

# SMA

# NEWS

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# Annual Dinner

Dr Tan Cheng Bock

at Hyatt Singapore

**SMA  
Annual  
Dinner**

**14 May 2011**

**Guest of Honour  
Dr Tan Cheng Bock**

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# Speech by Dr Tan Cheng Bock

*The 52nd SMA Annual Dinner was held on 14 May 2011 at the Grand Hyatt Singapore. The Guest of Honour was Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who is a general practitioner, corporate chairman and former Minister of Parliament (MP) for the now defunct Ayer Rajah Single Member Constituency.*

*SMA President Dr Chong Yeh Woei's welcome address, delivered at the start of the Dinner, can be found on page 12. The highlight of the evening was the conferment of the SMA Honorary Membership on Dr Tan Kok Soo, a general practitioner in private practice, and Dr Charles Tob, a cardiologist in private practice. The citations for Dr Tan and Dr Tob are on pages 7 and 9 respectively. A report on the proceedings of the Dinner, accompanied by a photo spread, starts on page 14.*

*Dr Tan Cheng Bock also delivered an address during the Dinner, which is reproduced here.*

Dr Chong, President of SMA, my doctor friends, foreign guests, I welcome you.

When I was asked to be the Guest of Honour, I wondered why. I retired from politics in 2006. I guess I am very controversial and that's why they invited me, or because they were very clever in predicting the elections. They chose this particular day which is exactly one week after our General Elections (GE), and I think they knew the results were going to be something like that. The governing People's Action Party (PAP) has taken a little shift in the popularity votes, a couple of ministers lost their seats, and today you have the announcement that Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister (SM) Goh Chok Tong are retiring.

I was wondering what speech I should make. So I decided to plagiarise a speech, and that speech happens to be mine.

In the year 1985, on the 1st of March, I was given the honour to deliver a speech to thank President Devan Nair for his opening address in Parliament. At the GE in December 1984, there was 12.5% swing in votes from the ruling party, which was a big percentage.

So I went back to my speech, and realised what I said then is still relevant today. So instead of cracking my head on what to say, I thought of revisiting my speech. Of course, along the way I will add my little controversial points here and there, and leave you to decide if what I said in 1985 is still relevant.

The President said then, in 1985, that the political leadership of Singapore has passed on to a new team of young leaders. Our younger leaders are now plotting a new stage of development for Singapore. They have set out certain goals to be achieved within the next five years. However, whatever they plan, whatever they do, they must not forget that it was the common man, the man in the street, who voted the PAP into power.

Since 1963, the people have given this Government a blank cheque. They went with us all the way, accepting our policies because they believed in us, they had faith in us, and above all, they trusted us. Our then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his able men had led us through the first stage of our development, the construction phase. The changes they produced were

remarkable. They were very visible – from squatter huts, zinc and plank shops to tall skyscrapers of Housing and Development Board flats and offices, from standpipes to individual taps at home, and from mud tracks to metalled roads. These changes were also impressive and dramatic. The people saw this with admiration and placed more faith in our Government.

But today (in 1985), there is an erosion of this faith and trust in the Government. This translated into a 12.5% swing in votes from the PAP in the last GE. The reasons for the erosion have been aired many times after the GE. The most frequently whispered is that the PAP no longer cares for the common man, as many Singaporean perceive their policies as elitist, in particular, the Graduate Mothers Scheme (which provided graduate women with incentives to get married and have children). That was why the non-graduates gave us a good walloping at the elections. But I will also tell you why we lost some ground. We had

streaming of schools, where we emphasised Special and Gifted tracks. This alienated us from those who were not so gifted or special. Then we gave publicity to scholars and their achievements. And of course, the unpublicised but much talked about social development programmes for unmarried graduates. All these and many more, including the Central Provident Fund (CPF) issue, made the people suspect the intentions of the Government. While most of these policies have been defended as not depriving the majority of their rights, the fact that they have benefited so few, alienates the majority.

After I made this speech, I was not liked by my party for a while. But I thought, we must be frank and honest. We must look at the reasons why the people want us to take a good look at ourselves.

Then I asked them, is this a government of ordinary people, or is this a government for a special breed of men? The ordinary men in the street are prepared to let the able ones lead,

but expect these able men to have empathy. But the PAP's hardheaded and statistical approach to problems gives the impression that they are beginning to care less for the people, and more for those who can achieve. In the eyes of many, we are beginning to shed our image of an ordinary man's party.

Have we really stopped caring for the ordinary people? The answer is no, and I still think it is no. We're still the ordinary man's party. We still build flats, roads and hospitals for them, improve utilities, and provide social and recreational facilities for all. Why are the people then less aware and conscious of these achievements than in the past? Have they forgotten that these achievements are only possible because this Government has remained honest, efficient and non-corrupt?

One possible reason why people do not appreciate these achievements is the rapid changes in policies in the past two or three years. They have confused our people so much that they have missed the forest for the trees. This happened again in the recent 2011 GE. Many cannot follow our policies, which were introduced too quickly. There was an angry mood in 1985, and I also experienced this angry mood in the 2011 elections. Remember in Parliament, we can pass a couple of Bills within one day. But now with the Opposition in Parliament, they will check on us.

I went to all the opposition rallies. I could feel the anger, so I wrote a blog entry, "Why so much anger?" My entry will give you many reasons why people are so angry with us. I won't go through all these



VIPs mingling before the Dinner, L to R: Dr Fachmi Idris, Dr Tan Kok Soo, Dr Charles Toh, Dr and Mrs Tan Cheng Bock and Dr Ravindran Naidu

reasons. Go and read my blog (<http://www.tanchengbock.org>).

