

Public concerns over PE understandable, says DPM Tharman

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SINGAPORE – It is “understandable” that concerns were raised over the recent reserved Presidential Election (PE), and the “encouraging” public debate showed that Singaporeans have an aspiration for race to matter less, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

However, this aspiration requires action, and cannot be achieved by simply reciting the national pledge or through an “incantation”, said Mr Tharman, who was the first Cabinet Minister to address public disquiet over the PE, held last week.

The PE was won via a walkover by Madam Halimah Yacob, who was the sole eligible candidate. At her swearing-in ceremony at the Istana last Thursday, Mdm Halimah noted the unhappiness some Singaporeans felt about the recent changes to the Elected Presidency scheme.

“Like them, I look forward to the day when we will no longer need to rely on the provision to have reserved elections, and Singaporeans naturally and regularly elect citizens of all races as Presidents,” she said.

Mr Tharman, who was speaking at a dialogue after delivering the inaugural Nanyang Technological University Majulah Lecture, said he agreed with the President when responding to an audience member who questioned whether the reserved election undermined meritocracy, and entrenched the notion of race, and whether Singapore was “regressing as a society”.

Mr Tharman said most Singaporeans, including himself, would have preferred an open contest. However, he pointed out: “The reality of the matter not just in Singapore but anywhere else, including most mature democracies, is that everything else being equal, race, ethnicity and religion matter. You don’t need to be a sociologist to know that. It’s the reality.”

He added: “You need a way of ensuring that from time to time, we all see that in practice and applies to every part of the Pledge ... It doesn’t happen naturally. It requires a conscious effort and never forget, that growing up as a minority is different from growing up as a majority ... Never pretend that it’s the same.”

Former Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Zainul Abidin Rasheed, who was among the audience, comprising university students and guests, also raised the topic of the reserved election when he asked Mr Tharman to speak about his concerns

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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

with Singapore’s social cohesion.

In response, Mr Tharman reiterated that social cohesion is a work in progress. Pointing out the divisiveness occurring in the region and the rest of the world, Mr Tharman said: “We are not special people. We are a human society like any other, and the natural workings of society, you can just let it go with the market, it can very easily lead to divisions deepening. So we have to avoid it.”

Mr Tharman also responded to a question on Government control of the media, and whether he agreed with the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) practice of “gutter politics” during the Bukit Batok by-election last year.

The phrase was used by Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan who lost the by-election to the PAP’s Murali Pillai. Dr Chee had criticised the PAP for launching personal attacks against him during the hustings.

Thanking the audience member for “being willing” to ask the question, Mr Tharman said he did not agree “with every tactic by every one of my colleagues”, adding that nevertheless, the PAP continues to be defined by its insistence on “character, honesty and being true to Singaporeans”.

He acknowledged that the ruling party has fallen short of its standards at times, and when this happens, action is taken against individuals who have let the party down.

Speaking from personal experience as a former civil society activist, Mr Tharman noted several times that Singapore is a vastly “more open and liberal place” compared to what it used to be. The sense of fear and constraint “is far less now”, he added.

“It is a vastly more open society now than it used to be. Vastly more open politically and people don’t have to be frightened,” said Mr Tharman.

He also reiterated that Singaporeans are in the position to judge the PAP, and will do so in the next General Election, which is due to take place by April 2021.

Mr Tharman added: “I don’t think Singaporeans are fools. I don’t think they’re fools at all. And even when they read the mainstream media, they don’t read it blindly.”