

Chan Chun Sing on finding leaders: We don't need 'fair weather candidates' only here during good times

He said that it was easier to find suitable candidates in the 'toughest of times'.

Jason Fan

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It is easier to select people for political office in the “toughest of times”, as more people step forward in service of the country, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing.

On the other hand, in good times, the government needs to exercise caution in its selection process in order to avoid inviting people who were merely “fair weather candidates”.

The minister’s comments were in response to a question posed to him by SPH Chinese Media Group head Lee Huay Leng during a dialogue at the 2020 Singapore Perspectives conference on Monday (Jan. 20).

Organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, the annual event sees Singapore’s leading political office holders taking centre stage to helm wide-ranging dialogues, with academics, diplomats, students and opposition politicians in attendance.

Every generation has its own problems

Lee, who was his dialogue moderator, asked him if the increasing difficulty for the PAP to attract good people into politics would impact the quality of Singapore’s leadership and cabinet.

In his response, Chan said that every generation faced problems finding talent, and did not want to say that this generation was more difficult than the rest.

“The challenges that we are against are quite well known. I’ve shared this, I think in IPS, previously before,” he said.

He pointed out, however, that the challenges in the 1950s and 1960s were more acute, given that Singapore’s first-generation leadership then faced life-and-death struggles.

“Some people literally get bumped off because of their political beliefs,” he said.

Political leaders in S’pore remain close to the ground

Chan said that in Singapore, every MP, regardless of which party they belonged to, was expected to keep in very close touch with the ground.

He noted that there are countries where political office holders with executive power may not be MPs, which means that they do not have responsibilities on the ground.

This would allow them to focus on their “national duties”, but the downside is that there would be a divide between what the ministers want versus what the ground feels, said Chan.

On the other hand, Chan brought up Singapore’s system, where every member of cabinet also has their own constituencies to run.

Chan admitted that this would make it challenging for these individuals (our ministers, basically) to balance the work required of their portfolios and the interests of their constituency, but he said that this was a strength of Singapore’s system.

“The strength of our system must be that our leaders must always keep their feet firmly planted on the ground, keep their ears close to the ground, understand what are the fears, concerns of our people,” said Chan.

Must love country more than they love themselves

Chan also emphasised that the government was not only looking for people who were merely “intellectually good”, but more importantly, those who possess the right values and the right teamwork.

“Running a country can never be done by a single man, or woman, for that matter, no matter how good he or she may be,” he said.

Hence, Chan opined that the government has to get the people with the right values in, and then mould them into a coherent team.

He said it was important that they do not “love themselves more than they love the country”.

Political service means intense scrutiny from the public

Public scrutiny on the individual, as well as the individual’s family, has increased, and may deter potential capable people from seeking political office, said Chan.

“I myself have been involved in a search over all these years to find good people. And I would admit that the reasons that they give for not wanting to step forth in political service are some of those that I’ve shared. The intense scrutiny, by the public, by social media, and so forth,” he said.

In fact, Chan said, when times are good, the difficulty to recruit people into public service actually increases.

“People are like, why me? I have a career outside, why me?”, he added.

Chan also noted that in good times, although people may step forward, the government needs to be careful in the selection process.

“We don’t need fair weather candidates that are here just because the times are relatively good. We need people that are here, who are prepared to stay the course, win the trust of our people, make tough decisions, and carry them out,” he concluded.