

Singapore needs a system where the 'centre holds strong': Tharman
Speaking at the SG50+ conference, DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam says the
Government wants to preserve a culture where it keeps thinking long-term and rolls
out sustainable policies, in the interest of the people.

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SINGAPORE: Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has said that as Singapore looks towards the future, the Government will need to focus on planning for the long term, and holding a strong centre in society.

He said this on Friday (Jul 3) at the SG50+ conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

'WE NEED A SYSTEM WHERE THE CENTRE HOLDS STRONG'

As Singapore celebrates 50 years of nationhood, it is not only taking stock of the past five decades, but also looking ahead. And as society evolves, DPM Tharman said that changes must be viewed with an open mind. But at the same time, the Government must focus on holding the centre strong.

"You must have that culture starting from very young, pre school, primary school, where kids speak up. You don't need to always make sense, you don't need to speak logically, but you've got to have a mind of your own. There's something to it. I believe in that. What it implies for political culture and systems - you need some humility on this."

"I think we should keep our minds open as to how this will evolve. We can't decide how, 30 or 40 years from now, our politics will be. We can't decide in advance. But we have a very good reason, based on our history and our sense of the reality we operate in, that we do need a system where the centre holds strong.

"And the centre doesn't hold strong because of the invisible hand of society. Quite the opposite. The invisible hand of society tends to pull things away from the centre. It holds strong because you've got a Government elected by people that works to keep it strong."

PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM

DPM Tharman also said it is important for the Government to be able to plan for the long term.

"There is a sense in which if your vote goes down significantly, any Government will tend to focus more on the short term than the long term. That's a reality of politics all over the world. Certainly, the current Government wants as much as it can to preserve a culture where we keep thinking long-term in the interest of people. Because it's fairer.

"It's much fairer to tell people that it's not just what we can give today, but what we can sustain in future. And the societies that haven't done that end up hurting the poor and the middle-income groups. That's the reality of it. It's not just about inter-generational equity, about the old versus

the young. It's also about the rich versus the poor. Because it's the poor who suffer when you're unable to sustain the welfare policies that you start off with."

AN INDIAN PRIME MINISTER FOR SINGAPORE?

DPM Tharman also fielded a question on whether Singapore will have an Indian Prime Minister.

"It seems to me inevitable that at some point, a minority Prime Minister - Indian, Malay, Eurasian or some mixture - is going to be a feature of the political landscape because we've got a meritocracy. It's an open system. It's just a matter of time.

"The common space that everyone is growing up in is much larger than it used to be pre-independence or even in our early decades. It's a pretty strong common space. There's an education system where everyone is educated with a first language, English. You go through common experiences together, National Service. So it's a matter of time.

"We all have our preferences, and I was always in sports, centre-half rather than centre-forward; I enjoy playing half-back and making the long passes, but I am not the striker unless I am forced to be. And I don't think I'll be forced to it because I think we've got choices."

Even as the nation look towards the next 50 years, DPM Tharman said that there is already a crop of people in the fray, and entering the fray, that will provide future leadership for Singapore.