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The lucky 'plodder' with a light touch

Three qualities shine through in Pillay's answers: resolve, hard-headedness and a firm belief in fairness, equality

By Lydia Lim

TO HEAR Singapore Exchange chairman J.Y. Pillay tell it, he was but a lucky 'plodder' among the illustrious public-sector pioneers who transformed Singapore from Third World backwater to First World nation state within a generation.

Such self-effacement is his trademark.

An engineer by training with mathematics his 'first love', Mr Pillay was clinically precise in the way he dissected and fielded all 25 questions that came his way during yesterday's 100-minute dialogue at the Arts House, the building where Parliament used to sit till 1999.

He was the third speaker in the Pioneers Series dialogues hosted by the EDB Society and The Straits Times.

The first two speakers were Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Temasek Holdings chairman S. Dhanabalan.

Mr Pillay eschewed direct criticism of policies both past and present but cast barbs - albeit with a light touch - at matters related to policy.

At one point, moderator Patrick Daniel, editor-in-chief of the Singapore Press Holdings English and Malay Newspapers Division, asked Mr Pillay why a Finance Ministry five-year plan he helped draw up in 1965 was kept secret even from the other ministries.

'It wasn't published,' Mr Pillay replied.

'So that might remind you of something that's just been happening,' he quipped, without mentioning what he had in mind, as the audience of 200 chuckled.

Later, he recounted a class at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, during which dean Kishore Mahbubani held forth to officials from neighbouring countries on the secret of Singapore's success, which he summarised in the acronym MPH, for meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty.

Mr Pillay recalled: 'He says, you go back, you introduce MPH and everything will be fine. But the big question is, how do you introduce MPH?

'On that, Kishore was a bit silent. In some places, it requires a revolution in thinking. I mean, you don't have to look too far.'

Born in Klang, Selangor and educated in Kuala Lumpur and London, Mr Pillay revealed why he decided in 1961 to give up his job in Malaysia's Public Works Department to join the Singapore civil service, after receiving a call from Dr Goh Keng Swee, whom he knew from his university days.

'I was attracted by the resolve of the leaders in Singapore, which I didn't see in Malaysia,' he said, adding that Singapore was a 'kind of Mecca' in those days.

All except three of the first Cabinet members were not Singapore-born, he noted.

Mr Pillay became head of the finance ministry at age 34 - but as Acting Permanent Secretary for the first four to five years, he was quick to point out. 'In those days we were all acting - cheaper for the

Government,' he deadpanned.

He later also led the ministries of Defence and National Development, as well as a clutch of government-linked companies, including Singapore Airlines, Development Bank of Singapore, and Temasek Holdings.

What shone through in his answers were the three qualities he lives by, and which also help explain the success of Singapore's pioneer generation: resolve, hard-headedness and a firm belief in fairness and equity.

Recalling his student days in London, Mr Pillay said he was a socialist in those days and even today, harbours 'socialist impulses'.

'If you are not a socialist when you're under 25, there's something wrong with your heart. If you're still a socialist when you're over 25, then there's something wrong with your head,' he said.

On Dr Goh, whom he had first met in London, Mr Pillay described him as 'a realist' who believed in 'a more equitable distribution of goods in society, though not an equal distribution because he was hard-headed'.

Self-effacing from start to finish, Mr Pillay twice praised Mr Daniel for being a 'superb interlocutor'.

As the dialogue drew to a close, he thanked his audience of public- and private-sector leaders and members of the public for their patience.

The choice of the Old Parliament House chamber as the dialogue venue was a good one, he declared. 'I see that this room and the exits are so devised that once you got them here, you virtually lock them up.'

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