REFLECTION ON MR LEE KUAN YEW BY MR LIM CHUAN POH, CHAIRMAN A*STAR

Friends and colleagues,

Our nation has lost a founding Prime Minister and the world has lost a great leader.

Much as his passing has been anticipated by all of us, when the time came, we were all deeply saddened. This is certainly more so for Singaporeans, as all of us have been touched by him one way or another, directly or indirectly.

Like you, I have been reading the different very moving stories of ordinary Singaporeans whose lives have been transformed because of what the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew has done for Singapore.

At the same time, we also read what other world leaders have said about him as a global statesman, a leader who belongs to the pantheon of great leaders in the 20th and 21st century, one who gets to the crux of the matter and will not seek to be politically correct, a pragmatist and not an ideologue.

I should also add that I am receiving condolence messages from different people around the world who are connected to A*STAR but fully aware that Singapore is what it is and where it is largely because of Mr Lee. These messages will be included in our Condolence Book.

Yesterday, a special Parliamentary session was convened and 11 parliamentarians spoke. The mood was sombre and it was emotional for all. If you have not done so, I would strongly encourage you to watch replay of all the speeches. Such tributes will not be repeated as it was one befitting only for a founding father who has dedicated his entire adult life to build a nation where there was none and to bring Singapore from Third World to First.

I simply cannot add to all that has been said about Mr Lee on his leadership, his vision, his deep understanding of human nature and societies, his policies or other aspects of him.

This morning, I will share with you my own life’s journey as an ordinary Singaporean and how Mr Lee has impacted my life.

As it turned out, my wife and I decided to retrace my own life’s journey in Singapore towards the end of last year, as part of our own commemoration of SG@50. I also did some basic research along the way so that I can reference my recollections against the chronology and timeline of Singapore’s history as well as my conversations with my siblings who are all older than me.

When I first remember things, I was living in Kampung Soo Poo off Kallang River and next to Kallang Gasworks, in a rented upper level of a two storey zinc roof house. I was two and half years old then.
I remember there was one night when all the lights were switched off and I was not allowed to step onto the balcony.

Nonetheless, there was a constant agitated commotion outside and, before long, I could see sticks, lances and rakes sticking up and down above the railings of the balcony.

No one explained what was happening to me but I sensed fear.

This turned out to be the July 1964 racial riots where 23 people were killed and 454 injured, and the whole incident started around Kallang Gasworks.

This is how I knew my age when I remembered this event and it is one that never left my memory.

More importantly, the cause behind the riots was what led to Singapore’s separation from Malaya eventually, the fundamental divergence between Singapore’s and Malaysia’s racial policy, multi-racialism vs Malay dominance.

I also remembered floating in Kallang River with a big black rubber tyre and seeing these bits floating around me. Years later, I realised those were the bits that came from outhouses that were positioned over the River.

The Kampung was a very dangerous place to live in as I recalled being evacuated at night a number of times and my mother has to carry me on her back because of fire outbreaks.

Even before I was born, my family was forced to resettle because of the big fire at Bukit Ho Swee in May 1961.

I discovered that my mother was carrying me at that time as I was born some six months later.

Before long, my family moved to the first HDB developed in that area, right next to the Kampung, at Tronoh Road, off Lavendar Street.

Everything was true, clean running water and electricity and proper public amenities including a TV in a community corner. This was basic public housing but clean and safe.

I was still young and my family could not afford to send me to kindergarten. So I spent a lot of time day dreaming at the balcony looking out at the going-ons.

I remembered distinctly two episodes.

One was when someone shoved the head of another in a drain and no one interfered for a long time until someone looking like a security guard came to break it up.
Another was when I witnessed gangs with parangs chasing another group down the streets.

Couple of years later, I went to a neighbourhood primary school. I discovered some of my primary school classmates were gang members.

I also remembered my late father bringing me to watch movies then and we could not buy tickets from the counter but only from the tout standing in front of the counter.

I heard the adults talk about 55 and how it was intended to target the secret societies or triads.

Again, years later, I understood that to be the Criminal Law Temporary Provisions Act enacted in 1955 under Colonial Rule to detain suspected criminals without trial largely in cases related to secret societies, drug trafficking and loansharking.

This statute is still in place today.

I wanted to apply to Victoria Secondary School as I prepared for my PSLE over 40 years ago, as many of my classmates who were doing well applied there.

My father and my siblings said no. I had to apply to Raffles Institution because my late father said that the Prime Minister studied there.

Only problem was no one from my school has ever got into RI.

This same logic happened again years later when I chose the Singapore Armed Forces Scholarship except that, this time, it worked the other way round.

My mother objected and said life would be cushier just pushing pen and not running around as a soldier. My reply was that the PM’s sons both went on the SAF scholarship.

Such is the influence of Mr Lee Kuan Yew that his exemplary leadership, his policies and his family is entwined into the lives of ordinary Singaporeans.

