

Comments on retirement by Dr Lee Boon Yang

I am most grateful to PM for the opportunity to serve Singapore as a member of his Cabinet Team. I have held political office for 24 years since Feb 1985, almost immediately after the Dec 1984 GE. It had been a great honour and privilege to be part of the government for the past 24 years and to contribute to Singapore's progress and effort to overcome challenges.

I thank PM for allowing me to retire at this juncture. My retirement will make way for a younger leader to take the helm at MICA. This is necessary and timely as the process of rejuvenation must be sustained.

The new Cabinet appointments will forge a stronger team to lead Singapore.

Memorable achievement? Over the past 24 years, there were many many challenges. I hesitate to call them my achievements. Whether in Defence, Manpower or most recently MICA, we have to deal with each challenge as a team. I had the benefit of very capable administrators and civil servants to work with me at each Ministry. We work closely on pushing the boundaries and advancing our mission.

I do derive great satisfaction from witnessing the growing vibrancy in the arts and heritage sectors. We have created new events such as the Singapore Biennale which have become a very successful celebration of Singapore and international contemporary art. Our museums are now able to attract more and more visitors with regular and blockbuster shows.

I am also very gratified by the implementation of the School of the Arts and the National Art Gallery Project. Both projects are making good progress. SOTA has already taken two intakes of students at its temporary premises while its new campus should be ready before the end of the year. The National Art Gallery is a major art institution which will serve Singapore well when completed in 2013.

Established events such as the Singapore Arts Festival have become a regular celebration of the performing arts with a very exciting and enjoyable programme for all Singaporeans.

The implementation of the Next Generation National Broadband Network is also a project which gives me great satisfaction. This is a very major investment with powerful catalytic impact on the economy and society.

It is very difficult to look back and list difficult moments. When I was Manpower Minister, raising the retirement age from 55 to 62 was a difficult move as it entailed making adjustment to CPF contribution. Having to cut CPF in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis was not easy. Fortunately for Singapore and for me as the Minister-in-charge, the union leaders were always forward looking and pragmatic. It took many sessions with unionists but we were able to win their support and confidence for moves which helped Singapore to make adjustment for an ageing society and reposition for economic recovery.

At MICA we also have many difficult moments of what to do with this or that art event or presentation. But I have always accepted that the arts can be controversial and provocative. So I try not to be rigid or to overreact but to look for a balanced outcome. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not and critics still fire away. But that is the nature of the arts.

What will I miss in retirement? I will miss the challenge of grappling with big issues and decision making at national level. But retirement may open the door to other possibilities which can also be meaningful and satisfying.

I have not decided what I will do upon retirement. I still have my duties as MP for Jalan Besar GRC. That will continue to take up a significant portion of my time.

I will take some time off to unwind. Then I will see what opportunities are available and how I can make a contribution to Singapore in the next chapter of my life.

For a start, I am looking forward to spending more time with my family. My daughter had her first baby several months ago. My wife and I are delighted to become first time grandparents and I would certainly like to enjoy more extended family time.

One blessing which I count as most important is that I am in relatively good health and well prepared to set out on a new journey.