But at that time, the MPs did caution our party. They made very impressive speeches in the House about this mood in 1985. But in spite of what they said, our ministers did not pay much attention to these issues. Maybe they did pay much attention, but they did not perceive the feedback correctly, or they took for granted that the people understood and were with them because of their track records. I remember that I cautioned the Government on foreign talent. I told them that I am not against foreign talent, and welcome foreigners to our country. But I thought the way they were managing it would one day hit us hard because it was so fast, that in a short spell, our population increased from 4 million to 5.5 million.

I am party to the building of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system. I was shocked when I took the trains. Every carriage was packed! I know that the crushing load per train is at most 400, but this was more than that. My wife and I were once edged out of a carriage. We couldn't get into the MRT or find a seat. This is something quite telling, especially for Singaporeans. You must take the trains to really appreciate what I said.

My call for the Government to slow down foreign talent was not well received. They accused me of sending wrong signals to the foreigners. But I told them that they must be careful as they were going to send the wrong signals to our own people. And you can see



Dr Tan delivering his address at the Dinner

the effects now.

MM Lee was very angry. He scolded me and asked everyone whether he or I could lead Singapore better. Of course he is a much bigger man than me! I didn't want to quarrel with him, so we had a very very formal relationship.

I then related a little story about my son. I brought him to the Botanic Gardens one day. While we were walking I was attracted by the section of orchids, so I walked a little too fast, and the poor fellow couldn't catch up with me. So when I looked back, I saw him sitting on the floor. I turned around, went to him and said, "Come." He said, "No, Dad, you walk so fast and don't care for me." So I told my party, we'd better slow down or they will not follow us. I did not know if they were going to listen to me or not, but I had to say my piece.

I told them it is not good enough for them to have good intentions when introducing new policies. The Government must also ensure that the people understand these intentions and thereby enjoy their support.

A policy supported by the people would be less traumatic when implemented. I told my party there were no more blank cheques. The people had given us a blank cheque in the past, but not anymore.

Today's context is almost similar. I know that there are some members of the Opposition here. You know, these two guys, Dr Ang Yong Guan and Mr Tan Jee Say (who were among the guests at the Dinner) haunted me. One day they invited me for tea. I didn't know their motives. All my friends are very cheeky. They asked me to give them tips on the elections. I said that I couldn't teach them how to win their elections. When you enter politics, you must stay strong and have the stamina. If not, you are in big trouble. Above all, you must have the passion and the feel and heart for the people. I served 26 years in Parliament and I went through a lot. Like a kungfu master, you cannot give them everything. If I gave them everything, they might come and beat us! So they stood at Holland-Bukit Timah Group

Representative Constituency, where I was voting. But I won't tell you who I voted for. I just told them, it is not easy, but give us a good fight. And I think they have given us a good fight. The Opposition has gained some ground in Singapore, which is good for the country.

Tonight, MM Lee and SM Goh retiring will make way for new blood. If our party believes that self-renewal is important, this is one of those things we have to do. I remember when I was scouting for talent, we always tried to pick people who are better than us. I know you are going to ask me how come they picked Tin Pei Ling. But that is what we have been trying to do in the past. But Tin Pei Ling might turn out to be very good, you know. But I must say that there is a wave of change going on, and we must expect it.

The new media is very important, and I think this is where the opposition did a very good job. But old fellows like me, if I can't beat them, I join them. Now I have my own blog and Facebook account. Unfortunately, the content of my blog wasn't too good for my party. They asked me, how can you say such things? I said, well, I want people to think. So I posted an entry, "A Test of Two Minds", about voting in Aljunied. But well, it is history now. The Opposition beat us and I must congratulate them.

One of our concerns is that the Government is always talking about Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Ordinary people do not know how to translate these

numbers. They are more concerned with bread and butter issues. The GDP is so high and everything is well, but why is the cost of living so high too? Why are transport costs so high? Why do I have to pay so much for my utility bills? The Opposition is very good. They tell me, if our GDP is so high, why are old folks pushing carts and picking up cardboard from the roadside? I think that struck a chord with many Singaporeans, because we live so well, but see our old folks doing such jobs.

Sometimes our GDP growth pushes us to always think about money. I think you all know that I resigned from a hospital board recently because money came into the picture. Someone signed a cheque and took the name of my hospital. I could not allow it. In principle, it is wrong. The Government is spending more than \$500 million to build this hospital, and I was so happy. I agreed to build this hospital. But I also told them, that in future we should not just be building hospitals. We should build a healthcare delivery system in every section of our country. This particular hospital that I was helping to build would

be at the apex, and step-down care must be properly managed. All the doctors and allied healthcare professionals should come together as one body. Then we can build this healthcare delivery system and duplicate it elsewhere. One day I attended a hospital board meeting and found that the name was changed. I was really, really upset. Because the contribution by this particular rich person is only \$125 million. I said that it was wrong, and I couldn't answer to my grandchildren in the years to come. If they ask me, "Grandpa, why is this hospital named after this man?", I can only say, "His family signed a cheque."

So that is me. I don't know whether I have changed, or if I am the same old MP you used to know. But I think, don't worry about the political changes. The country is still stable. I can guarantee you, the people they have voted in may be young, but they are very good. All that we need to do is tell them when they stray a little bit, and we will have a very good team. With the help of my Opposition friends there, we'll keep them on their toes.

Good night. **SMA**



Old friends, L to R: Dr and Mrs Tan, Dr Ang Yong Guan and Mr Tan Jee Say