

IPS forum: S'pore does not need 'fair-weather' politicians but leaders who will stay the course, says Chan Chun Sing

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SINGAPORE - Singapore does not need "fair-weather candidates" who join politics only when times are good, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing on Monday (Jan 20).

Instead, it needs leaders who are willing to stay the course, win the trust of Singaporeans, make tough decisions and carry them out, he added.

"In fact, in the toughest of times, we find it easier to select people," Mr Chan said at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

"On the other hand, when times are good, there are many people who want to step forward and you really have to be careful who you choose."

He was responding to Ms Lee Huay Leng, who had asked about the difficulty of getting people to join politics. Ms Lee heads Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Media Group and was moderating a dialogue with the minister.

Mr Chan also said the intense scrutiny of politicians and their families, especially in the age of social media, may deter prospective candidates from entering politics.

But those who do are "prepared to put aside their personal interests - and to some extent, their families' interests - in service of the country", he said.

He added that the challenge of attracting political talent is not just that of bringing in people with the intellect, but also those with the right values and motivations.

"The first order of business is how do you get people with the right values in, and to the best of our efforts, we may still get it wrong," he said.

"Once they are in, how do we get them into a coherent team - that they do not love themselves more than they love the country?"

The conference was attended by nearly 1,000 people, including students, civil servants, academics and representatives from civil society and the private sector, as well as leaders and members of opposition parties.

Speakers at the conference, including Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, discussed topics such as politics in Singapore and how the political dynamic has shifted in recent years.

During the dialogue, former senior minister of state for foreign affairs Zainul Abidin Rasheed, who is Singapore's non-resident ambassador to Kuwait, asked Mr Chan which policy areas should the Government revisit.

Mr Chan said it is an ongoing effort in many areas, from tracking broad geopolitical shifts to changes in Singapore's domestic societal makeup.

"We cannot assume that just because we've got certain things right at this point in time, that this will always be right," he said. "That would be a very, very bad mistake."

For instance, his ministry is constantly looking at Singapore's economic strategy, he said.

The minister also cited the example of more inter-ethnic marriages and marriages between Singaporeans and foreigners, which means the compartmentalisation of people according to race will have to change.

"The complexion of our society will definitely change in the upcoming years," he said. "And if all these things are going to change, then we have to seriously ask ourselves, every step of the way, are our policies still right and relevant?"

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt of Nanyang Technological University's Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme asked Mr Chan if it was possible to have the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) completely independent of the Prime Minister's Office

He also suggested limiting the maximum size of group representation constituencies (GRCs) to two people. "If the intention is minority representation, we do not need more than two people," he said.

Mr Chan said the committee, formed last August and still working out the boundaries, is made up of public servants with knowledge of issues such as population and demographic changes.

"I have never doubted their independence. They do their job professionally," he said. "No matter who does the work, how it is done, you have to report to somebody and present it to be approved and issued," he said.

Mr Chan added that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has instructed the committee to reduce the average size of GRCs and create more single-member constituencies. "So we have to wait for the EBRC's work to be done before we make any comments," he said.