

## **Chan Chun Sing tells us stories about elitism, his “brothers”, Tharman, & being driver to diplomats He loves telling stories.**

**Joshua Lee, Jonathan Lim**

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Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing concluded the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 30th anniversary conference on Oct. 26 sharing his definition of “elitism”, Singapore's leadership model, and urging Singaporeans to see past class.

He did so using personal stories and anecdotes.

We reproduce them below:

### **On his “brothers” who will take care of him**

In response to an audience member who asked what can be done for more opportunities for social mixing, Chan provided this anecdote about him and his “brothers” — friendships he forged during his time as a SAF regular:

**Chan:** “When I was the commanding officer of 2nd battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment, my runner (signaller), he's an illegal VCD seller. So do you pigeonhole him?”

He's extremely loyal to the mission and the unit. He told me, ‘Sir, can you tell me when is the battalion proficiency test?’ I said this and this – these are the dates.

He said, ‘Ok Sir, I need to tell you I'm going to surrender to the Police, and I'm going to Changi (Prison). But I promise you I will come back in time for the battalion proficiency test to *chiong* with you. But Sir, after that can you allow me to surrender again for my next offence?’

I grew up on the left hand of the bell curve. I have a lot of experiences with such brothers. I learnt the word ‘brothers’ way before I joined the labour movement, My soldiers were the ones who told me, ‘Sir, don't worry. Anywhere you go in Singapore, our brothers will take care of you.’”

**Moderator:** ‘Are you still friends with them?’

**Chan:** “They are still my brothers.

I never looked down on them because they [sold] illegal VCD. I know it was a hard life. When they [came] into NS, their monthly allowance goes down to a few hundred dollars. Whereas at that point in time, the profit margin for every illegal VCD sold was about S\$5.

I looked at him as an individual because I realised how loyal, how sincere he can be. He didn't choose to become an illegal VCD seller. I tried to teach him computing. He told me, ‘Sir, you make me run ten rounds and ten kilometres, I'd rather do that. Can you don't torture me?’

We need to realise that in our society there is a diversity of people out there. Let us not look at one another based on income, based on education level, based on housing type only. Let us look at each individual and value them for what they are.”

## **Consoling ACS boys who were called 'elitist'**

One of the themes of Chan's panel speech was the need for fellow Singaporeans to reach out to each other *despite* our social strata.

"Each of us can play a part in how we relate to each other and how we reach out to each other," said Chan.

"Recently I was speaking to students at ACS (Anglo Chinese School) Independent and I made this point to them, because some of them were feeling a bit down because people were making fun of them saying that they are elitist because they are in ACS Independent.

I told them this: To be in ACS Independent is not elitist, because you have done well to get to where you are. But if you are in ACS Independent and you forget to reach out or you refuse to reach out to those people who are less privileged than you then, I think, that is the definition of elitism."

"To be successful in our system and to be able to rise up and fulfil one's potential is not elitism," added Chan. "To be successful and not reach out is elitism and I hope that is something that we bear in mind as we go forward as a society."

Chan ended his anecdote by calling for Singaporeans to "appreciate that different people have different gifts and that we should value and treasure them".

## **On his encounter with a diplomat**

Chan explained why political leaders should not alienate themselves from the common man. He also explained how the government encourages social mixing so that the haves will not forget to help the have-nots.

"There are also things that we design into our own system to make sure that our so-called successful ones never be living in a world of their own.

Now that I'm a Minister, I interact with my counterparts overseas. They are very puzzled. They always ask me "Who's your driver?"

I said, "I don't have a driver".

Once, I picked up a foreign guest at the airport, I said "Why don't you ride in my car and talk along the way?"

So, he went to my car. First, he wasn't sure which car was my car — because I drive a Toyota Prius. So, first he was a bit uncomfortable "Oh it's your car"

Then he opened the back door, got in and sat at the back. I opened the front door and got into the driver seat.

Then, he asked me, "Pak Chan, sopir di mana? (Where's your driver?)"

I said, "Sopir sini (Driver here)"

"Oh, sorry sorry."

Jumped out of the back door, jumped to the front passenger seat.

Then we drove off. We came to the first traffic light. I stopped. Then he looked at me – “Why you stop?”

And I said, “Traffic light.”

Then he looked at me – “But you Minister, what?”

Then I looked at him – “So?”

Then he looked at me again – “But there’s nobody around”

So, I looked at him – “Singapore got a lot of cameras.”

Then, we got into an interesting conversation. He said, “Why is it that Singapore is so strange. You’re a Minister right? Why you drive your own car? Why don’t you get a driver or outriders and escort?”

And I shared with him how our founding leaders decided, very early on, that we will not have such things unless it’s on very officious duties like foreign delegations.

Because we want our people to live as far as possible, as simply as possible, as much as possible as the common man.

Because if you live too differently from the common man, you may one day forget how the common man lives.

If you have outriders for your vehicle every day, you will never solve the traffic congestion problem. Because the traffic congestion problem doesn’t apply to you. Right? That’s what happened in some countries.

Now having said that, can we fully get rid of this situation? It takes two hands to clap. By policy design we can try to have HDB estates that have more mixing, we can try to have the condos to be in the middle of HDB precincts — try to build the flats so that it is almost indistinguishable between one and the other.

But that’s just one part of it. The other part must surely be that for those that have succeeded to understand and remember that our success is not just because of us and that it is incumbent on us to reach out to understand.”

### **On getting Tharman’s help at Davos**

One issue on everyone’s minds is the issue of leadership succession, and sustainable leadership.

Chan shared a story on how leadership in Singapore works on the premise that each subsequent generation of leaders rely on the foundations laid by its predecessor.

“For a small country to have continuity in policy direction we have an overlapping model. We don’t have sharp discontinuity, or we hope not to have sharp discontinuity as a model. It is the responsibility of the first generation, however you define it, to help the subsequent generation.

And for the subsequent generation to help the subsequent generation to succeed. And (we) have no illusion that, just because tomorrow somebody becomes the leader of a particularly small country like ours, that we will naturally be able to stand on the world stage effortlessly.

Can I tell you a real story? This year DPM Tharman brought me to Davos. And I mean it – he literally brought me to Davos.

Would I have been able to get to Davos on my own? Sure, you can buy an air ticket and book a hotel. But will anybody want to meet this “don’t know who” Chan Chun Sing from Singapore?

The answer is probably no.

DPM Tharman had to use the weight of his reputation to help us even secure meetings for the junior ones like us. And that was very gracious of him — to say that “why don’t you give this young person from Singapore a chance? Talk to him. See whether he can make a contribution”.

That’s how we keep the flag flying high. It’s not about “Oh, I’m the clever one. I just turn up and voila, you all should bow down deeply in front of me because I am from Singapore”.

I mean, if you come from a big country, yes, maybe that might work. But that is certainly not how it is for Singapore.

First, try to move beyond the one, two, three, four, five (generation of leadership type of model).

Try to see how we can build a leadership model that has sustained presence — that can help our country fly the flag in the international forum. To stand up there because people believe that we stand for continuity, consistency.”