

## **Government focus on preserving the centre, encouraging civil society: Tharman**

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Singapore succeeded in its first 50 years because it maintained a free market economy, but also believed that there is a role for the government to intervene and give people a chance to make the best in life.

Those were the remarks made by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam to CNN's Dr Fareed Zakaria questions for a discussion at the SG50+ Conference, jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the National University of Singapore yesterday, 3 July.

"The central role of government in any modern democracy has to be to preserve the centre, and to constantly lean against polarising forces to unify the whole."

"So it is not just about strategies of social mobility and education and jobs, which is of course fundamental. It is also about how people engage with each other, it is about institutions that encourage that, as well as developing a strong civil society."

Dr Fareed also asked Mr Tharman whether there is space for creativity among the younger generation, if there are constraints placed on challenging authority and political dissent.

Noting the difference in education focus between America and Singapore, Mr Tharman said that the issue is "not what we add to the education system, but what we subtract... and it requires some courage", as it would mean taking apart a system that has proven to have worked so far for Singapore.

"The things you want kids to experience as they grow up is not just to do with curriculum content, but what they do outside the classroom – time reflect, time to think for yourself, time to explore, time to interact and develop a sense of fellowship. And those are two quite fundamental things – thinking for yourself and having a sense of individuality is not at odds with developing a strong sense of fellowship."

On the need to encourage the young to question set ways of thinking and develop their creativity, Mr Tharman suggested that there is a need to start early to encourage children to question and speak up.

"You don't always have to make sense, you don't need to speak logically, but you have to have a mind of your own."

As to how such a mindset might affect political culture, Mr Tharman referred to the Switzerland model, which has a high level of creativity and active civic participation. "They have a very deep respect for each other, they have very strong social norms, you don't make life difficult for your neighbours... We can't decide, 30 to 40 years from now, how our politics will be, but we do have

a very good reason, based on our history and our sense of reality we operate in, that we do need a system where the centre holds strong.”

Dr Fareed also asked about the political future of Singapore, where the ruling People’s Action Party’s commanding majority in Parliament effectively sanctioned the government to continue pursuing policies that are in the long term interest of the country without pandering to popular interests.

Mr Tharman replied that the government has, since as early as 2008, been pursuing policies that try to develop a more inclusive society, providing protection for the elderly, and improving social mobility.

Nevertheless, he said that it was important to “preserve a culture where we keep thinking about the long term interest of the people, because it is fair.”

“It’s much fairer to tell people that it’s not just what we can give today, but what we can sustain in future. And the societies that haven’t done that end up hurting the poor and the middle-income groups.”

“It’s not just about inter-generational equity, about the old versus the young. It’s also about the rich versus the poor. Because it’s the poor who suffer when you’re unable to sustain the welfare policies that you start off with.”

Mr Tharman said that sustaining this model will require political leadership as “you cannot win votes in Singapore by promising the absurd” and the government needs to be able to tell citizens how social expenditure has to be financed.

He also noted that, no matter who is in power, the government of the day needs to be committed to two things – focus on the long term and speak the truth by telling people what we do today shapes tomorrow; and hold the centre strong.

On whether there should be a dominant player in politics, he noted that political parties need to be “subjected to serious competition”, to which Dr Fareed retorted, “You have 79 seats (in Parliament), how is that competition?” which drew laughter from the ground.

“That is the outcome, not the design,” replied Mr Tharman. “As a politician, I spend a lot of time on the ground, interacting with people. It is not what you see in typical one party states, nor in multi-party states where you have a dominant party that fixes the system.”

Mr Tharman also spoke about sustaining a competitive meritocracy that allows people to think and interact. He was also encouraged that students leaving school nowadays are willing to “take a road with bends... even if you can’t see past the bend” and adopt career paths that “pass the mother-in-law test”.

The conversation ended with Dr Fareed trying the recently popular question: Would Singapore accept an Indian Prime Minister?

“In sports, I play centre-half rather than centre-forward; I enjoy playing half-back and making the long passes – I am not the striker,” said Mr Tharman to laughter from the crowd.