Picking the next PM

"I cannot say who my successor will be (and) my predecessor didn't pick me. All we can do is to bring into the net a group of people. Who shows promise? Who has talent? Hopefully amongst them will develop someone whom the rest will acknowledge to be their leader," he said.

In contrast, he noted, the United States has no such system, but a campaign season which acts as the crucible. President Barack Obama "came from nowhere". "He swept the country, he became President."

"But we've also had bad presidents in America," he said. "In Singapore, you can't afford to have a bad prime minister. That's why we're minimising our risks. But it is not a 100 per cent solution."

"You have to pour water to make organic plants grow," he emphasised.

"They don't emerge automatically. What does emerge automatically? Someone they think is the best person or the best solution."

As an example, he referred to former US president Jimmy Carter, who was also a candidate who "emerged from nowhere" to take the Oval Office in 1977.

"Many consequences followed that," Mr Lee said. "Now he is a distinguished ex-president. But when he was president, the world held its breath."

When Mr Chong countered that the US has survived its bad presidents, Mr Lee asked rhetorically: "And Singapore is like the USA? A superpower?"

Later, another undergraduate pointed to the fact that national football teams are picked from the players in domestic football clubs, if the opposition wins a group representation constituency in the coming polls and has high-calibre politicians within its ranks, he argued, should the People's Action Party (PAP) not offer these individuals a portfolio and a place in the Cabinet?

But Mr Lee said that the PAP does look among "domestic football clubs" for its candidates – from the grassroots to the national and internationally years before they reach top political office.

Mr Lee acknowledged that Singapore's system of leadership cultivation is rarely practised in other countries.

Only one other country does it this way, and that is China, he noted. Their Central Organisation Department – zhong zu bu, which he described as a "super PSD (Public Service Division)" – tracks its top cadres as they are deployed and developed around the country. Its future leaders are known both nationally and internationally years before they reach top political office.

By Rachel Chiang

THE future leadership of Singapore is not left to chance because the country cannot afford to have a bad prime minister, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last night.

Asked by Singapore Management University law student Chong Zi Qian, 25, why the Government does not allow future leaders to emerge organically but instead picks its "A" team, Mr Lee said that letting leaders emerge by chance has led to detours and dead ends in other countries before.

He also disputed that prime ministers are picked, pointing out that they are instead chosen by their peers, that is fellow Cabinet ministers, as primus inter pares, the first among equals.

"I cannot say who my successor will be (and) my predecessor didn't pick me. All we can do is to bring into the net a group of people. Who shows promise? Who has talent? Hopefully amongst them will develop someone whom the rest will acknowledge to be their leader," he said.

But in an exchange which gave Mr Lee reason to pause, and which the audience of 1,200 students followed with bated breath, Mr Chong pressed the Prime Minister on how it is possible to guarantee that those who pick the country's future leadership will pick correctly.

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