

Major task to find next 'A Team' from small talent pool

MM: Two-party system not viable as there's not enough top talent

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SINGAPORE'S talent pool is not big enough to support a two-party political system, as it is tough enough unearthing a first-rate team comparable to Singapore's founding fathers, said Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew yesterday.

Calling the People's Action Party (PAP) Old Guard Cabinet 'the A Team', he noted that there have been calls for political liberalisation, but also reminded that Singapore's 3.7 million resident population lacked the talent to support a two-party system.

'Many people say, why don't we open up, then you have two big parties and one party always ready to take over. I do not believe that for a single moment.

'We are not Israelis, you know. They can afford to do that. They have got any number of generals, writers, linguists, life science researchers, everything. It's a different mix of population,' Mr Lee said.

'We do not have the numbers to ensure that we'll always have an A Team and an alternative A Team. I've tried it, it's just not possible,' he added.

Speaking at a dialogue session at the Shangri-La Hotel, Mr Lee noted that, when he became Prime Minister in 1959, only two of the 10 ministers in his first Cabinet had been born in Singapore.

They were Mr Lee himself and Mr K.M. Byrne, who was the Labour and Law Minister in the early 1960s.

'All the others were born and bred in Malaysia, Ceylon, India and China,' Mr Lee said.

But now, Singapore has to pick leaders from within its borders, he said, adding that 'it's one thing going to the South China Sea for deep sea fishing (and) another thing going to Sentosa lagoon.'

He also cited the example of the current Chief Justice, Mr Chan Sek Keong, who was born in Ipoh.

For the next Chief Justice, however, 'we are trawling from the Singapore pool'.

At the same time, he stressed the necessity for Singapore to have a top-notch team in charge.

'Singapore needs an A Team in charge to work out the best solution...political leaders who are on the ball, think ahead, analyse carefully, choose the best options and sell it to the people, because you have got to carry people with you.'

He said that he had been lucky in finding an A team to replace the original one that was 'more than equal' in ability, integrity and capabilities.

The second A team was able to produce a third A team.

'This present A team,' he said, 'is good for another two elections. If, in these two elections, you don't see the silhouette of a fourth-generation A team, then you have reason to worry, because you need at least one term to become a really capable MP and a minister.'

In a dialogue with 900 participants at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference on the future scenarios facing Singapore, Mr Lee said that the major threat to the country was not an inability to attract talent but the loss of Singapore-born talent.

'Our Achilles heel is that we lose too much of our own talent at the top, drawn by very attractive offers from top financial and legal institutions taking them out to China and elsewhere, and then not returning,' he said.

He cited his own family as an example.

His two sons had both taken up government scholarships and then returned to help build the Singapore Armed Forces and the economy up.

But of his three grandsons, all outstanding students, only one had taken up a government scholarship.

The Public Service Commission had also informed him that only half of each year's 300 top students applied for scholarships.

'That is the challenge that I consider most critical. We win that challenge and we can keep two-thirds of our top talent, then...that settled core is firm, that spine is there, the added talent can be so many megabytes, the hard disk is there,' he said.

Returning to the theme of political leadership, Mr Lee questioned the wisdom of supporting leaders like current United States Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

He described Mr Obama as a one-term senator with manifest intelligence and a gift for getting the right pitch.

'But you ask yourself: Is it going to be a safer world with McCain or with Obama?' he wondered aloud, leaving the question unanswered.

IPS chairman Tommy Koh later asked Mr Lee if the PAP would allow for a human rights commission to be formed.

Mr Lee said that that was for the younger leaders to decide but added that, in his view, as long as the Singapore Government remained clean, capable, meritocratic and fair, 'I don't see the need for more political policemen'.

Prof Koh, however, said that he respectfully disagreed.

He pointed out that, in mature democracies such as the United Kingdom and France, there were institutions such as human rights commissions and ombudsmen which 'act not as policemen but in order to help improve governance and fairness'.