

Embrace excellence, shun selfish elitism, says Chan Chun Sing

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SINGAPORE - Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing met a group of students from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) recently and he said some felt that people were making fun of them, saying they were being elitist.

"I told them this - that being in ACSI is not elitist; you did well to get to where you are."

"But if you are in ACSI and you forget or refuse to reach out to those people who are less privileged, then I think that is the definition of elitism."

Mr Chan recounted the event on Friday (Oct 26) at an Institute of Policy Studies conference as he sought to make it clear that Singaporeans should aim not to be anti-excellence, but anti-elitism.

It underlines his message at a panel discussion on income inequality and social mobility, that people should look past a person's income or status, and that the successful in society have a responsibility to give back to society and be volunteers to help the underprivileged.

The discussion took a jocular turn at one point when he asked the 820 people in the audience, comprising academics, senior civil servants and students, a rhetorical question: "So since I am now a minister, I presume that qualifies me as a member of the elite?"

The response from The Straits Times' Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong, who was also on the panel, drew laughter and applause: "Yes - a member of the political elite, a member of the academic aristocracy benefiting from a state-sponsored scholarship and elite by virtue of income and education."

Mr Chan pushed back, arguing that as someone who grew up in a poor, single-parent household and had to work hard to achieve his present success, he should not be labelled a member of the elite class.

"There is a difference between anti-elitism and anti-excellence," he said.

"I would not hold it against somebody, regardless of his background, if he does well and makes a contribution to society. But if someone has done well, not through his own effort but maybe through his connections... and doesn't reach out to people, then that is different."

He added that in his Buona Vista ward, which is part of Tanjong Pagar GRC, he is MP to the richest and poorest in Singapore.

When the wealthy ask him how they can give back, he often tells them he needs their time and talent more than their money, he said.

Making a direct plea to his audience, he said: "If only each and every one of you could adopt one family, reach out to that family every week and give the children a positive role model to look up to, that I think is much more important than any monetary help."

During the question-and-answer session, sociology professor Paulin Straughan highlighted a concern among today's youth who feel it has become harder for them to enjoy the same degree of social mobility their parents did.

This has made them unhappy and eroded their optimism.

Mr Chan, in his response, indicated that it is his generation's responsibility to help today's young.

Those who are successful need "to uphold, refine and continuously improve the system so that the next generation can continue to succeed, just like us", he said.

"The definition of our success is not how well we do for ourselves but how well we enable the next generation to do better than us," he added.