

EDUCATION

Spread young talent among schools

Concentrating the best students in top schools is not ideal, says Ngiam Tong Dow

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SINGAPORE—The Republic's young talent should be spread out across the island's schools, instead of being concentrated in a few elite schools, said retired top civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow yesterday.

Speaking at the National University of Singapore's U@Live Forum — which was attended by 200 people, including undergraduates and alumni — Mr Ngiam, 75, noted how the country's top students went to either "Raffles Institution (RI) or Raffles Girls' Secondary School".

"I'm not saying that they don't deserve to go (to these schools); they do. But they will be taught by just two sets of teachers, and they can only deal with the regular problems of the world, they cannot deal with (problems that are out of the box)," he said.

Mr Ngiam was responding to a comment by former Nominated Mem-

ber of Parliament Viswa Sadasivan, who moderated a dialogue session.

Mr Viswa, who is an RI alumnus, noted that the school's students were made aware that they were the cream of the crop. "It's not a good thing because it leads to elitism and complacency," he said.

Mr Ngiam also reiterated that Government scholars should not all be joining the Civil Service after completing their studies. Instead, half of them should "go into business", he said.

"The whole point is to spread our brains throughout society and not just in the administration," said the former Ministry of Finance Permanent Secretary, who is now Pro-Chancellor at NUS and Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

During the dialogue, Mr Ngiam was also asked about his thoughts on a one-party system versus a multi-party system.

In response, Mr Ngiam cited the ancient cities of Sparta and Athens. "Sparta was efficient and disciplined, but in the end, it failed, because such a state is very brutal, whereas Athens was very chaotic, argumentative, messy, but they survived," he said.

In his speech before the dialogue

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Mr Ngiam Tong Dow



TODAY FILE PHOTO

session, Mr Ngiam proposed that the Finance Ministry extend a S\$100 million grant to the Economic Development Board to invest in 100 start-up companies that germinated in Singapore's universities and polytechnics.

"Singapore has to tap into its universities and polytechnics to initiate the spirit of wealth creation in young

minds," he said.

He also suggested that students be encouraged to form project teams of two to three from various faculties to propose business ideas.

Speaking to reporters after the dialogue, Mr Ngiam said that under his proposal, the money given to undergraduates would come in the form of risk capital — and not grants — that would be administered by EDB.

"Grants are a great wastage, if I may say so ... When I was chairman of EDB, I never gave out grants, because if you ask me for a grant, it means your company is not commercially viable. I think the present tendency to give grants is a wrong system," he said.

Mr Ngiam reiterated that Singapore "cannot depend on (multi-national corporations) forever".

He said: "I'm trying to suggest that universities should be mobilised as our strategic assets for economic growth. (We have to) spark entrepreneurship. If they fail, then so be it. Unless we try, we will never be able to start up our own companies."

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Sundaresh Menon is new Chief Justice

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"excellent choice" for CJ, former AG Walter Woon, who is now the David Marshall Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Centre for International Law, said: "He has had extensive experience as an advocate, both here and abroad ... Also, he has a first-class brain, so I expect that the quality of jurisprudence emanating from the courts will continue to be excellent."

Drew & Napier Chief Executive Davinder Singh added that Justice Menon's "sharp legal mind, integrity and deep sense of right and wrong will make him an excellent CJ who will command the universal respect and confidence of the legal community".

Law Society of Singapore President Wong Meng Meng noted that he was "one of the leading members of the Bar" before his appointments as AG and as Judge of Appeal.

Said Mr Wong: "He was one of the most successful and definitely one of the most respected."

Commenting on his appointment, Justice Menon said it was "daunting to be faced with the prospect of taking over from someone who has been a towering figure in the Singapore legal landscape".

"I pray that I will discharge this

great responsibility with wisdom, courage, humility and honour," he added.

CJ Chan said being in the public service for 26 years, including six years as CJ, "has been a great honour and privilege given to few".

He said: "Justice Menon brings with him new ideas and perspectives on the administration of justice. I extend my best wishes to him and congratulate him on a well-deserved appointment."

Tributes also flowed for CJ Chan.

NUS law don Michael Hor said that he "has brought the judiciary, and with it the legal system, of Singapore to a level of excellence which is easily on par with, and in some respects, even above the best legal systems of the world". He will also be remembered for "his preponderant sense of evenhandedness".

"One came away from an encounter with the CJ satisfied that he had carefully considered and weighed everything that had been said, although he may not have ultimately agreed with what had been said," Prof Hor said.

Mr Wong said that under CJ Chan's watch, "the common man knows that he will not be denied justice in our courts any more than the criminal may think he can escape or hoodwink justice".

"The Bar is especially grateful to CJ Chan for the exemplary judicial temperament he displayed throughout his tenure and the grace and respect extended to lawyers who appeared before him," he said.