

'Singaporeans have an aspiration for race to matter less': DPM Tharman



DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam having a chat with NTU students after the inaugural NTU Majulah Lecture on Sep 20, 2017. (Photo: NTU)

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SINGAPORE: Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has said that he, like most Singaporeans, would have liked to see a contest in the recent Presidential Election.

However, the debate over the presidency proved that Singaporeans have an aspiration for race to matter less in politics and society, he said in response to questions after the first Majulah Lecture organised by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on Wednesday (Sep 20).

Mr Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Economic and Social Policies, mapped out his vision for how education needs to evolve to an audience of more than 1,500 during the lecture at NTU's Nanyang Auditorium.

After the lecture, he was asked about the 2017 Presidential Election. A student asked if the fact that the election was being reserved for the Malay community was an indication that the country was “regressing as a society”, despite Singaporeans growing up reciting the pledge that has the words “regardless of race, language or religion”.

“Speaking as a citizen, I really feel proud that Mdm Halimah is our President. That we have a Malay president after 47 years. And a woman,” Mr Tharman said.

“It is understandable that questions are raised on the reserved election. It is also understandable that most people, including myself and I’m sure most people here, would have preferred a contest. But the aspiration for race not to count is something that needs working towards. It cannot just be a pledge, it cannot be just an incantation.

“If along the way you see decades after decades, that you don’t have a Malay president, I think that what we say loses its meaning. That’s the reality.”

Former Senior Minister of State and member of NTU’s Board of Trustees, Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, also raised the issue of the reserved election and asked Mr Tharman if divisive politics was a concern.

“For example, we have one of the best candidates standing for our elected president but yet Singapore is divided, is troubled by what we went through,” he said.

Mr Tharman said that the starting point in Singapore is a cohesive society but it requires "continuous work" to maintain multiculturalism.

"It requires conscious action, conscious acts of the state, which work if they are supported by people," he said.

Mr Tharman also touched on sensitivities of being a minority in Singapore.

"Never forget, that growing up as a minority is different from growing up as a majority. It is different. Never pretend that it's the same. It requires extra action, extra empathy, and that sense of sharing the same boat together," he said, adding a Chinese idiom that means staying together through wind and rain.

ON PAP, HONEST POLITICS AND AN INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Mr Tharman was also asked to comment on a lack of independent media and whether the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) resorted to mudslinging opposing candidates, as was perceived during the by-election in Bukit Batok last year.

The election was contested by PAP's Murali Pillai and the Singapore Democratic Party's Dr Chee Soon Juan. Some felt the PAP was undermining Dr Chee's candidacy by bringing up his past run-ins with the Government.

Mr Tharman shared his own experience having grown up "politically conscious and active" in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Singapore has really changed. It is a vastly different and more liberal space compared to what it used to be," he told the audience.

"The sense of fear, the sense of constraint is far less now. Yes, you get pushbacks and sometimes you may not like it. It doesn't mean I agree with every tactic by every one of my colleagues."

But if there is something that defines the PAP, Mr Tharman said it is its insistence on character, honesty and being true to Singaporeans.

"That trait of the PAP shows up almost all the time. Sometimes the PAP itself falls short, and action has to be taken on individuals and it is taken."

Mr Tharman said he also has "great faith" in Singaporeans. He said they judged what happened during the Bukit Batok by-election and would judge the PAP at the next election.

"I don't think Singaporeans are fools. Even when they read what we call the mainstream media, they don't read it blindly.

They know some things are more likely to come up on page four than on page one; the headlines may be a slightly different size, but they read things. They have the social media as well. People talk more openly, they exchange views more openly, and they make judgements."

Source: CNA/hm

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