

# Singapore needs younger leader for the longer haul: PM Lee

He says he would 'strongly prefer not to' remain in office for another decade

By Kelly Tay

kellytay@sph.com.sg

@KellyTayBT

## Singapore

SINGAPORE Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says he would rather not continue leading the country for another 10 years, as he believes a younger person should take the helm.

"I strongly prefer not to. This is a job which needs a young man – people with energy, people who will be there and can connect with young people, and will fight the battles with the young people; not for five or 10 years, but for 20, 30, 40 years to come. And you need somebody of that generation," said Mr Lee on Thursday night.

He was responding to a question from a Belgian-born man who has lived in Singapore for 20 years. The man had asked Mr Lee: "Are you prepared to stay put for another 10 years, because I think we need that."

The exchange took place at the opening dinner of the SG50+ conference, themed "Singapore at 50: What lies ahead?", jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP). During the event, Mr Lee engaged in an hour-long dialogue session moderated by US journalist and author Fareed Zakaria.

While Mr Lee acknowledged that Singapore is "paranoid" and "worries all the time" about the possibility of losing its success, he said such paranoia is necessary.

"You don't expect to go back to where you were in the 1960s, and yet it is not natural that you stay at this place. Is it to be expected that the population of three-and-a-half million citizens and maybe a million foreign workers will have the best airline in the world; the best airport in the world; one of the busiest ports in the world; a financial centre which is one of three or four key financial centres in the world; and an education and healthcare and housing system which gives us a per capita GDP which is – at



While Mr Lee acknowledged that Singapore is "paranoid" and "worries all the time" about the possibility of losing its success, he said such paranoia is necessary.

PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

least by World Bank calculations, if you look at PPP (purchasing power parity) – higher than America or Australia or Japan?

"It is an entirely unnatural state of affairs, and one which we should count our blessings for – if not every day, at least (at) every election," said Mr Lee, to raucous laughter and applause from the 640 business and community leaders, policymakers, academics and students in attendance.

Mr Lee also warned of the danger of having a fractured political system – one in which parties look out for the interests of only their constituents, instead of developing policies to benefit all.

"In most other countries, the governments do not develop policies which are meant to help everybody equally. If you're a Republican, it's quite clear who your policies are meant to help . . . If you're a Demo-

crat, you also know what your constituency is, and you take care of your constituency.

"But in Singapore, a government's job is to look after as large a proportion of the population as possible, while still giving people the incentive to vote for this government so that they will get some benefit for it. And if we take the view that if you voted against me, I shall help you first because that shows my largeness of spirit – then I think you will go extinct as a government," said Mr Lee.

Rejecting Dr Zakaria's suggestion that Singapore would benefit from a culture with less respect for (or even one that directly challenges) authority, Mr Lee said: "I think we must have a balance. We want people who stand up; we don't want people who scrape and bow. But if you don't have a certain natural aristocracy in the system – people who are respected because they have earned that – and we level

everything down to the lowest common denominator, then I think the society will lose out."

Defending his approach to tackling defamatory remarks, Mr Lee said that Singapore's legal remedies, which were inherited from the English, are necessary. "It's right and proper that there should be ways for a defamation to be examined, determined whether it's true or false, and if it's false, that there should be proper damages and redress . . . If you can't redress defamation, how can I clear my name when somebody defames me?"

Mr Lee – who was down with the flu – emphasised that racial harmony in Singapore cannot be taken for granted. He warned that if an ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) attack were to occur here, suspicion and enmity would be created almost instantly – splintering the nation's cohesion. "The problem is not gone," he said.