



By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

MEETING CHAIRMAN YEO

My first meeting with Chairman Philip Yeo was in the late 1990s when I was on my HMDP fellowship in Boston. At the dawn of Singapore's biomedical revolution, Chairman Yeo had brought a senior entourage to the United States to visit the great academic powerhouses of Harvard and MIT and the surrounding biotech enterprises. He had asked to meet Singaporean doctors in Boston for dinner at Legal Seafoods next to MIT. As the dessert arrived, he looked at my chocolate ice-cream and asked, "Hey doc, is this nice?" Just as soon as I said "yes", his spoon was shovelling my ice-cream into his mouth. I thought, woah, this was no ordinary individual.

The second encounter was at a Bintan seashore, where I was holidaying. As I lay on the beach

which matched my skin complexion, a convoy of All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV) roared by with what I thought were a bunch of teenagers. In the front ATV was Chairman Philip Yeo in shades and grinning widely. Good thing he was able to discern my belly from the sand dunes.



I finally had the opportunity to meet him officially at the *SMA News* interview. He has locked horns with scholars, bloggers, titans and government big kahunas. Love him,

hate him, head-butt him, hug him, hi-five him, hail him or throw test-tubes at him, his primal footprint in Singapore's economic development is undeniably huge. As I entered his office, the first thing that hit me was the enormous wall-to-wall bookcase filled with an ocean of books, and his very large table had all manner of articles obsessively arranged in neat orders. The next thing that struck me was his boyish candour, a cheeky grin and an unstoppable energy that makes the *Energizer Bunny* look like a hypothyroid cretin in coma. His manic mind moved like a bullet train and his replies to questions were machine-gun rapid.

The interview was a rollercoaster ride filled with flights of ideas, fascinating history, globe and topic-trotting stories and deep candid insights. This was a man with a mission, and a man on the move –

to lift Singapore to another level to stay ahead of the curve. Let's face it, our nation and its population could fit into the back pocket of one of Shanghai's or Beijing's precincts. In many manufacturing industries including late-night hairdressers to building planes, trains and automobiles and eco-cities, we might be out-performed by much larger and hungrier players with much bigger bases. The Chairman understands that without talent and innovation, Singapore is as relevant as yesterday's *roti prata* buzzing with houseflies. I recall in my primary school days there was a rich kid who had the coolest jet plane trading cards and *Airfix* models. He was popular and classmates swarmed around him to trade and play card games. When the cards became cheaper and more accessible, and *Airfix* became passé, so did he.

There have been public criticisms of the Chairman offering large pay packages to bring in foreign *whales* to turbo-charge the biomedical enterprise, leaving the local dolphins and *ikan bilis* in their wake. Some critics have sounded out on the Biopolis as being too isolationist without a sufficiently well-placed downstream clinical interface, and wonder on a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, whether it has really been too much money invested for too little returns. Others have expressed concern that an elite army of brainy, bonded A*STAR scholars might not guarantee more mature, think-out-of-the-box, high-performing scientists but more *manja* narcissistic opportunists. McKinsey's famous *War on Talent* manifesto saw its mantra implode with Enron, one of its star corporations. Enron did everything McKinsey said it should do – pay

and pamper its *stars* really, really well, hire the smartest-of-the-smartest guys in the room regardless of age and seniority, promote these prodigious young turks from top business schools to the stratospheres, and move the solid uncool systems geezers (in Enron-speak – the losers) out of the way. In Enron, aged wisdom, strong systems and earthy values took second place to rodeo individualism, unnaturally sizzling performance, and short-term bottom-lines. And Enron, voted America's most innovative company from 1996 to 2001, became America's most innovative fraud.

Chairman Mao. In fact he dresses more like a mix between Steve Jobs and Sir Humphrey Appleby, the quintessential Permanent Secretary from *Yes, Prime Minister*. The Chairman lists among his strongest influences, Dr Goh Keng Swee, who once sat at the feet of the legendary London School of Economics political philosopher and Fabian socialist, Harold Laski. As Chairman of SPRING Singapore, he now leads the charge for local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have largely been stunted under the tall shadows of

“The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.”

- John Maynard Keynes, economist

The Chairman brought me to an adjoining room where he had portfolios of all his A*STAR scholars, including flashy posters of these best and brightest involved in all manner of happening activities from taekwondo to swimming. He seems to headhunt braniacs who have swish EQ, oomph and that cool quotient – think sheep-cloning, cancer-curing polo boys and girls. He was like a proud dad talking about his “children”. I sensed his quiet desperation to ramp up the nation's intangible wealth to compete in an unforgiving talent-abundant 21st century globalised knowledge economy. The Chairman is no fast car, fast hand, fast times, fast money Enron CEO in a ten gallon hat and a loud suit, nor is he

multinational companies. Cigar-swiggling Communist Cuba, arts-entertainment-media *Wondergirls* of Asia, Korea, and the *Ah-Mei* techno-powerhouse Taiwan all have innovative, market-dominant, world-beating, high velocity SMEs.

Whether you think the Chairman is a pain-in-the-perineum autocratic ya-ya Yeo or a visionary Big Picture Prophet Philip, he will continue to stay late into the night devouring information on stem cells and pirates, shooting out tons of emails, nurturing a new generation of remarkable scholars and ensuring that Singapore does not become that poor little rich kid who no longer has his jet plane trading cards, *Airfix* models and a swarm of trading friends, and instead, ending up *Home Alone*. **SMA**