lucky" over the past six decades, maintaining the right ethos of political service will not be easy in times of "peace and abundance".

Said Mr Chan: "True political service requires leadership and stewardship for this generation and for the future generations."

"The emphasis is on 'service' and not 'politics'."