

## **Here's what we observed from Heng Swee Keat & Chan Chun Sing's tag team at S'pore Perspectives**

**How they spoke and engaged the intelligentsia gathered is always a good indicator of how they're growing as 4G leaders.**

***Martino Tan***

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The Institute of Policy Studies's (IPS) annual Singapore Perspectives is the flagship conference for the think tank.

It also happens to be the unofficial flagship political conference in Singapore because of the quality of the discussion topics, the speakers and panellists featured (a Minister has been the keynote speaker since 2010) and the attendees it manages to attract.

Every year sees a convergence of academics, intellectuals, senior civil servants, ambassadors, business leaders and other public figures discussing and addressing issues that concern Singaporeans.

If the General Election (GE) is going to be held this April or September, this event is effectively one of the last opportunities that exist for the 4G leaders to engage ~~persuade~~ Singapore's intelligentsia that they are ready to take over Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his team.

Enter the one-two 4G ministers, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing.

How they performed collectively would depend on who you ask, but we observed a couple notable things from this year's conference:

### **1. The Workers' Party's (noted) absence from the IPS crowd**

IPS Director Janadas Devan opened the conference with a rightful reminder that this year's Singapore Perspectives is not a General Election (GE) forum, even though the likes of the Singapore Democratic Party's Paul Tambyah, the Progress Singapore Party's Michelle Lee and the People's Power Party's Goh Meng Seng were present and asked questions.

"Despite the season, this conference is not meant to be a GE forum. Other bodies affiliated with the university are organising such forums. But naturally, we invited the Leader of the Parliamentary Opposition to speak at this conference, he declined, though we hope to have him on another occasion."

Indeed, even if inviting Workers' Party (WP) chief Pritam Singh was not done with the intent of modelling this year's Singapore Perspectives as a GE forum, he is, of course, ultimately right that it can't possibly be a GE forum without him or any representative of the only opposition party in Parliament.

One has to go back more than one election cycle to discover when the last time was that a WP representative was at IPS.

Back in 2013, WP Chairperson Sylvia Lim was part of a panel as a newly-minted Member of Parliament.

It does look, however, like Pritam fully intends to build on his predecessor Low Thia Khiang's "sensible approach" of grassroots politics.

Just over the weekend, he told his party members that the WP will field candidates who are "competent MPs" and can "manage their Town Councils well".

That priority, by our (and probably their) estimations, should trump being a guest speaker at a national conference at any rate.

## **2. Pitching the "Singapore Together" movement**

What is the Singapore Together movement, you might ask?

Even if you were never successful in pinning down precisely what it actually is, you likely would recognise how DPM Heng pitches it.

The aim of the movement, he said on Monday as before, is for our 4G leaders to "go beyond just working for you, to working with you, to build our future Singapore".

And he hopes it will form a new model of partnership between government and Singaporeans in owning, shaping and acting on Singapore's future.

In his speech, he cited the Citizens' Panel and Citizens' Workgroup, initiatives designed to get Singaporeans involved in designing policies and putting them into action, as well as the Somerset Belt and Geylang Serai projects as examples of the government getting Singaporeans involved in shaping our physical environment.

Here's what he said about his vision in fostering a stronger sense of ownership among the younger generation of Singaporeans:

"Just as our founding leaders made home ownership their cornerstone policy to give Singaporeans a stake in Singapore and a share in our progress, Singapore Together will be our new cornerstone of nation building".

If home ownership (and National Service) was how the pioneer generation leaders aimed to root the first generation of Singaporeans, Heng and the 4G leaders hope that acts of service by young Singaporeans for their communities and friends will give rise to the same sense of ownership our forefathers felt.

Regardless of your familiarity with Singapore Together, one thing's for sure — you can certainly expect to hear more mentions of it in the coming months ahead of the GE.

### **3. The Heng Swee Keat & Chan Chun Sing tag-team**

There is a reason why both Heng and Chan were invited to bookend this year's conference as its keynote speakers.

They are, as we mentioned, the number one and two leaders of the People's Action Party (PAP)'s next generation, after being introduced as the ruling party's First and Second Assistant Sec-Gens slightly more than a year ago.

Instead of analysing the quality of Heng's and Chan's responses, speeches or points made in their respective discussions, less than astute observers like us can compare their respective speaking and engagement styles.

Some context: Both Heng and Chan are reasonably seasoned at navigating this critical, calculating, less-than-friendly audience of intelligentsia.

And they should be by now, given that this is Heng's fourth appearance, and Chan's third.

In line with that, we certainly note the overall improvement in adeptness that our two leaders showed in handling difficult questions from the public.

But, of course, there is a difference in styles between them.

Heng, for one, came across as more cerebral in the delivery of his speech and his engagement with the audience.

Being the Finance Minister, he also seemed to be most comfortable addressing questions related to finance.

Heng was able to explain clearly and confidently, in response to a question from Tambyah, the alternatives the government had considered to the impending rise in the Goods and Services Tax (GST), which Heng himself had announced in the 2018 Budget Statement.

He first expounded on why one needs to look at Singapore's tax system as a whole when weighing a rise in GST, and the importance of investment contributions from the reserves (Net Investment Returns Contribution).

He then shared how he considered raising other taxes like corporate income tax, but pointed out that around the world, other countries were instead reducing their corporate income tax rates in a bid to attract foreign investment.

Chan, on the other hand, provided the punchier soundbites and anecdotes in the delivery of his speech and his dialogue with the audience.

Perhaps borrowing a page from his trade union playbook, Chan applied a catchphrase to how the 4G leaders view politics and governance.

Like his predecessor “cheaper, better, faster” labour chief Lim Swee Say, Chan asked the audience how Singapore can build a political system and culture that keep Singapore going, growing and glowing.

During his question-and-answer session, Chan addressed how Singapore is tackling the issue of climate change with an impressively clear eight-minute explanation of the challenges, dilemmas and recommendations relating to the energy and carbon puzzle.

And it showed — the unexpected expertise he showed in this area was greeted by a stunned silence, followed by a sizeable applause.

Ironically, Chan’s folksy style appeared to have much appeal with the intelligentsia — responding to a question about bilingualism, his sharing of his personal experience of “thinking in Chinese and translating it into English” and “doing Math in Cantonese” incited laughter as well.

All that said, we’d like to let Heng conclude with words he shared about himself and Chan two years ago.

Heng said of him and Chan in Nov. 2018:

“What Chun Sing said reminds me of what Mr Lim Swee Say (former Manpower Minister and Labour Chief) used to say, ‘same same but different’. We are ‘same same’ in that we are all united by a common sense of purpose, which is to take Singapore forward, to improve the lives of Singaporeans. And I can say this of all our MPs and all our party members. But the ‘different’ perspectives actually strengthen our team.”

Cool.