

PM Lee Hsien Loong At Launch Of A History Of The Peoples Action Party, 1985 - 2021

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Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of “A History of The People’s Action Party, 1985 - 2021” at the National University of Singapore’s University Cultural Centre.

December 14, 2021.



I am thrilled to join you today to launch the book “A History of the People’s Action Party: 1985-2021” by Dr. Shashi Jayakumar. The book tells the story of the PAP, not from its founding or early beginnings but beyond the initial years of struggle for independence and the first two decades of nation-building. The book starts in 1985.

Why 1985? Those familiar with Singapore’s history will recognize the year as a turning point in our political development. The transition from the founding generation of PAP leaders to a successor team was in its final stages. A pivotal general election had just taken place in December 1984. Many of the PAP old guards retired from politics or stepped down from leadership roles in that election. Only Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, and Mr. E.W.

Barker remained from the founding generation in the new Cabinet. After the election, the younger ministers chose Mr. Goh Chok Tong to be their leader, and he became the first Deputy Prime Minister. A record number of fresh faces – 24 new MPs – were brought in, including quite a few who eventually formed the 3G leadership team, and I was one of them.

The 1984 General Election witnessed a transition in leadership and a generation change in the electorate. The PAP's vote share fell sharply by 12.9 percentage points. Since independence, the Party received less than 70% of the total votes for the first time. Two opposition candidates were elected – Mr. J.B. Jeyaretnam in Anson, re-elected, and Mr. Chiam See Tong in Potong Pasir for the first time. Mr. Lee interpreted the election results using a biblical reference at the post-election press conference. He described it as the inevitable transition from the independence generation to a new generation of voters who "knew not Joseph". He explained that the older generation who stuck with the Party through the baptism of fire during Merger and Malaysia and in the early years of independence were beginning to fade away, to be replaced with a younger generation that was better educated, more demanding of their leaders, and that had not experienced the struggles or known the hardships their parents' generation went through.

It seemed like the PAP was losing political dominance. It was a moment for introspection, perhaps even concern. What did the future hold for the party, and Singapore? This made 1985 a logical starting point for the book.

But from the perspective of telling a good story, the PAP history post-1985 was probably a more challenging book for Shashi to write than its history pre-1985. The party's early years pre-1985 were full of drama and excitement. The Postmen's strike in 1952; the founding of the Party two years later, 1954; the close partnership with the trade union movement, fighting to improve the lives of workers; the struggle for self-government and independence; cooperation with the pro-Communist left wing, followed by the inevitable parting of ways; the mortal battles with the communists and then the communalists; to merger, separation, independence, and building a nation from scratch. At the same time, the post-1985 story has been one of relative calm and stability. Year after year, Singapore continued to sustain its strong growth and rapid transformation. We stayed cohesive and united as a nation. We smoothly carried out two leadership transitions – from the 1G to the 2G, then 2G to the 3G. There was steady progress, but not so much thunder and lightning. If someone made a movie out of the PAP story, you might be forgiven for overlooking the sequel. But this later part of our history was no less momentous or remarkable in its quiet way.

Imagine being back in 1985, crystal-ball gazing what the next 35 or 36 years had in store for Singapore. Many were anxious about the leadership succession, more fractious politics, and

significant leadership direction and government changes. After all, this had happened in many countries which came into being after the War a decade or two earlier than us, like in India, Israel, or Korea, beyond their founding generations. Others even predicted the failure of the Singapore model. The party leadership themselves were quietly resolved to build on our solid foundations, renew themselves, and take the country forward. But even they could not confidently predict that for another 35 years post-1985, the PAP would earn the strong support and trust from new generations of Singaporeans, keep itself vigorous and effective, dominate Singapore politics, provide Singapore with good and effective government, and take Singapore from the Third World to the First, and beyond. This has been a story of stability and progress. Of evolution, not revolution. Of patient building and improving. Of ensuring that tomorrow will be better than today. Living through these decades, Singaporeans may not consider our stability, progress, and success astonishing. But in fact, this was hardly predicted, much less foreordained – far from it. It did not happen by itself, nor has it happened in many other countries, yet it happened in Singapore. How did Singapore manage to achieve this? The PAP is an integral part of the explanation. This makes the party's history from 1985 to 2021 a story worth telling and understanding. Shashi's book explains how the PAP has sought to build a cohesive society in Singapore, build awareness and consensus across different groups, and improve the lives of Singaporeans across the board. It analyses how the PAP government has reached out, engaged, and listened to the people; adapted policies to address Singaporeans' changing needs and to fulfil their rising aspirations; worked to deliver high standards of living, healthcare, education, and housing; created well-paying jobs and better futures; and sustained this performance year in and year out, in good times and bad, and in doing so, earned the trust and mandate of the people and kept the virtuous spiral going another turn upwards. This book recounts how the PAP continuously transformed and renewed itself over the decades. It reorganized the party to strengthen its close ties to the people. It scouted, inducted, and groomed potential leaders with the right skills, values, and diverse experiences and perspectives while staying true to its core values of honesty, incorruptibility, and competence. This book also brings us behind the scenes where decisions were made, and it covers the internal debates within the party, the difficult choices, and trade-offs, the reflections from our successes and failures.

