

A Hugely Likeable Voice of Conscience in the House (Straits Times, 13 March 1999)

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Medicine is my first love. Politics is a calling. I enjoyed practicing medicine in a village called Ama Keng. My patients were humble farmers who sometimes paid my charges with their poultry and vegetables. They often complained to me about government agencies being unfair to them, pleading with me to stop them. I helped to seek redress on some resettlement claims and at the same time, educated my patients on government rules.

My strong rapport with the villagers earned me the invitation of the opposition parties to stand against the People's Action Party's (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) of the constituency. I declined, as I wanted to practice medicine.

My experience in National Service (NS) hardened and saddened me at the same time. My colleagues and I were discharged because the army had no program for us as medical officers. NS was in its infant stage and there were gaps in policy and implementation. I was jobless after my departure from the army as the Ministry of Health refused to employ me due to my unusual stint in NS. This experience strengthened my resolve to right a wrong. In spite of my misfortune, my support for NS remains undiminished.

For the next decade or so, I worked as a private doctor. At first, I joined Dr Sheng Nam Chin, a member of the opposition party, Barisan Socialist, as his locum; then I joined Dr Soh Fook Thim; finally I set up my own practice in Ama Keng.

One day, the PAP Assistant Secretary General Mr Goh Chok Tong invited me to his house for a "chit-chat". I recommended two other doctors to him for consideration as potential MPs, but he was persistent and wanted me instead. He knew I was not enamoured with the PAP, still he told me the party did not want only yes men and I would be free to speak my mind. Finally I met Senior Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew and he was very clear with his words. "If people like you don't come and serve, then by default Singapore will be run by 3rd graders."

In the face of the appeal, I could not reject them without feeling guilty when my country called. By then, I was 40 years old. I would be a backbencher, keep my practice and hope to change and influence policies. I was very idealistic then.

My colleagues who left for Australia after their discharge from NS, were disappointed when they heard I joined the PAP. "How could you?" they asked "We were fixed up by them in the army". My answer



1997 Election Campaign: Dr Tan Cheng Bock with son, Kwan Lee (extreme left) and two other supporters.



Dr Tan Cheng Bock with the children of Teban Gardens.

was if you felt you were wronged, you must stay and fight. Moreover the government on the whole was honest and had integrity. Though I might not subscribe to all their views and policies, I would be proud to be part of it.

Many friends thought I would be a "one-term MP" after my first frank press conference and maiden speech in Parliament. I had accused the government's education policy of creating class divisions. Then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Dr Goh Keng Swee took a cutting of the newspaper headline to the House, slammed the paper down and rebutted point by point all that I had said. I was wounded and speechless. Older MPs advised me to lie low, but I was determined to convince him that the policy was wrong. At the next sitting, I brought a stack of books from my daughter, who was in Primary Three, and put them on the rostrum. I started blasting the ministry on the way the textbooks were written and on how streaming would stratify our society into monolingual, extended



Dr Tan Cheng Bock (extreme right) at Sunday breakfast meeting with grassroots leaders.

and normal Singaporeans. The reply from DPM was less searing but still memorable. I felt better that I had redeemed myself.

After the 1984 general election, when the party suffered a 12% swing in voter support, I was appointed Chairman of the Feedback Unit to gather feedback from the ground. I enjoyed the assignment as I could play a part in bringing the people's dissatisfaction to the government's attention.

The best recognition of my work was my nomination and subsequent election into the Central Executive Committee (CEC) by MPs and cadres respectively. This made me the only backbencher in the policy making body of PAP. I was re-elected five times.

I was torn between party loyalty and my strong convictions on the Nominated Members of Parliament (NMP) concept. I believe that those who want to serve must fight for a place in the House. Accountability is important, yet the NMP has no constituents to answer to. I voted against my party in the House and received a warning. This was not the first nor last time that I voiced issues which were considered 'controversial'. In the debate on Foreign Talent, I asked the government to tone down its repeated messages on the need to draw in foreign talent as they did not go down well with Singaporeans in these difficult economic times.

Perseverance and determination are important to push you to do what you believe in. I fought many years for CPF to be used for tertiary education before it was finally allowed. I convinced the Ministry of National Development (MND) to let Singaporeans park their cars for free in HDB estates on Sundays and public holidays, to promote family togetherness. Till today I still receive warm "thank you's" from those who remembered. Also, I was overjoyed when the government did away with the monolingual and extended labels for our students.

I have always believed in a multi-racial society, hence I expressed my desire for the twinning of Special Assistance Programme (SAP) Chinese schools with

national schools to promote interaction between students of different races. I have not had much success in this but I will continue trying. In the latest parliamentary debate, I was so disturbed by the constant use of the term "Chinese Elite" that I called for the dropping of this divisive label. 1st DPM Brigadier General (BG) Lee Hsien Loong has promised to look into this.

As a medical man in Parliament, I pay special attention to medical issues. When hospitals were restructured, I spoke about the dangers of commercial interest interfering with professional considerations. Furthermore, I felt there was a disproportionate allocation of subvention funds to hospitals, with a focus on costly hospital base care and less emphasis on economical primary health care. To me, this is dangerous, as people would see expensive hospital care as the all-pervading panacea of cures instead of good primary health care.

I also pleaded for a proportion of hospitals to remain government-based and non-restructured so as to provide good reference standards in health care. Sadly, only Alexandria Hospital is government-based. To ensure health care remains affordable in hospitals, I insisted that 'C' class beds must be available in restructured hospitals that receive subvention grants. I was gratified when National University Hospital (NUH) began providing 'C' beds which were not offered originally.

Even though I was a doctor, I did not confine myself to articulating medical issues only. I lead the Singapore-South East Asian Parliamentary Group to Cambodia. I had to chair a meeting of politicians from opposing political parties on the conduct and procedure of their National Elections. It was a difficult task as the country is an infant democracy with its inherent challenges. However, as a non-partisan chairman, I believed I handled it fairly. It was a high point in my political career as I was making contributions to our neighbour in my capacity as a Singaporean MP.

As an MP, I felt I must inspire my helpers and grassroots leaders to share my vision and philosophy. For five general elections, we fought and won five big victories. My team has bonded very closely with me and helped me realise my dream of building the Ayer Rajah Community and Services Complex, to meet the needs of the young, the old and the disabled.

I thoroughly enjoy my role in politics. Although my involvement in politics has affected my medical practice, my contributions to my country far outweigh what I could have achieved as a general practitioner. Luckily, I have an understanding partner who willingly covers for me during my absence from the clinic. Above all, my wife is my best friend, supporter and critic. She is my source of strength whenever I am down.

Lastly, I hope more of my colleagues will take up the challenge and go into politics to help Singapore develop into an even better country in the next millennium.