

'Matter of time' before S'pore has non-Chinese PM

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Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has said it is a matter of time before Singapore gets a non-Chinese prime minister.

"It seems to me inevitable that at some point, a minority prime minister - Indian, Malay, Eurasian, or some mixture - is going to be a feature of the political landscape.

"We've got a meritocracy, it is an open system," he said yesterday, noting that people share experiences like national service and are educated largely in English, and that the common space is expanding.

But he does not see himself taking on the job, he said when replying to Washington Post columnist Fareed Zakaria, who had asked whether Singapore could see an Indian prime minister.

Mr Zakaria was chairing a dialogue at the SG50+ Conference on what lies ahead for Singapore, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

DPM Tharman, who is also the Finance Minister, said: "Singapore is evolving. The common space where everyone is growing up in is much larger than it used to be."

"It is a pretty strong common space, an education system where everyone is educated with first-language English. You go through common experiences together, national service, so it is a matter of time."

When Mr Zakaria asked if he would do the job, Mr Tharman drew a sporting analogy.

"Let me put it this way. We all have our preferences and I was always, in sports, playing centre-half rather than centre-forward. I enjoy playing half-back and making the long passes, but I am not the striker.

"Unless I am forced to be, and I don't think I will be forced to it because we've got choices. We won't always get it the way we expect it to be, but we think very hard about succession in Singapore."

He added: "We've got a crop of people who are in the fray already and entering the fray who will provide future leadership."

The question of whether and when Singapore may see a minority prime minister has come up in recent years. Days after Mr Barack Obama was elected in 2008, becoming the first black American president, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked whether Singapore was ready for a non-Chinese prime minister at a dialogue with Malay-Muslim community leaders.

PM Lee said he thought it was possible for Singapore to have a non- Chinese prime minister, but it may not happen soon. He also acknowledged that attitudes towards race had shifted as English provided more of a common ground.

At yesterday's hour-long dialogue, a member of the audience asked Mr Tharman what he felt were the "key tenets of a more positive narrative of an ageing Singapore" and ways to achieve it.

Mr Tharman said his vision for the country 50 years from now is one where people are encouraged, have a passion for learning throughout their lives and can age actively. And more importantly, to go beyond what Singapore has achieved in multiculturalism.

"The Singapore of the future should be not just about four circles and a common space in between which is neutral... It is also about overlapping circles," he said.

"It is having a love for diversity," he added, "not just tolerant of each other, not just accommodating... but something deeper than that."

"And I think we can achieve it."

At a later panel discussion, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh noted that there had not been a Malay president since Mr Yusof Ishak in the 1960s. He asked Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong if a Malay could be elected president.

Mr Goh said making the presidency an elected one did not preclude Malays, but acknowledged that one man, one vote might see the Malay candidate struggling to get elected.

He, however, added that "if good candidates came along, the time will come when the Malay candidate would be elected"