Getting good candidates to run

One lively exchange between participants and MM Lee was over the question of capable candidates — the PAP’s ability to attract them and the opposition’s difficulty in finding sufficient ones.

Lee Ching Wern: My concern personally, is you’ve said yourself that you cannot guarantee the PAP Government 20 years down the road will be clean and be as good as it is today. We’ve created a system such that the playing field is so skewed, that it’s impossible for us to have a good check.

MM Lee: (Laughs) No...

Lee Ching Wern: What if the PAP misgovern, how are we going to counter that?

MM Lee: Let me put it quite simply this way... If you reflect the mood on the ground, there must be at least 30, 40 per cent, maybe 45 per cent right, who want a strong opposition to check the PAP. Suppose you had capable people with a track record, people who have done 10 to 15 years as business leaders, doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers, whatever, computer programmers, they got together, you think they cannot win. It’s a different proposition, is it?

Lee Ching Wern: I think the PAP has very little to be insecure about. It’s got the quality candidates. It’s got a great track record, and every Singaporean can see for themselves what the PAP has done. So it is really necessary to impose restrictions on political blogging and podcasts?

MM Lee: Political blogging and podcasts, why do we stop it? We think that elections should not be something you package. You are selling the candidate as a product.

Lee Ching Wern: Isn’t that what PAP is doing too?

MM Lee: No.

Ken Kwek: Why don’t you let voters decide?

MM Lee: A podcast is not a face-to-face conference. If you were writing an article, today we would not have this exchange. You write the wrong piece, and I write the letter to the press. But because we are face to face, I pointed out to you that what you made, your first statement, you spoke to about 100 people, I can’t let you get by, you know. It was a misrepresentation of the facts. Then you said I interviewed 40, then I said how many people were afraid, none.

Ken Kwek: Then why can’t you use the same forum to rebut them?

Lee Ching Wern: Then why can’t you let someone blog, then why can’t you blog back, and let voters decide then?

MM Lee: I think the reason why they are doing this is because they don’t have any other platform.

Lee Ching Wern: Isn’t that what PAP is doing too?

MM Lee: No. It is not a podcast.

Lee Ching Wern: So you think a Singapore with a dominant party ruling, without a good opposition to check...

Joanne Leow: Would you say that the opposition now is unnecessary then?

MM Lee: No. I’ve not said that. And I’ve never said that. What I am saying is that the opposition we have now is not up to mark.

Not up to the mark?

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Joanne Leow: Would you say that the opposition now is unnecessary then?

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Hong Xinyi: It’s not just...

MM Lee: No, let me finish it. So I am taking in this time, three new candidates. One of them would be a potential minister. I would welcome a contest. But if there is no contest, let me tell you, he would turn out to be another Khaw Boon Wan.

In 4½ years he will prove himself. When Khaw Boon Wan goes to Sembawang, everybody knows he can deliver.

Yam Yu Jian: But Mr Lee, I believe that the lack of competition is due to the lack of a level playing field. Singapore always believes in fair competition. So when does this fair competition come in the elections?

MM Lee: You know I was told by... a communist MP, I brought him out here to defend some socialist club students for treason. And he said the capitalists are most unfair.

Every time elections come, he finds all the halls already booked, and in England it’s cold. In winter, you can’t have an open air meeting. So the Conservatives and the Labour party would have blocked up all the halls. So they got to use tiny little rooms.

And all the media was blocked by other pro-Labour owners, or pro-Conservative owners and they only have the daily worker with a small circulation.

There is no fair playing field between political parties; it’s as simple as that. I came in, first election, PAP, we won three seats. Plus one independent who joined us, four.

Was it fair? I had whole media against me. Straits Times...Nanyang Siang Pao, Sin Chew Jit Poh. Why am I so strong against the media?

Because they try to put us down, they twisted everything I said. That I was a communist when they knew I wasn’t. So I told them in 1959, during the election campaign as they were gambling for me, I said: “When I win, I will show you how you have to behave yourself.”

Yam Yu Jian: Mr Lee, you said that at that point of time...

MM Lee: No, let me. The media is not setting the agenda for Singapore. If you want to set the agenda, you must put your stakes in and say, “Come out”. You are not setting the agenda surreptitiously: creating this issue, creating that issue.

Any misdeed, any misdoing by any officer, any government, bring it out. That’s how you keep the government clean right? But you are not setting the agenda. I will not allow the foreign media to set the agenda. So every misrepresentation we have a reply.

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