

# It matters a lot who is picked as next PM: Panel

## Tembusu Forum discusses key role played by nation's prime minister

Fabian Koh

Does it really matter which fourth-generation leader is chosen as the next prime minister, given his party's strength in depth? It matters a lot.

That was the response of the panel of four to the question from an audience member at a forum last night at the National University of Singapore (NUS), titled Singapore's Fourth Prime Minister: Aspirations and Expectations.

Professor Tommy Koh, rector of Tembusu College which hosted the forum, recalled how Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, when he was prime minister, convened a committee to look at how to liberalise Singapore's censorship policy. When Prof Koh asked Mr Goh's predecessor Lee Kuan Yew about the move, the reply was how it was "important for the new PM to set his own direction and policies".

Speaking to an audience of 270 NUS undergraduates, faculty and guests, Prof Koh, who was the forum's moderator, said: "Although we have a system of collective leadership, the PM is the leader of the team. He very much sets the agenda, the tone and the direction of the government."

Dr Eugene Tan, Associate Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University, who flashed a slide which described the contenders for the next PM as Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung and Minister in the PM's Office Chan Chun Sing, added that the PM not just moulds the Government, but also plays a role in uniting Singaporeans.

Nominated Member of Parliament Kuik Shiao-Yin added: "Many lay people will not read policy write-ups or parliamentary news reports. But they will read the person – the tone in which this person speaks to the people, the vibe they project and the attitude they hold towards handling opposing views."

The forum panel consisted of former NMPs Dr Tan and ITL Corporation executive chairman Zulkifli Baharudin, Ms Kuik and second-year sociology student Tan Yang Long, who represented fellow students.

As part of his presentation, Mr Tan read out a letter to the future fourth prime minister, set at the time he would have just taken office. It reflected, he said, concerns he had gathered after talking to peers in his generation – including the hope for more acceptance of alternative viewpoints.

"We are prompted in school to think critically and voice our opinions, but we see some naysayers being treated negatively," he read from the letter. "We want you to trust that we do not disagree for dissent's sake, and that we can find unity even in the face of our differences with you – differences of ideologies, opinions, beliefs or values." He also said that social inequality, social mobility and social identity were some of the biggest concerns of his generation, even if sometimes "the statistics you show us in Parliament indicate otherwise".

Still, Ms Kuik urged the audience to give the next PM the time to settle, recounting her own experience when deciding whether to become an NMP. "Public scrutiny is not fun. Whoever becomes the PM must choose: Do you close off and not care at all about what people think and distance yourself from the ground? Or do you dare to care but risk opening yourself up to wounds?"

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Mr Zulkifli Baharudin, executive chairman of ITL Corporation, speaking at yesterday's forum, titled Singapore's Fourth Prime Minister: Aspirations and Expectations. ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI



IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL ISSUES

We are most concerned with social inequality, social mobility and social identity. We see these consequences surface in our day-to-day lives, even if, occasionally, the statistics you show us in Parliament indicate otherwise.



MR TAN YANG LONG, second-year sociology student.



CHOICE FACING NEXT LEADER

Whoever becomes the PM must choose: Do you close off and not care at all about what people think and distance yourself from the ground? Or do you dare to care but risk opening yourself up to wounds?



NOMINATED MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT KUIK SHIAO-YIN