

Chan Chun Sing: S'pore needs 'good & real political leaders, not just politicians for the short-haul'

Chan brought up the need for a political system that could keep Singapore going, growing and glowing.

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Where politics is a “dirty” word associated with power contests, corruption and which capable and committed people refuse to participate in, in Singapore, it should be about governance — defined as improving the lives of our people.

These remarks were made by Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing on Monday afternoon at the 2020 Singapore Perspectives conference Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS), in a speech he made proposing strategies to build this constructive political system and culture.

He said this was vital to ensure that Singaporeans could improve their lives and realise their aspirations — even though he noted this aspiration isn't an easy one to achieve in view of competing forces like

- the appeal to the narrow interest of specific groups,
- political opportunism of the extreme left and right to exploit the fears of people, and
- the opportunistic framing of issues to appeal to nativistic instincts.

1) A functioning political system must have “reasoned debate based on facts”, many voices must converge to action

Chan touched on the need for “reasoned debate based on facts” that lead to concrete plans and actions to better people's lives — something he noted “has never been harder” in this age of “fake news” and “alternative reality”.

In his view, democracy is often defined too narrowly as the contention and strife amongst opposing or competing ideologies, with the mark of success seen to be the quantity of different voices present in a society.

Chan said these are inadequate, and said that although many diverse perspectives exist in modern democracies, these must come together in the direction of concrete action.

Instead, he said in many democracies, we see compromises, with consideration for broader social interests giving way to those of narrow sectors.

Chan said that this would result in the longer-term interests of future generations being sacrificed.

“It is as if politics is only for the me, here and now. The future voter is absent and mostly ignored,” Chan said.

“What sort of politics do we want — especially if Singapore is to be around forever, not just the next four or five years?”

2) We need the gumption to evolve our political system

Chan also said that in order for Singapore to keep growing, there was a need for our political system to evolve, in order to stay relevant with the needs of the time.

He said it is a very difficult task, citing “gerrymandering to the advantage of the incumbent” as an example of how a government trying to evolve its political system might be “reduced to accusations”.

“But the lack of evolution almost inevitably leads to revolution. The system ossifies and collapses,” he added.

He acknowledged that no political system was perfect, and that functioning political systems were always “works in progress”.

“Be it the GRC system, Elected Presidency or POFMA, we all have a responsibility to ask ourselves how to evolve our systems to anticipate and pre-empt problems. Even when it is politically inconvenient and politically not expedient,” said Chan.

Chan also noted that in other countries, political systems may become outdated, rendering them unable to deliver results for the current generation, and unable to safeguard the interests of future generations.

Can Singapore avoid this fate, and can maturity in Singapore’s case not lead to “ossification, decrepitude and finally collapse”?

For Chan, the answer to these questions are “as important as who we choose to lead” Singapore within the existing system.

3) Future leaders need to be “real political leaders and not just politicians”

Chan said that in order for Singapore to keep glowing, the ethos of political leadership forms the final piece of the puzzle.

He brought up the need to inspire and bring forth future political leaders that were “capable, committed and with conviction.”

What does this mean? Chan said these people need to be prepared to make bold, difficult but necessary decisions, with the vision and ability to anticipate and take on challenges ahead of time.

Chan also said that these leaders need to be “good and real political leaders and not just politicians for the short-haul”.

He referred to them as people with the gumption to lead, and not “see where everyone is running and then sprinting ahead of them, and for good measure shout ‘follow me’.”