

27 April 2018

Mr Lim Swee Say

Dear [Swee Say],

As you step down from the Cabinet, I am writing to thank you for the many contributions that you have made to Singapore.

We first knew each other more than forty years ago, when we were both serving in the SAF. I got to know you better when I was Minister for Trade and Industry and you headed the National Computer Board, and later, when we worked together on the Suzhou Industrial Park project. You struck me as a determined, passionate leader who delivered results. You had a warm, down-to-earth personality. On the ground you were practical, persuasive and effective. I thought these attributes suited you to a political path, and so approached you to join politics in 1996.

I am glad you agreed. Before you were elected to Parliament, we sent you to the NTUC, where you quickly won the trust and affection of the unionists. Three years later, you left the NTUC to become a Minister of State, in the Ministry of Trade and Industry and concurrently the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

You were appointed Minister for the Environment in 2001. There, you introduced NEWater, a game-changer in our water story. The challenge of NEWater was not the science or engineering, though it took bold

imagination and hard work to develop the technology. It was to persuade Singaporeans to accept the idea of recycling and consuming used water, a delicate matter of psychology and public confidence. This you achieved brilliantly. You guided PUB to come up with the name NEWater, and the idea of packaging NEWater in elegant bottles, branded just like high-end bottled water. You worked hard with PUB colleagues, reaching out to business leaders, grassroots leaders, student leaders, and the community-at-large to gain public support. Your Cabinet colleagues gave you full support: during the 2002 National Day Parade we all led a toast to Singapore with NEWater. Today, Singaporeans are happy and proud to use NEWater, which accounts for up to two-fifths of our water needs. This has fundamentally changed our water situation, and substantially overcome a strategic vulnerability that has obsessed us ever since independence.

You returned to the NTUC to serve fulltime as Deputy Secretary-General in 2005, to prepare to succeed Mr Lim Boon Heng as NTUC Secretary-General two years later. Mr Lee Kuan Yew wrote in his book “Hard Truths” that “not everybody can work with the NTUC and grassroots leaders...Lim Swee Say is a natural”. Under your leadership, NTUC expanded its membership significantly, adding more young members to its ranks through the Young NTUC and the nEbO Club. You also worked with the Government to review and amend the Employment Act to raise standards and provide protection for more workers, including Professionals, Managers and Executives. You worked hard to uplift low-wage workers. One important idea was the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), which reassured and encouraged lower wage workers that they had a clear career progression and the hope of future wage increases.

In all your appointments, you firmly upheld the importance of creating jobs for Singaporeans. You dedicated yourself to helping workers stay employable, as the best form of welfare and worker protection. Your first initiative in NTUC was the Skills Redevelopment Programme to equip workers with portable skills through skills certification. During the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2010, you persuaded employers to cut costs to save jobs instead of cutting jobs to save costs. As a result, as soon as the storm

passed, the economy recovered quickly, or as you put it, “upturned the downturn”. In 2008, you established the Employment and Employable Institute (e2i) as a central resource for workers to obtain training and job placements. e2i has since grown from strength to strength, and benefited more than 600,000 Singaporean workers.

From 2011 to 2015, you were concurrently the Deputy Chairman of the People’s Association. There you expanded our grassroots network and outreach. This proved very useful later when we implemented the Pioneer Generation Package and MediShield Life.

In the Party, you served at different times as Chairman of Young PAP and Government Whip. On the ground, you were a committed and indefatigable MP, first representing the constituents in Buona Vista, before moving over to lead East Coast GRC in 2011. All your residents speak warmly of your approachability, unassuming demeanour and powers of persuasion. They enjoyed chatting with you, and appreciated your efforts to explain key Government policies in a clear and often entertaining manner.

In 2015 you were appointed Minister for Manpower, where you built on your work at NTUC to improve the welfare of workers. You brought to MOM a strong understanding of the labour market, and how to balance the interests of workers with the needs of businesses. You managed the strong political pressures on our foreign worker policies, and prioritised the Singaporean core of our workforce. You set up comprehensive programmes under “Adapt and Grow” to train workers and help them find new jobs, including the Professional Conversion Programmes, Career Support Programme, Career Trial etc. You strengthened the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) and the Fair Consideration Framework, to protect workers from unfair discrimination. To help workers retire well, you raised the reemployment age, raised CPF contribution rates for some older workers and gave CPF members more options to save for retirement. At the same time, you built trust with employers, working closely with industries, taking in feedback and fine-tuning manpower policies to support their needs. Both businesses and

workers found in you a reliable, trusted partner who understood their concerns and aspirations.

My letter would not be complete without mentioning your knack for simple and effective messaging. Till today, many Singaporeans recall with a smile the vivid catchphrases that you coined over the years. Amongst the most memorable are “cheaper, better, faster”, “better, betterer, betterest”, “futurise” and most recently, “ $1/3 + 2/3 > 1$ ” to describe our workforce composition. These were not idle wordplay or poor math, but embodied important economic and manpower realities and priorities in a form that Singaporeans could understand, remember and act upon.

You have been an invaluable member of my team, and will be deeply missed. You often said that “people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care”, and you lived by this mantra. Even though you are stepping down from Cabinet, I am confident that you will continue to serve your constituents well and contribute to Singapore and the labour movement in many other ways.

I wish you the very best in your future endeavours.

Yours sincerely,

LEE HSIEN LOONG