

‘How do we define elites?’ Chan Chun Sing discusses class issues, calls for more to help others in Singapore

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SINGAPORE: Who should be defined as an “elite”, how to help the less privileged and how Singaporeans share in the country’s finite resources – these were some of the issues brought up by Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing on Friday (Oct 26).

Mr Chan, speaking at the closing panel session held as part of the Institute of Policy Studies’ 30th anniversary, commented about the issue of elitism in Singapore by recounting a recent visit to Anglo-Chinese School (Independent).

He shared that a few of the students felt down because others were making fun of them by labelling them “elitist” for being in that school. To this, the minister said he told them that being in the school is not elitist because they have done well to get to where they were.

“But if you are in ACS (I) and you forget to reach out or if you refuse to reach out to those people who are less privileged than you, then, I think, that is the definition of elitism.”

He went on to make the distinction between “anti-elitism and anti-excellence” and cautioned against the tearing down of people just because they are successful.

"I don't (hold) it against somebody, regardless of his background, if he does well and makes a contribution to society. I think that's fair," Mr Chan said.

"But if someone has done well, not through his effort, maybe through his connections or ancestry (and) never reach out to people, then there is a difference."

He had earlier asked rhetorically if he was considered part of the elite because he is now a Member of Parliament (MP) and minister.

This prompted another panelist, Straits Times’ opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong, to chime in: “Yes. As a member of the political elite, one. Member of the academic aristocracy ... elite by virtue of income and education. Is that enough, or should I go on?”

"So that is all elite right? So, the fact that I've worked hard and grew up in a single-parent family, that no longer matters," the minister replied.

“The fact that I have 'arrived' makes me an elite, and therefore I should be subject to all these perspective, accusations, whatever," he said with a shrug.

Mr Chan went on to highlight how in Singapore, people often make assessments and judgments about one another based on some key identifiers, such as where they live or went to school. He suggested that this allows people to be pigeonholed.

However, Mr Chan cautioned against this: "If we truly want to be a gracious society, that appreciates each and every individual, let's try to avoid (or) minimise such pigeonholing of people. See people ... for what they can do, what they can contribute."

He also highlighted how Singapore wants to give people the best opportunities to succeed regardless of their background: "And yet, when the person has succeeded, we brand them as an elite regardless of whether (the person) is still reaching out, still serving, still contributing."

Time, commitment needed more than money

Mr Chan shared that the richest and poorest people in Singapore reside in his Buona Vista ward, and he would be asked by the rich how they can help.

To this, he would reply: "I probably don't need your money as much as I need your time and your talent."

The minister explained that his wish was for them to each adopt a family in the neighbourhood, reach out to them and be good role models for the children. This, though, requires a long-term commitment spanning a decade or two, he acknowledged.

"We need people to step forward; we need people not just to talk about the reasons, argue about the causes (of social inequality)... but we all can do something for that one family in our respective neighbourhoods."

Leaving something on table for those more in need

Citing another experience he had as an MP, Mr Chan shared that during one meet-the-people session, he tended to a single mother who has six children and she was looking for help to find a job as well as to renew her ComCare assistance of S\$300 for the interim.

At a nearby table, he could see a young couple in their mid-20s who were "very agitated" in asking why they only received half of the eligible S\$20,000 Housing and Development Board (HDB) grant.

The minister said the experience was "almost surreal" in terms of the different ends of the needs spectrum the two parties were on and how they had asked for help.

"Today, in Singapore, I don't think we don't have enough resources to take care of our weak and our less privileged. In fact ... our problem is how to define who the weak and the less privileged are," Mr Chan said.

"In today's Singapore, I think it's not so much how much we have to share with one another; it is also about how we share, and whether we as individuals will want to take all that we think we should have or should we leave something on the table for someone who needs it a bit more than us."