I must not give too much of the book away. Instead, I encourage you to read the book yourselves and learn more about the history of the PAP and Singapore.

Much credit for the book goes to Shashi for putting everything together systematically and cogently. His Ph.D. was in medieval history, but I am glad he took up this project to study the contemporary history of Singapore. He understood the seriousness of the task, having

been charged with it by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew himself. His policy experience in the civil service came in useful to contextualize and interpret the research materials. Shashi invested enormous time and effort over ten years to research and wrote this book. He thoroughly reviewed party materials and government documents from the National Archives; he interviewed over 60 PAP leaders, from the Central Executive Committee and HQ Exco members to backbenchers and PAP activists. Shashi, a big thank you for chronicling the PAP journey and writing a history that befits the subject's significance.

Many thanks also to the publisher, NUS Press, and the university supports it. This is a scholarly one to me that reflects credit on both.

My final thanks are my comrades in the PAP who have shared their time with the author and contributed to the book's richness, especially to the comrades and friends of the party who walked the journey from 1985 to 2021. They have all served and contributed in different ways. We owe an outstanding debt to them. I am happy to have quite a few of them here with us today. Some are currently serving, like Christopher de Souza and Dr. Tan Wu Meng. Others have retired but continue to support the party cause and share their experience and wisdom with younger generations. From the first generation, Mr. Ong Pang Boon, our first organizing secretary (1957 Elections), Mr. Tang See Chim (1966 By-Elections), and Dr. Chiang Hai Ding (1972 GE). Also, Professor Jayakumar, who is also pro-chancellor (1980 GE), Mr. S Chandra Das (1980 GE), and Mr. Lau Ping Sum (1980 GE) from the second generation, and my age, Wong Kan Seng (1984 GE), Dr. S Vasoo (1984 GE), and Ang Mong Seng (1997 GE). Thank you all for your many years of contributions and selflessness.

The book ends just after the 2020 General Election, neatly taking us one full circle since 1985. We are now, once again, at another turning point in the PAP's history, starting the next chapter of the PAP story. Just like in 1985, we are again in the midst of a leadership transition, this time from the 3G to the 4G team. The PAP MPs who were first elected in 1984 have all retired – except for me. The pioneer generation of voters, who were just beginning to leave the scene in 1985, have by now mostly faded away. About 60% of today's voters were born after independence. Growing up in a stable Singapore, they experienced steady progress year after year. They have benefitted from our collective efforts to develop our economy and build our Singaporean identity. Their aspirations, hopes, and expectations are different from those of the young voters of yesteryear in the 1984 General Election who are their parents. At the 2020 General Election last year, the PAP won a strong mandate from voters again, but our vote share fell by 8.6 percentage points. We also lost two GRCs to the opposition for the first time.

As in 1985, many questions about the future are now on people's minds: How will the PAP

deal with new challenges? How will the 4G team respond? Do they have what it takes to overcome adversity and take Singapore forward? Will the new generation have the same survival instincts to bond with their leaders and gel together as one people?

I hope this book will provide a sense of history and perspective to the journey that we have traveled in the past decades, help readers appreciate how Singapore achieved what it has, but most importantly, inspire the next generation – party activists, party leaders and Singaporeans alike, to be equally committed, resourceful and resolute in pursuing a brighter future for Singapore.

Like in 1985, in 2021, no one can be sure what the future holds. The following 35 years will be different from the last, and we cannot simply take what is written in this book and transpose it into the future.

Most fundamentally, our task is not to foretell the future but to create it. The PAP continues to carry a heavy responsibility for Singapore's security, stability, and success. It must always work closely with Singaporeans to take the country forward.

