

'I believe Tan Cheng Bock's vision will build a better S'pore': Lee Hsien Yang on why he joined PSP

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- Dr Tan Cheng Bock said that Mr Lee's family issue is "incidental" to his joining PSP
- Mr Lee said that he is concerned about inequality, governance in Singapore
- Analysts said that the party will have to clearly frame their stance
- Mr Lee not likely to run in this General Election, some analysts added

Mr Lee Hsien Yang, the younger brother of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, said on Wednesday (June 24) that he joined the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) as he believes party chief Tan Cheng Bock's vision will "build a better Singapore".

At the same time, Dr Tan dismissed the notion that Mr Lee had joined the party because of his feud with his older brother.

TODAY had asked Dr Tan if he thought Mr Lee's addition to the party might lead to a backlash, as some might think that a family dispute is being brought into the political landscape. The dispute over PM Lee and his two siblings' family home and whether to demolish it in relation to the last will of their father, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, went public in 2017.

Dr Tan replied: "No, no... his family is incidental. The important thing is our philosophy, what we stand for. And I believe Hsien Yang knows that.

"We want to get the processes of government in this country correct. We want to make sure that the divisions of the Government are proper."

Dr Tan then said that there had been "too much mixing" between the Government and civil service.

"Politicians, civil servants, army. Look, who are the people coming now representing the PAP? You are either in the army or you are in the civil service. How can they really understand Singapore?" he added.

In contrast, he said, the PSP's candidates come from "all walks of life", so they are able to lend different perspectives to avoid "lopsided" representation or groupthink.

Dr Tan and Mr Lee were taking questions from the media after their 8.30am breakfast meeting at Tiong Bahru Market, which lies within Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

During the meeting, Dr Tan handed Mr Lee his PSP membership card, officially marking his induction into the party.

Dr Tan added that Mr Lee's presence in the party is a "clear indication" that PM Lee has not followed what his father had wanted for the country.

“I worked with Lee Kuan Yew, and I know his very principles, of accountability, independence and transparency,” Dr Tan said. “That caught me. That captured a lot of what he wanted to transmit to us.”

When asked about the significance of their meeting taking place in Tanjong Pagar GRC, where Mr Lee’s late father served as a Member of Parliament for 60 years, Mr Lee would only say: “I am here to have breakfast. The wanton noodles were very good.”

Dr Tan chimed in: “We really enjoyed the breakfast.”

Mr Lee was asked several times if he would be fielded as a PSP candidate in the coming General Election (GE), which will be held on July 10.

His answer was consistent. “You’ll know if I do,” he said. “If I contest, I am sure you’ll find out, just as you found out about breakfast.”

When a journalist pointed out that there are only 16 days to go before the polls, Dr Tan said: “Don’t worry. In politics, we know when to make our move. Timing is important.”

Mr Lee was also asked what were the issues that mattered to him.

He said many issues are “alive” at the moment, including those of income inequality, poverty, governance and transparency, and issues surrounding housing.

“I think many things need to be dealt with. The PSP has an approach which emphasises compassion,” Mr Lee said.

Before the breakfast meeting ended at about 9.50am, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) started holding various press conferences to announce their new candidates for GE2020.

Asked if PAP had expected Mr Lee to contest in the GE, Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Environment and Water Resources, said: “We don’t know and we won’t speculate on whether he is running as a candidate.”

On Wednesday, Dr Tan also criticised PM Lee’s decision to call for the GE now, calling it a “very irresponsible act”.

“He must think of the people first. He called for caring for the pioneers (and) the Merdeka Generation. Let me tell you, these are the people who are very vulnerable, that age group. And he is exposing all these people,” he said.

“They might win this battle, but they are going to lose the war. And we are going to suffer,” he added.

At 7.30pm, a video of Mr Lee reciting a message appeared on PSP’s Facebook page. In it, he said that the “upcoming GE will be a watershed”.

“There will be no LKY bonus or SG50 to help the ruling party,” he said. “And there are a number of live issues which are of broad concern, including the CPF scheme, HDB leases and the Presidential Election widely perceived to lack legitimacy.”

He added that his sister, Dr Lee Wei Ling, “also shares this view” and had said so in a Facebook post in 2016 before “Oxleygate”.

Mr Lee and his sister have been estranged from their older brother after the disagreement over their family home at 38 Oxley Road.

Earlier this year, a disciplinary tribunal found that Mr Lee, along with his wife Lee Suet Fern, had “misled” a frail and ailing Lee Kuan Yew into signing his last will, which was prepared 15 months before his death.

“It is possible to be loyal Singaporeans, to be proud of what has been accomplished in the past, to recite with pride, 'we the citizens of Singapore', to love Singapore and yet to not vote PAP,” Mr Lee said.

He ended off by saying that there are “many different ways” to contribute to PSP, such as through volunteering, persuading family and friends to support the party, and through donations.

WHAT ANALYSTS SAY

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that just the presence of the younger Mr Lee may suggest that the family feud has “gone yet another level”, but how he and the party decide to frame their intentions going forward will be key.

“If they frame it too tightly around the family battle, then we know they brought the familial battle in there,” she said. “Or is this really a battle of ideas at the level of the state and of the nature of policies and procedures and programmes?”

Agreeing, Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, said that should Mr Lee contest for the upcoming GE with PSP, there are “plenty of issues” that will be on voters’ minds.

“Is he running (because) he really wants to provide change to the community, to the residents and voters, or is it part of a family feud that is ongoing?”

Dr Felix Tan said that should Mr Lee contest at the polls, Tanjong Pagar GRC would be “ideal”.

“After all, (Tanjong Pagar) was formally under his father,” he said. “I think the significance is that there’s always that lineage of sorts — that people (there) are very familiar with the Lee family.”

Still, some experts said they believe that Mr Lee will not contest at the polls.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, from the National University of Singapore's political science department, said that Mr Lee will be unlikely to contest as the current situation does not favour the opposition.

“I don’t think at the moment the calculus is that he will stand at the election because he will definitely lose. He doesn’t want to be embarrassed, and he will continue to be a wildcard.”

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan concurred that he would be “very surprised” if Mr Lee was a candidate and that he does not seem like “a political animal”.

Assoc Prof Tan added: “Interestingly, his oldest son (Li) Shengwu has said before that a third Lee in politics is not in Singapore's best interests.

“PSP will have to be careful that its campaign does not centre on the Oxley home issue alone. Mr Lee, whose involvement in the campaign could result in his being larger than life, can also subject the PSP to very intense scrutiny as well.”

Dr Singh said that the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with Singaporeans' low appetite for risk, means that the opposition is not likely to fare well in the GE.

“By joining the party, he is giving endorsement to the party... he is undermining the brother's legacy and legitimacy and that is all,” Dr Singh said.

While Dr Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies did not make predictions on whether Mr Lee would be put up as a candidate, she said that having both him and Dr Tan in the opposition camp sends a clear message.

“This move today suggests that even one of the sons of the founding prime minister has something to challenge the incumbents with regard to governance to Singapore today,” she said. “(Dr Tan and Mr Lee) are going to take issue with how the country is governed by the incumbent vis-a-vis what they believe would have been the expectation of the late founding prime minister.”

“They don't have to say all that much... people will just view them as representing a certain age in Singapore's governance history.”