The Kampung is no more and it is now a light industrial estate. My primary school has closed though the building is still there and being used. My family’s first rented one and a half room HDB apartment has been torn down and rebuilt.

But the entire Kallang area has been transformed a few times over the intervening 35 years since I left that area and it is now a lovely heartland with a clean Kallang River that ran through it.

When I visited over 3 days last year, it was heart-warming to see old and young alike exercise in the park, by the river, along the walkways or fishing early in the morning. As a matter of fact, I mistook one of the HDB estates for a private condominium.
So, in fifty years, slums were cleared and public housing built and upgraded and enhanced over time.

Step by step, they became homes where you can access good schools, amenities, jobs and you can build your homes where you feel safe and there is a sense of belonging.

Through the SAF scholarship, I was the first in my family to go to university and one that is overseas.

I met Mr Lee Kuan Yew a few times over the course of the earlier part of my SAF career.

But, Sep 11 demonstrated to me that he is truly different from the others.

I was the Chief of Defence Force by then. The SAF obviously had to put in place several contingency plans following Sep 11. The most critical plan was over ruled because of possible significant diplomatic implications.

When this plan eventually reached Mr Lee, who was Senior Minister then, he asked why a particular approach was not taken. His suggestion happened to be what was proposed by the professionals to begin with and to the credit of the Ministers present, they acknowledged that the SAF was over ruled.

I was very proud of the integrity of the entire chain of decision making. More importantly, as a professional, I felt I had the backing and confidence of the government.

A year later, I read the cover page news in Straits Times on 1st Aug, a Thursday, showing PM Goh Chok Tong drinking New Water after a tennis game.

As the Chief of Defence Force, one of my responsibilities was to oversee the organisation of the National Day Parade. I thought it would be great if the nation could toast the anniversary that year with New Water to shift the mindset of Singaporeans to accept New Water.

I discussed with the organiser of the parade on how we could incorporate New Water into the whole celebration and we both agreed that it was doable in spite of the limited time for preparation.

So I proposed this to the Minister for Defence then, DPM Dr Tony Tan. I reassured him that we could make the changes at this late stage notwithstanding that there were no more full dress rehearsals or Preview before the actual parade.

DPM Dr Tony Tan told me to send the recommendation to PM and the Cabinet for their decision. I was taken aback when I got an email from Mr Lee Kuan Yew.
He asked if anyone pressured me to make the changes and whether I was confident of swinging it as it was very late in the day to make any significant changes to the National Day Parade and that there were other opportunities to introduce the New Water.

He was reassured when I told him that, as organiser, we initiated the proposed change and that we were confident of making it happen.

Some of you here may recall toasting with New Water in NDP 2002.

It clearly showed that Mr Lee was not only not unreasonable but have a deep instinctive understanding of human nature and knew exactly the right question to ask and to whom.

The third encounter was indeed rather personal. I left the SAF at the end of Mar 2003. I was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal that year and received my award towards the end of the year. Coincidentally, it was the first time that Mr Lee Kuan Yew was unable to attend.

I attended the same ceremony in 2004 in my capacity as PS(Edu). During the reception, Mr Lee came up to me and my wife and congratulated me. I was initially a little confused only to surmise later that he had he was offering belated congratulations.

One more encounter to share.

Mr Lee never asked to see me when I took on the job as Chief of Army or as the youngest Chief of Defence Force. But, he asked to see me when I was appointed as Chairman A*STAR. The meeting was at the Parliament.

I was early and he was slightly late. Good thing was I got to spend 15 minutes chatting with the late Mrs Lee. That was my first one on one conversation with her and it was a most pleasant encounter.

Mr Lee arrived later and we spoke. My conclusion of the purpose of the meeting was that it was not about the discussion but I think he wanted to size me up personally.

This was how much he attached to the importance of BMS R&D in Singapore. He had again demonstrated uncanny leadership in focussing on what mattered the most at that prevailing point in time.

What I have shared is but another story of how Mr Lee’s Singapore has given average Singaporeans opportunities based on meritocracy. It is the kind of society and country that when you work hard, when you do the right things and do them right, you will be recognised and you can go as far as your potential and capabilities allow.
More than that, it is now a country that we feel proud to identify ourselves as Singaporeans, bearing red Singapore passports, and confident of our future.

Nothing says it louder about how Singaporeans respect and appreciate what Mr Lee Kuan Yew had done for Singaporeans and Singapore than the people’s willingness to wait patiently for hours, rain or shine, at great inconvenience and difficulties to themselves especially those with disabilities to pay their last respects to their founding Prime Minister.

But, our ultimate respect to him must be our commitment to continue this Singapore’s journey that he started with his generation and bring it to the next level that will make him proud.

I would therefore like to invite all of you to rise and join me in reciting the Singapore pledge as our commitment to continue this Singapore’s journey. Please recite along with me:

“We, the citizens of Singapore,

pledge ourselves as one united people,

regardless of race, language or religion,

to build a democratic society,

based on justice and equality,

so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress,

for our nation.”

Thank you very much.