

Task of renewal the toughest, says PM

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SINGAPORE'S most difficult challenge: Updating the political system and renewing its leadership so it works in generations to come.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2010 conference yesterday, explained a key intangible element of the challenge: Nurturing "the ethos and the spirit of a whole generation of Singaporeans and particularly the brightest and ablest who have the most options and highest ambitions, to feel that this is something worth doing, and worth committing their lives to...making this place succeed".

This, as compared to demographics and the economy, would be the hardest task the country faces, and also the one that would take the longest time, he said in response to the question by Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh.

Mr Lee added that his role before retiring would be to establish the next generation of leadership, to ensure prosperity and a vibrant society.

In his keynote address earlier, he said that although the Government has been making good progress on identifying promising political leaders, it does not have a complete team lined up in Cabinet yet.

Mr Lee is confident that by the next election, the party will "field a team which will contain the core of the next generation leadership, who can in time take over from me and my colleagues, and assure the country's future for the next 10 to 20 years".

But he also threw cold water on what he referred to as the "mini election fever" that has gripped Singapore recently, stating categorically that the next election was "not imminent".

Rather, it is due "sometime within the next two years", he said.

As National University of Singapore political-science research lecturer Alan Chong told my paper, ground-level buzz on imminent polls has mostly been speculation and when elections will be held is still up in the air.

In his speech, PM Lee ran through the changes made to the election system last year, such as increasing the number of opposition Members of Parliament and diminishing the size of group representation constituencies.

He noted that these changes will ensure more diverse voices in Parliament, and will enable the Government to act decisively once a consensus is reached.

While a sound political system is essential, he stressed that it still needs the right people at the helm to succeed.

Mr Lee was also asked for his take on recent media reports of ably-qualified young individuals joining the opposition.

Mr Lee said that ability was just one pre-requisite for entering politics. Integrity and commitment were also essential.

He added: "We wish them well. But we hope that Singaporeans will judge individuals like that as rigorously as they judge individuals who join the PAP.

"For the opposition, it's a change. You have one scholar or two and they can think: "Wow, this is a luminous transformation." Well, it is a significant development...But let's look at the person, not what degrees he has, but what he is able to do for Singapore."

When it comes to Singaporeans in global leadership roles, PM Lee expressed "modest aspirations".

He added: "I am very hesitant for Singapore to aim to create global leaders, we should know our place in the world.

We talk about punching above our weight but we're super bantam-weight... we know where we fit in the global system, that way we can be most effective, can protect our interests and hold our own without taking a false step and taking a tumble."

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