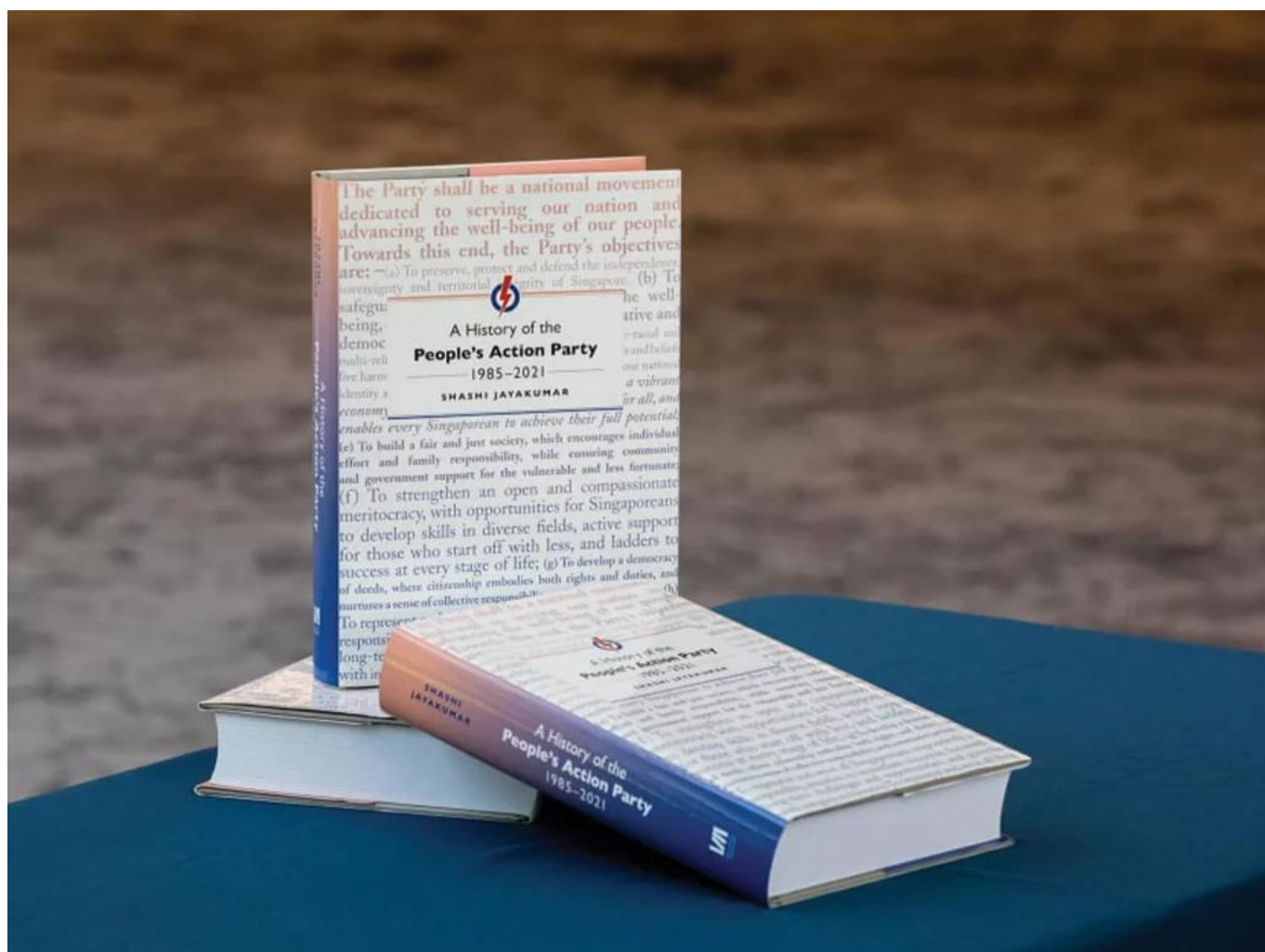
So that in 35 years, another historian writing another volume about the PAP will have as inspiring a story to tell of how the party continued to keep Singapore exceptional and thriving through the decades. And whoever is launching that next book can do so with the same sense of pride, gratitude, and thanksgiving, as I have launched this book today.

Congratulations once again, Shashi. I wish your book every success!

Thank you very much.



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Dr Shashi Jayakumar at the book launch.
Photo Gambar MCI/Terence Tan



The book tells the story of The People's Action Party since 1985.

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