

## **The will to defy the odds of history**

**This is an edited excerpt of a Q&A session with Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2020 conference on Monday**

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**Q (Aidan Mock, Yale-NUS student, member of SG Climate Rally):** Climate change has been a big topic that we've discussed today. It's something my peers and I feel really deep anxiety about.

I want to ask how Singapore intends to confront the elephant in the room, which is the large fossil fuel industry that we host, given that we want to be responsible and pull our weight in dealing with the climate crisis as well.

**A (Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing):** Yes, we have a big petrochemical industry. But we also have to be realistic. How is our petrochemical industry performing?

But we do have this issue, notwithstanding that we take our carbon responsibilities very seriously.

Now, when EDB (Economic Development Board) tries to win investments and create jobs for the next generation, we have to take into account not just our land constraints, our manpower constraints, our fiscal constraints, and so on and so forth, we also have to take into account our carbon constraints.

Singapore is a data hub. Many Internet companies, many digital companies, would like to set up their data centres in Singapore. But data centres require huge amounts of energy; huge amounts of energy require huge amounts of carbon budget. Are we able to attract these companies? If we are unable to attract them, what does it mean for our economy, our position as a global hub for the digital services?

Now, these are difficult questions that cannot be answered just because we are philosophically wedded to one consideration and not the rest.

In fact, in all such difficult decisions, we have to ask ourselves: How do we remain competitive as an economy to attract those investments and create new jobs for our people? How do we fulfil our carbon budget obligations, not just for this generation, but for the next generation?

So what can we do to unlock the energy constraint, or rather the carbon constraint, for the next 50 years, so that we can continue to attract industries, create new jobs for our people, yet at the same time, manage our future carbon budget?

The climate change carbon budget is not about 50 or 100 years later, when the sea level starts rising. For us, it is a here-and-now challenge. If we cannot manage that, we can't even attract the industries to create the jobs for the next generation.

But I think there are many things that we can do. First, think of how we can diversify our energy sources. We have gone from oil and gas to LNG (liquefied natural gas), which is one of the cleanest fossil fuels.

Second, we can significantly try to improve our solar panel coverage. In fact, I think by the end of this year, if I'm not wrong, one in every two HDB flats will have at least some solar panels, and we will try to scale, as much as we can. But we need to manage the demand as well. Finally, are we thinking of a post-fossil fuel future?

Yes, we are. Because we know where the trend of the world is going. We are just one small part of the global economy. ExxonMobil, Shell, and so forth, they are all thinking of a future beyond fossil fuels. How fast we can get there? It all depends on how fast we are able to adopt those technologies.

But when the time comes, it will mean that our economic structures will fundamentally be quite different. It means that the types of jobs that we can create for our own people will be quite different. And all this will not be able to be done overnight, because as you shift the industry structure, we must have a care about the jobs that are being displaced, and these are jobs that many of our people are working in.

So, yes, we are looking at that, and we are thinking of how to make sure that we insulate ourselves against all these difficult problems that may come and confront us, but we can all do something to unlock that energy and carbon puzzle confronting us today.

**Q:** Where do you see Singapore in the next 20 to 30 years?

**A:** My long-term vision for Singapore is not just for the next 20 or 30 years. I grew up in a part of the system where I understand that the last 50 years of our existence have been an aberration in the history of Singapore, and the history of this part of the world.

If we go back a few hundred years, Singapore had never been independent, and some would argue Singapore had never been allowed to be independent, because as a small city state without a natural conventional hinterland, it is very difficult to survive. Without those external links for resources, supplies, markets and talent, it is very difficult to survive.

The last 50 or more years, we have had to eke out a living for ourselves. We have had to defend ourselves, take care of our security. We have had to earn our keep and not depend on other people's charity. We have to value-add so that we entrench ourselves in the global environment. Nobody has sympathy or charity for a small country.

In the last 50 years, we have had to navigate a domestic environment in which we all came from different shores. To have a country, regardless of race, language or religion, is not the norm. In fact, in many other countries, the national identity has to do with race, language, religion, ancestry, geography and so forth.

