

Tony Tan's book gives insight into S'pore's nation-building journey

PM Lee hopes memoir will inspire more to follow in ex-president's steps

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Singapore has been fortunate that Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam chose to serve the country on many occasions, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the former president and deputy prime minister's memoir on his political journey.

Speaking at the event on March 12, PM Lee said he hoped the book would inspire more to follow in Dr Tan's footsteps to come forward and lead Singapore into a better future.

PM Lee recalled the times he worked closely with Dr Tan, adding that he always valued his views.

Dr Tan was first convinced by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to join politics in 1979, despite being initially determined to stay in the banking sector.

After retiring from Mr Lee's Cabinet as education minister, he was persuaded to come back as deputy prime minister and defence minister in 1995 to help shore up then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's Cabinet.

And despite wanting to retire during PM Lee Hsien Loong's time at the helm, he agreed to PM Lee's request to stay on a while longer, and volunteered to helm research and development policy.

The book titled Tony Tan Keng Yam: My Political Journey is published by Straits Times Press and co-authored by Dr Tan and former Straits Times journalist Leslie Koh.

PM Lee was guest of honour at the book launch, held at the Singapore Management University's Administration Building function room.

Dr Tan's book covers his personal perspective of national policymaking and decision-making, and reflects on difficult decisions made during his political career, such as scrapping the graduate mothers' priority scheme and the 1986 Central Provident Fund rate cut.

PM Lee said the memoir was readable and insightful. In particular, younger readers will benefit from an inside view of Singapore's nation-building journey from someone who was intimately involved in getting Singapore to



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong greeting Dr Tony Tan and Mrs Mary Tan at the book launch. PM Lee said younger readers will benefit from an inside view of Singapore's nation-building journey from someone who had contributed so much to the nation's success. ST PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG

where it is today and who had contributed so much to the nation's success, he added.

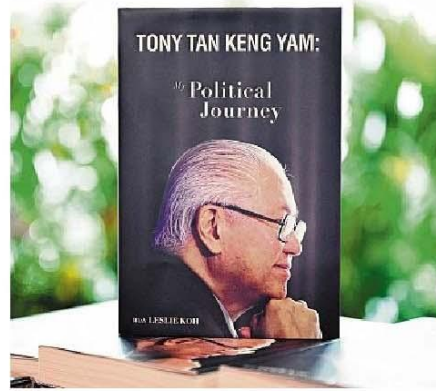
Having worked closely with Dr Tan for many years, PM Lee said he was familiar with many episodes highlighted in the book but enjoyed reading Dr Tan's perspectives on these significant events.

He highlighted three in particular – his own first posting, which was to the Ministry of Trade and Industry where Dr Tan was minister; when Dr Tan chaired the National Research Foundation (NRF) between 2005 and 2011; and when Dr Tan was elected president in 2011.

During his stint as minister of state at MTI, PM Lee said he was assigned by Dr Tan to chair an economic committee in 1985, meant to rethink Singapore's long-term economic strategy.

But the economy unexpectedly dived into a sharp recession, and while there were many steps taken to reduce business costs, there was one move employers were pushing for.

That was to cut Central Provident Fund contribution rates,



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which the Government had strenuously resisted, said PM Lee.

Then PM Lee Kuan Yew even said at that year's National Day Rally that the rates should not be cut, as they helped to protect workers' savings.

But discussions confirmed that the high CPF rates had to be cut by 15 percentage points to help the

economy.

"But how should we navigate this radical change in policy, which was likely to be surprising, controversial and unpopular? It was difficult, not just because the Government has taken such a strong public stance on the issue.

"But Dr Tan also felt that it would be awkward for me as a new MOS

(minister of state), on such an important matter, to be the one to publicly contradict the prime minister, who was my father. He was very conscious that we had to keep public and personal life separate," said PM Lee.

Eventually, Dr Tan publicly floated the idea, and also convinced the Cabinet and Mr Lee.

"To me, this episode exemplified Dr Tan's leadership style – entrusting someone with a task, leaving him to run with it, judging the moment to make a decisive move, and then making a strategic intervention himself to secure the key outcome," said PM Lee.

During Dr Tan's time at the NRF, the organisation made a strong push in biotech, which was a big, long-term bet with an uncertain payoff, added PM Lee.

But today, Singapore is seeing the returns on that investment, he said.

The last highlight was when Dr Tan put himself forward as a candidate for the 2011 Presidential Election.

Having already held leadership positions in the public and private

sectors, Dr Tan had nothing more to prove and no reason to expose himself once again to the hurly-burly of an election campaign and intense scrutiny of public life, noted PM Lee.

"But he felt he had something to contribute that the nation required at that moment. He knew what was needed of a president, to be a respected and unifying figure that stood above the fray of politics, represented a whole nation and provided a steady fulcrum for our political system," he said.

Speaking next, Dr Tan said he had never thought that he would write a book, let alone one about himself or his political life.

When he retired – a number of times, he quipped – many encouraged him to share his story, but "to be honest, I was more than a little reluctant", he said.

He eventually began writing as a personal exercise to recall what he had done and the lessons he had learnt, in case his grandchildren were interested in reading about them.

In 2019, he began discussions with ST Press to write the book, though the Covid-19 pandemic hit a year later.

"That is when I realised how valuable the lessons I had learnt over my life and work were," he said.

Dr Tan, who is the former chairman of Singapore Press Holdings, said he could see that Singapore was once again facing something unprecedented, unknown and uncertain.

And just like in the earlier days, Singapore had to figure things out on the spot and try to solve the crisis as it unfolded, while keeping an eye on the future, he said.

He said: "I hope that some of the lessons we have learnt in the past might be of value to the next generation of citizens and leaders.

"In sharing about problem-solving, policymaking approaches when taken in my book, I hope this will help the next generation to be better prepared to manage any crisis the future might hold for us."

The book launch was also attended by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, former deputy prime minister S. Jayakumar and former People's Action Party chairman and MP Khaw Boon Wan.

Other attendees included chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers Eddie Teo, Banyan Tree founder Ho Kwon Ping, DBS Bank chief executive officer Piyush Gupta and Singapore Management University president Lily Kong.

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The book is available for purchase at \$40.33 for the paperback version and \$78.48 for the hardcover version at all major bookshops from March 12. It is also available on the stbooks.sg website.

