Conviction, openness key to S'pore's success, says DPM Heng at Albert Winsemius book launch

SINGAPORE - It was a conviction to do what was right for the people and an openness to take on new ideas and try 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 on Monday (May 23).

And 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 added.

DPM Heng was speaking at the launch of the book *Albert Winsemius And Singapore: Here It Is Going To Happen*, which is 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 through 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.

DPM 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 underlies many other 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 added.

Although Dr Winsemius was not a Singaporean, "was not born here, and did not grow up here", said DPM 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 strong affinity for Singapore. His heart was with Singapore, and he was committed to do good by Singapore and help our people succeed," he added.

"The Singapore Story would have been a very different one, if we had decided not to pursue his recommendations simply because it did not originate here. In fact, 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 has become 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 DPM 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. As an island state, our success rests on our openness and connection to the world."
Dr Winsemius' contributions to Singapore's economic growth and development are covered in detail in the 1,000-page book by Nanyang Technological University 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 the province of Friesland 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.

Attending the event at the National Museum, Dr Pieter Winsemius, 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 three weeks, twice... a year, which I still can't believe. I was a consultant my whole life 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 his country in the 1980s.

"My father was extremely fond of Singapore, and we grew up with Singapore. It's my father's home away from home, and it became our second home as well, without ever being here," he added to laughter.
The younger Dr Winsemius, who had specially come to Singapore for the book launch with his children and the children and grandchildren of his two sisters, had brought a block of cheese as a gift for the authors, quipping that his father had always said "selling cheese is much more difficult to do than anything else, making policy and things like that".

Singapore was still a British colony when Dr Winsemius first arrived in 1960 and had just achieved self-government. The economy was undeveloped, educational attainment was low and unemployment was over 12 per cent.

DPM Heng said: "The prospects were bleak. But fortunately, from the very beginning, Dr Winsemius saw the potential of our country."

The economist and his team, who had been tasked by the UN to help Singapore industrialise, presented the Government with what is better known as the Winsemius Report, which guided the country's economic development.
Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, who also spoke at the event, told an anecdote about how Dr Winsemius had advised the Government to keep the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles along the Singapore River, even though the country was shedding its British colonial past.

"That's because he and our founding fathers... envision a globalised, connected Singapore, one that was open for business," he said.

Leaving the statue would send a signal to investors that Singapore was at peace with its history and comfortable in its own skin, and that the country would remain open to talent, ideas and technology from everywhere, added Dr Balakrishnan, noting that this continues to be a lifelong habit of Singapore.
The younger Dr Winsemius said his father derived great pride from working with Singapore's early leaders such as Mr Lee, Dr Goh and former minister and Economic Development Board chairman Hon Sui Sen.

Such was his belief in Singapore that he personally approached companies such as Shell, Esso and Philips to set up here.

Ambassador of the Netherlands to Singapore Margriet Vonno said the special relationship between Dr Winsemius and the Republic is "one of a kind" and has brought benefits to the peoples of both countries.

"We still benefit from the ripples that his work and legacy created all those years ago," she added.

Albert Winsemius And Singapore: Here It Is Going To Happen ($65) is available at this website.

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