Even today, we don't have the geographical, cultural and linguistic buffers against many of the global forces impacting us.

Amid all this - having to take care of our security, take care of our own lives and economic survival, and take care of our own cohesion for the last 50 years - nothing has been very natural. Nothing.

And I've worked my whole life believing this. If we are careless, if we are not careful, if we are not sensitive to the larger forces in the world, if we take what we have for granted, we can very easily lose all this and have to start all over again. So I never take it as a given that we will arrive at SG100 effortlessly. Never.

When I went back to the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces) and talked to them, I asked them: "How many of you think we will celebrate SG100, based on the current trajectory?"

Many put up their hands, and I'm very proud of them. But I reminded them: "While you have the confidence - and I'm proud that you have the confidence - never forget why you are still in uniform. The very fact that you are still in uniform tells us that we have many other challenges that require you to be in a uniform, and it's not a job done. It is always a work in progress."

Now at MTI (Ministry of Trade and Industry), every day, my economic team has to go round to the rest of the world and convince people, local and foreign, to put their investments in Singapore so that we can have good and better jobs for our people, not just for today, but for the future.

EDB officers grow up very fast. They grow up learning that nobody will owe us a living, that we have to give a value proposition to the rest of the world, to tell them why they need to do business with us.

When it comes to social issues, we have succeeded on many fronts, but the challenges are ongoing.

In the past, we were equally poor, today we are unequally rich. The challenges are no less. In the past, everybody felt they had a chance to rise to the top, and today, we still pride ourselves on this - that among all the societies we see, Singapore is probably the best place to be born, even if you don't come from a privileged background, because we have every reason to believe that we can succeed.

But that is not to be taken for granted. All countries, as they mature, ossify. They form groups, and after a while, there will be groups that ask themselves: "Why should I continue to support this system if I cannot get ahead in this system?"

Those are our ongoing challenges.

So what's my vision? I have only one simple vision for my entire life's work, be it in the SAF, MSF (Ministry of Social and Family Development), NTUC (National Trades Union Congress), or now, MTI.

I have one very simple vision, and that is for Singapore to defy the odds of history, to survive and thrive as a small city state without a natural hinterland. To survive and thrive where we may not have a common ancestry, race, language and religion. That we can define our identity

based on a forward-looking set of values of multiculturalism, meritocracy, incorruptibility. That we will define a future where the future is in our hands, and we are not beholden to others nor held ransom by others. That when others ask us to jump, we don't have to only ask: "How high?"; we can ask: "Why?"

Is it easy? No. I don't think so. My wife asked me: "Why do you continue to be where you are? Every day, you are getting all the brickbats, your family is getting the brickbats, your children are getting the brickbats."

Why are we still here? I can tell you that we are still here, I am still here, because I want my children and my grandchildren, and many more generations to come, to be able to call themselves Singaporean. To have the means to call themselves Singaporeans, and the gumption to be called Singaporean - the will. Today, we may just be Singaporeans, but one day, there will be a Singapore tribe.

That's why, for the bicentennial, I liked it so much when Indranee (Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah) proposed the tagline: From Singapore to Singaporeans.

There's a double meaning to it.

From Singapore, a geographical location, to Singaporeans, a people. A people united by a set of values, although we may not have a common ancestry, race and religion.

But "Singapore to Singaporeans" is also about our stewardship, to leave behind something better for the next generation, just as the previous generation has left us with what we have today. That every generation of Singaporeans will not fear, because they will start from a higher platform, to scale a high peak. That every generation will lend our shoulders to the next, to stand taller and see farther.

And if we can continue to do that, I'm not worried about SG100. I would say that even beyond SG100, we will continue to shine.

So what's my vision for Singapore? Defy the odds of history. Show the world how a small city state without natural resources, without a common ancestry, can come together, value-add to the world, contribute to the world and bring forth people with a common set of values and vision, and are not just looking at the past.

That is our life's work. Ask Swee Keat (Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat). I think he will give the same answer. That's what unites us in this endeavour - to make sure that there will be a Singapore that all our children and future generations can be proud of.