

# Leaders should get closer to the people: Ng Eng Hen

JOY FANG  
joyfangz@mediacorp.com.sg

**SINGAPORE** – Turning away from the usual proceedings of a forum, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen instead kicked things off with a presentation at the annual Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum yesterday.

Armed with a pointer, Dr Ng walked among the rows of students as he delivered his presentation on Singapore's history and its growth, peppering the audience with occasional questions and personal anecdotes.

In the question and answer session that followed, Dr Ng described his presentation style as an example of what he felt leaders should be: Closer to the ground. "It's a process of communicating and getting closer to people. Sometimes when you're a leader, you tend to be a bit too far, which is why I decided to ask you questions and come near to you," he said.

During the presentation, while talking about the Japanese Occupation, Dr Ng shared how his father-in-law planted tapioca during the war and continued to do so until he was 80, and also kept a cupboard full of canned food. "He said 'you always have to be ready in case there's war again,'" said Dr Ng, adding that, as a prospective son-in-law, he had to eat all the tapioca set before him.

Organised by the National University of Singapore's Students' Political Association, the forum, titled *The Years Ahead: National Decisions, Global Impact*, was attended by 160 students who were mostly from NUS.

With the General Election (GE) expected to be just around the corner, four out of the 12 questions posed were about the GE. Others included whether there would be compulsory conscription for women, and on Singapore's stance amid tensions in the South China Sea.

A student, observing the People's Action Party's (PAP) "push towards the heartlands as part of its election strategy", asked Dr Ng what policies are in the works to complement this "growing offensive".

Dr Ng pointed out that all the policies have been for the heartlands, citing MediShield Life, housing policies and the Pioneer Generation Package as examples. "That's the strength of our political system; we make sure that the centre of gravity for our policies is for those who are living in three-room, four-room flats ... and if you look at our policies, I think we justify keeping that," he said.

Dr Ng also reiterated the message that beyond deciding who manages one's town for five years, elections are also about electing future Government leaders. "Amid the heat, the politics of it, hopefully the serious messages get through — what is this about, what are we voting about," he said.

In Singapore, "if you don't get voted in by your constituents, you don't get to be in the Government," he said, not-

ing that the Cabinet lost former Foreign Minister George Yeo, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Hwee Hua, and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Zainul Abidin after the PAP's Aljunied GRC team was defeated in the 2011 GE.

Asked if Singapore has the "unique"

role of mediator between nations during international confrontations, Dr Ng noted that big countries approach Singapore for partnership because the Republic offers integrity, honesty and openness. "I'm not just saying this because this is (the) season, but corruption is such a cancer that once it sets in,

it's very hard to eradicate ... if there's one thing you have to prize, it is complete integrity in the systems."

Mistakes will be made, but the important thing is to get to the bottom of it when they occur, he said. "If there are people who need to be chopped, so be it. If I lose (my) reputation, so be it."



It's a process of communicating and getting closer to people. Sometimes when you're a leader, you tend to be a bit too far, which is why I decided to ask you questions and come near to you. So that it's sort of flesh and blood.

**Dr Ng Eng Hen**  
DEFENCE MINISTER