Mr HDB, Lim Kim San, passes away

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ONE of Singapore's founding fathers, former Cabinet Minister Lim Kim San, died peacefully at his home yesterday at the age of 89.

Mr Lim (picture), who has often been described as the man who broke the back of Singapore's housing problem, was the driving force behind the Housing Development Board's early development programme, which now provides homes for three million Singaporeans.

Back in the 50s, many people lived in squalid conditions. Homes were rickety structures – and one large colony in Bukit Ho Swee was razed to the ground in 1961, making 16,000 homeless. But Mr Lim, an energetic man with a go-getter style, managed to build some 8,000 low-cost flats in just over four years, allowing those who lost their homes to return.

He received the state's highest honour, the Order of Temasek, for this remarkable effort. But he went on to surpass this mark, spurring the HDB to achieve its goal of completing 51,000 units of decent and affordable housing by 1965, at the end of its first five-year programme.

That year, he received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, in recognition of his community leadership, which provided a model for the developing world. At the ceremony, he said: "There is a saying in Malay, the national language of my country, which goes like this: 'Lembu punya minyak sejati punya nama'. Translated it means: The oil is from the cow but the buffalo gets the credit. So it is with me today."

Not one to grab the credit for himself, Mr Lim, who worked for free as HDB chairman, dedicated the award to the inexperienced but dynamic, hardworking and unselfish young officers who he had the fortune and privilege to lead.

Although he made his mark in public housing, Mr Lim will be remembered for his many other accomplishments, serving as minister for 18 years – holding various portfolios including those of education, finance, interior and defence, and national development.

He also served as chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority for 15 years until 1994, and under his stewardship, Singapore became the world's No 1 container port.

Mr Lim also served as Deputy Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisors and the first Chancellor of the Singapore Management University.

In his last role as executive chairman of Singapore Press Holdings, he increased its profits four-fold from $74 million to $307 million, during his 14 years at the helm of the media conglomerate.

Even when his health deteriorated, Mr Lim came to the SPH office every day in a wheelchair, said staff.

One of his biggest contributions to the Government cause may have come in his shrewd judgement of people, functioning as the People Action Party's "talent scout" in its self-renewal drive. As chairman of what has come to be known as the Lim Kim San Committee, he had, over the years, interviewed hundreds of candidates to shortlist a few dozens from among whom a few were eventually chosen.

Recalling Mr Lim's prowess in that area, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "He has probed potential candidates for their motivation, the attitude, integrity and human relations skills. He has done so skilfully, and tactfully, relying on his enormous experience and uncanny insight to identify those who are truly committed, suitable and show the most promise."

Last night, the Prime Minister said he and his Cabinet colleagues were sad to learn of the passing of Mr Lim. As a mark of respect to Mr Lim, one of Singapore's founding fathers, the State flag on all Government buildings will be flown at half-mast on the day of his funeral this Sunday. The Government will assist the family in making the funeral arrangements and the Prime Minister will deliver a eulogy at the funeral service. A widower, Mr Lim, is survived by his six children.

Singapore has lost one of its illustrious sons, said President SR Nathan.

"Among the founding generation of leaders of independent Singapore, Mr Lim was the least known. He refrained from publicity despite the monumental difference he had made to the lives of ordinary men and women of Singapore," he said.

In his letter of condolence to the family, the Prime Minister said: "Mr Lim has lived an extraordinary and fulfilling life, giving of himself to his friends, family and country."

PM Lee Hsien Loong, in his letter of condolence to the family.

His passing is a deep loss to all of us."