

Singapore's political system has to evolve with the times or risk collapse, says Chan Chun Sing

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For Singaporeans to continue improving their lives and realise their aspirations, a political system and culture has to be built which will keep the country “going, growing, and glowing”, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing on Monday (Jan 20).

However, he cautioned that this would not be an easy feat.

Being an open society, Singapore is challenged by external forces trying to “penetrate and permeate” its society to influence the nation’s direction, he warned, adding that the country lacks the geographical, historical, linguistic, and cultural buffers against those forces.

Mr Chan pointed out that other societies also face challenges such as the fracturing of the political centre by narrow interests and people on both ends of the political spectrum exploiting fears.

The minister was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies’ Singapore Perspectives conference. The theme of the conference was ‘Politics’.

Noting that politics has become a ‘dirty word’ in many places now, associated with power battles for personal benefit and corruption, in Singapore it should be about governance, said Mr Chan.

“Governance is fundamentally about improving the lives of our people, to enable them to fulfil their potential and aspirations.”

Constructive solutions

Mr Chan went on to talk about three ways in which Singapore can remain “exceptional”, starting with generating constructive solutions.

He said that democracy can sometimes be narrow in its definition, whether it be a competition of differing ideologies or the different voices in a legislature or society. He cautioned that the success of a democratic system cannot be measured by that alone.

“Beyond plurality, any functioning political system must have reasoned debate based on facts that lead to concrete plans and actions to better the lives of our people,” he said.

Mr Chan explained that narrow interests are taking the space of broader societal interest which in turn sacrifices the interests of future generations.

He asked everyone, especially young people, to think about the kind of politics that they want which will enable Singapore to stick around forever instead of just the next four or five years.

An evolving political system

Narrowing down on political systems, Mr Chan admitted that no system is perfect all the time.

He said that attempts to alter a political system can be called out as gerrymandering to benefit the incumbent, but that “the lack of evolution almost inevitably leads to revolution” which can lead to the ossification and collapse of the system.

Instead, functioning political systems are “works in progress” and must be viewed as such, with rules and structures evolving to respond to what is needed in any given moment.

He pointed to the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), and elected presidency as Singapore’s evolution to “anticipate and pre-empt problem”, even when these moves may be politically inconvenient.

As the country’s political system matures, Mr Chan says Singapore has to avoid it becoming outdated such as in other countries where it no longer represents the aspirations of its people and is unable to deliver results for the present and future.

Political leaders with the right ethos

For his third point, Mr Chan explained that the country needs “real political leaders and not just politicians”.

He explained that Singapore’s leaders must be able to uphold the nation’s values and make the “difficult but necessary decisions” as well as anticipate problems and challenges, addressing them in advance.

Mr Chan said Singapore has been “lucky” to maintain the correct ethos of political service the last sixty years, but doing so in a time of “peace and abundance” will be a challenge.

He emphasised service over politics.

“True political service requires leadership and stewardship for this generation and for the future generations.” said Mr Chan.