

George Yeo: A Man for All Seasons

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As Singapore's Foreign Minister of nearly seven years, Mr George Yeo will leave a legacy of strategic thinking, cultural diplomacy and friendship.
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ONE of my hopes for the 2011 General Elections was that those who won would be magnanimous and those who lost would be gracious.

Foreign Minister George Yeo was gracious in defeat. In his concession speech, he congratulated Mr Low Thia Kiang and his Workers' Party team on their victory and wished them success. Of the other defeated candidates, only Mr Desmond Choo of the People's Action Party and Ms Nicole Seah of the National Solidarity Party were just as gracious.

A man's character can be gleaned from his conduct, both in victory and in defeat. Mr Yeo is a gentleman and an honourable man, whatever the conditions.

I have had the pleasure of working under his leadership in three of his ministerial portfolios. He was our first minister of the then Ministry of Information and the Arts, or Mita. During nine years at Mita, he changed Singapore from a so-called cultural desert to a cultural oasis.

He appointed Mr Tan Chin Nam chairman of the newly created National Library Board - and Mr Tan, together with Mr Christopher Chia, revolutionised our library system and made it one of the best in the world. Mr Yeo also appointed Mr Lim Chee Onn chairman of the National Heritage Board, and me, chairman of the National Arts Council.

It was under his leadership that the Esplanade was built, the Asian Civilisations Museum was envisioned, the Arts Festival was made an annual event, the LaSalle College of the Arts took off, and the Government agreed, for the first time, to subsidise arts education. Today, Singaporeans enjoy a rich and varied cultural life. They should not forget the person who planted the seeds that have blossomed.

Mr Yeo brought the same energy, imagination and enthusiasm to the Ministry of Trade and Industry. He realised that because trade is Singapore's life blood, it should play a proactive leadership role in global trade forums like the World Trade Organisation (WTO). He quickly won the admiration and trust of his peers. They asked him to chair the negotiations on agriculture, one of the most contentious issues. WTO director-general Pascal Lamy is an admirer of Mr Yeo.

In order to enlarge Singapore's economic space, Mr Yeo championed the idea of linking Singapore's economy with other economies by way of free trade agreements (FTAs) and comprehensive economic partnership (CEP) agreements. During his watch, he launched more than a dozen FTA and CEP negotiations.

He appointed me chief negotiator in our negotiations with the United States. During the journey of two years, we encountered many difficulties. Throughout, Mr Yeo remained calm, optimistic and creative. He worked relentlessly with the different stakeholders in the US to earn their support and to find acceptable solutions to the difficulties.

In the final stage of the negotiations, there was a shortlist of issues that the two chief negotiators could not resolve. Those issues were finally resolved by Mr Yeo and his American counterpart, Mr Robert Zoellick, in a marathon negotiating session that extended through the night without dinner and ended successfully at dawn. Members of the Singapore delegation were deeply impressed by the cool and masterly way in which Mr Yeo had negotiated with Mr Zoellick.

Mr Yeo has been Singapore's Foreign Minister for nearly seven years now. He inherited a ministry in good order as a result of the legacy of Mr S. Rajaratnam, Mr S. Dhanabalan, Mr Wong Kan Seng and Professor S. Jayakumar. What contributions did Mr Yeo make to that heritage? I would single out three.

First, he taught us to think strategically and to prioritise. He constantly asked his staff to ensure that our most important bilateral relationships were in excellent order. He scanned the horizon for new opportunities - such as in the Middle East and Latin America.

Second, he was the first foreign minister to use history and culture as instruments of diplomacy. He persuaded the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to restore the Sun Yat Sen Villa and to turn it into a historic site linking Singapore, China and Taiwan. He requested that the National Heritage Board restore the memorial to Subhas Chandra Bose, who is celebrated in India as a nationalist and independence fighter. It was due to the leadership of Mr Yeo, a Roman Catholic, and of former Indian president Abdul Kalam, a Muslim, that the ancient Buddhist university at Nalanda, Bihar is being reincarnated.

Third, Mr Yeo believes in the importance of friendship in diplomacy. He often invited his foreign guests to his home to have dinner with him and his family. He went out of his way to show warmth and friendship to his foreign interlocutors. When Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar was Malaysia's foreign minister, Mr Yeo visited him in his constituency in Malaysia to pay his respects during Hari Raya.

Mr Yeo is blessed with high IQ, EQ and CQ - cultural intelligence. He is an exceptionally gifted man. Although an engineer by training and a soldier by profession, he is also a philosopher and historian. Although a devout Roman Catholic, he is a champion of inter-faith dialogue and understanding.

Mr George Yeo is ideally qualified to play a leadership role on the global stage, and I sincerely hope he will do so.

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