

The Straits Times, page B3, Tuesday, 24 May 2022

Conviction and openness key to Singapore's success: DPM Heng

Values that led founding fathers to work with Dutch economist in 1960s still salient today

Tha m Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

It was a conviction to do what was right for the people and an openness to taking on new ideas and trying different approaches that led Singapore's founding fathers to work closely with Dutch economist Albert Winsemius on economic transformation, said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat.

These two key values of conviction and openness are all the more salient today as the country navigates a world that has become more divided and insular, he said.

Mr Heng was speaking yesterday at the launch of the book *Albert Winsemius And Singapore: Here It Is Going To Happen*, about the life of the Republic's chief economic adviser for close to a quarter-century.

The Dutchman, who came to Singapore as a leader of a United Nations Development Programme mission in 1960, was instrumental in promoting a pro-business environment, advocating training for workers and establishing the National Wages Council, helping to move the island up the value chain.

At a time when newly independent states were mostly industrialising by replacing foreign imports

with domestic production, he advised Singapore to challenge the orthodoxy and connect with other advanced economies, and pursue foreign investment to create jobs.

Mr Heng said: "Key to our economic story was that our founding fathers were prepared to get down to the basics, to innovate and go against the grain of conventional wisdom... Dr Winsemius was a most valuable guide in this effort."

He noted that this approach underlies many aspects of Singapore's economic and social policies, such as building up retirement savings through the Central Provident Fund, promoting affordable home ownership through Housing Board flats and encouraging lifelong learning through SkillsFuture.

"We must continue to have the conviction to do what is good and right for Singapore and Singaporeans, even if it means going against conventional norms," he said.

Although Dr Winsemius was not a Singaporean, "was not born here, and did not grow up here", said Mr Heng, that was no impediment for founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and then Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee who worked closely with him.

"Given that he had no prior nexus with Singapore, it is remarkable that he developed such a



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat (with red tie) and Professor Euston Quah (fifth from left) of Nanyang Technological University with Dr Pieter Winsemius (fourth from left) and other members of the Winsemius family at yesterday's launch of a book, co-authored by Prof Quah, on Dutch economist Albert Winsemius (below). PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, ST FILE



strong affinity for Singapore. His heart was with Singapore, and he was committed to do good by Singa-

pore and help our people succeed. "The Singapore story would have been... very different if we had decided not to pursue his recommendations simply because they did not originate here. Our openness - to ideas, investments and people from all over the world - has been a critical factor in our success."

At a time when many societies are turning inwards, it is even more important for Singapore to remain open "to the best people, ideas and support from around the world", and to focus on what is best for the

country, said Mr Heng. "We must continue to develop deep capabilities, to equip ourselves to work together with the best around the world, to take on new opportunities and make a difference."

Dr Winsemius' contributions are covered in detail in the 1,000-page book by Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Albert Winsemius chair professor of economics Euston Quah and his co-authors, NTU research associates Luke Nursultan Iuldashov and Zach Lee. It also gives a glimpse into his life

as a cheesemaker in Friesland province in the Netherlands and contains reminiscences of those who crossed paths with him, such as Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and National Wages Council founding chairman Lim Chong Yah, who were among the 220 guests at the book launch at the National Museum of Singapore.

Dr Pieter Winsemius, the son of Dr Winsemius who died in 1996, said the book is the final chapter of his father's adventure and a "closure on a mighty adventure for us".

"My father came here for three weeks twice a year... That you can get a relationship like this in three weeks, and another three weeks, and it's a lasting relationship - the key word is trust... absolute trust," said the retired politician who was minister of housing, spatial planning and the environment in the Netherlands in the 1980s.

"My father was extremely fond of Singapore, and we grew up with Singapore."

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan recounted how Dr Albert Winsemius had advised the Government to keep the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles by the Singapore River. This would send a signal to investors that Singapore was at peace with its history and comfortable in its own skin, and would remain open to talent, ideas and technology from everywhere.

Dr Pieter Winsemius said his father derived great pride from working with Singapore's early leaders. Such was his belief in Singapore that he personally approached companies such as Shell, Esso and Philips to set up here.

yuenc@sph.com.sg

* *Albert Winsemius And Singapore: Here It Is Going To Happen* (\$65) is available at https://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/101142/12081?st_client=in-app-webview