

Launch of Lee Hsien Loong and Singapore

Remarks by Mr Janadas Devan, Director, Institute of Policy Studies

In Singapore, we choose ministers on the basis of their high competence – and then pray they also become good politicians.

In other countries, they choose ministers on the basis of their political skills – and then pray, usually in vain, they turn out to be competent ministers.

So socialised are we to the notion that our ministers are primarily super-Perm Secs, this book on our third Prime Minister has nary a word to say about him *qua* politician. There is a section entitled “politics and society” but it is not about the nuts and bolts of politics – which in other jurisdictions means winning elections, amassing power, and staying in office.

Of course this is a blessing. There are no nights of the long knives in our political history. There is no internecine warfare between No 10 and No 11. There are no frequent changes of prime ministers or frequent cabinet reshuffles. On the whole, it is a blessing that our politics is boring.

As I remarked on a previous political transition – from the charismatic leadership of Mr Lee Kuan Yew to Mr Goh Chok Tong – our instinctual devaluation of politics is rooted in the de-politicisation of politics that took place in the two to three decades after Separation. I remarked in an essay in IPS’s 2009 publication, *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years In Singapore*: The first generation of leaders under Mr Lee

... had themselves reduced the role of the party and expanded that of the permanent government – the civil service and its affiliated bodies. They had redefined politics as the art of government; and they had redefined the politician as pre-eminently the able public servant, the elite but meritocratically chosen, public-spirited technocrat. Goh Chok Tong and his second-generation colleagues were the products of this process, as are his successor, Lee Hsien Loong, and Lee’s third-generation colleagues. If the first generation had failed to redefine politics thus, Goh’s premiership would have been inconceivable; and if Goh had failed to confirm the durability of the new system, the orderly succession of power to the current incumbent would not have occurred. Goh’s signal achievement was that he proved Singapore could outlast the charismatic leadership of Lee Kuan Yew.

Still, it would be misleading to suppose that politics therefore doesn’t matter. Actually, politics matters a lot. Prime Ministers are *primus inter pares*, as Walter Bagehot defined the office in the 19th century – “first among equals”. But Prime Ministers are also,

in our system as much as in other Westminster-style democracies, *primus inter politicos* – “first among politicians”.

We have no difficulty seeing the founding Prime Minister as both “first among equals” in the Cabinet as well as “first among politicians”. Dr Goh Keng Swee once referred to Mr Lee’s “superb political generalship” in the battle between the People’s Action Party and the Communist Party of Malaya (or CPM) and its United Front apparatus.

As we would have noticed in the recently published Albatross File, that political generalship extended to our years in Malaysia. It was the counter offensive that Mr Lee launched after the 1964 race riots, to bring pressure on the federal government to either settle on terms favourable to Singapore or to agree to alternative constitutional arrangements, that compelled the Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to consider cutting off Singapore.

As for our second PM, as tempting as it is to see Mr Goh as primarily a technocratic leader – so dramatically different he was from Mr Lee — it would be a mistake to do so. Mr Goh turned out to be a remarkably skilled, old fashioned grassroots politician as well as a superb team manager.

Just take a look at the general elections that preceded Mr Goh’s premiership and those that followed. We tend to forget this now, but the worst swing in votes in the PAP’s history didn’t take place when Mr Goh or Mr Lee Hsien Loong were prime ministers. It took place under the elder Lee’s tenure, in 1984, when the PAP’s vote share fell by a startling 13 percentage points – from 77.7 per cent in 1980 to 64.8 per cent in 1984. It fell again in 1988, to 63.2 per cent – *before* Mr Goh took office; and fell yet again to 61% in 1991, just a few months after Mr Goh took office. It improved thereafter under Mr Goh.

This is not the occasion to speak at length about our political history. But I’d argue that the de-politicisation of politics that took place in the immediate decades after Separation began faltering in the last decade of Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s premiership. Singaporeans began to yearn in increasing numbers for a stronger opposition to check an overwhelmingly strong government. The re-politicisation of politics began in the waning years of the elder Lee’s tenure; gathered steam in the Goh years; and accelerated further during Mr Lee Hsien Loong’s premiership from 2004 to 2024, especially after the 2011 GE when the Workers’ Party won its first GRC, Aljunied. The government could no longer think of policy – especially economic and social policy, and increasingly in recent years, foreign policy as well – as though the politics didn’t matter or it would look after itself.

As a result, policies too changed – not in their fundamental thrust, but in their emphases, their accent as it were. The government now plays a significantly more intimate role in the socio-economic lives of citizens than it did under the first generation’s leadership. Contrary to the assertion that the first generation was more “socialist”, I’d argue it was the 2G and 3G who widened the scope of government considerably.

Government was more responsive under the younger Lee (and Mr Goh) than it was under the elder Lee. It's impossible to be definite about this, but I don't think the likes of Dr Goh Keng Swee or Mr Lim Kim San would have countenanced let alone proposed anything resembling the Pioneer Generation Package or the recently announced family support schemes; and I'm certain we would not be drawing as much as 20 per cent of the annual Budget revenue from the reserves if they had had any say on the matter. They'd have preferred to lock up the reserves and throw the keys away.

As *primus inter pares*, PM Lee Hsien Loong presided over a substantial widening and deepening of the scope of government, using to good effect the considerable resources the state had built up over sixty years as well as adding to those resources. As *primus inter politicos*, PM Lee successfully bought the PAP more time to further strengthen the organs of government domestically and better secure Singapore's position internationally. It's not possible to run the experiment again to check the accuracy of the following assertion, but I would submit that if PM Lee had not succeeded as a politician – if the PAP's share of the votes had fallen well below the 60-65% range that has been the norm since 1984 — we would have had a considerably weaker government domestically and Singapore's position regionally and internationally would have been gravely parlous indeed. The rest – indeed, *everything else* – is politics.

I thank Gillian Koh, Terence Ho and Chua Mui Hoong for the completion of this book. If journalism is the first draft of history, the accounts they have expertly curated here is the second draft. It will not be the last word on the Lee Hsien Loong years, certainly – for there will be revisions and re-revisions aplenty – but I think it will be fair to say that all subsequent drafts of history will owe something to their efforts.