

Senior Minister of State Tan Chuan-Jin at the Bukit Brown cemetery.





# Tan Chuan-Jin

## FINDING SPACE TO COLLABORATE

Singapore



**S**ingapore's Acting Minister for Manpower, Mr **Tan Chuan-Jin**, is also the Senior Minister of State for National Development, overseeing urban development in the island-state. He spent 24 years in the Singapore Armed Forces before retiring as a Brigadier-General in 2011 to enter politics. Since then, he has been actively engaging civil society, interest groups and the public at large on several hot-button issues. Centre for Liveable Cities Advisor Prof Lily Kong interviewed Mr Tan about public engagement on 7 May.

● **When people think of the army, which you were a part of for many years, they think of its rigid command and control. So where does your belief in engagement come from? Did your experience in the army play a part and how?**

My belief in public engagement comes from my approach to leadership. My starting assumption is that I don't know everything. Whether you're a minister or a commander, people look up to you as though you know the answers, but in fact, everybody is groping. So, you need to engage your team.

With greater engagement, I think you get better clarity. That's what you need from leadership – clarity.

Eventually one person would have to make the call, but it is based on a collective sense of leadership. Through this process of engagement, there's also buy-in from the team.

Ours is a conscript army so most of the men are drafted into national service for a period of time. When it's not your job on the line, there must be a compelling reason to want to do it. In that sense, it is even more critical that you reach out and engage the citizen army.

● **As far as public engagement is concerned, where do you think Singapore now stands?**

I think it varies from topic to topic, group to group. The dialogue between government and NGOs has always been there in various forms, but it is more visible and extensive today. Perhaps the engagement wasn't as much as we would have liked it to be before, so I guess everyone is learning now.

● **What are the engagement lessons gleaned so far from the Rail Corridor<sup>1</sup> and Bukit Brown Cemetery<sup>2</sup> episodes?**

For the Rail Corridor, the Singapore government had been looking at settling the issue for a long time with Malaysia. Because of the sensitivity of negotiations, it was not something that was discussed with the public. I don't think, as a government, you should or can discuss extensively on every issue. So for this issue, we first settled on a package settlement with Malaysia and when the railway land was returned, we decided that would become the starting point for discussion with the public at large.

Of course, some people didn't like that we had returned all the tracks and some bridges, but we went in with a fairly blank slate in terms of what the Rail Corridor would become. We shared perspectives with the public and were willing to hoist new ideas on-board. We very



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much wanted people to chip in and shape it as much as possible. And that's where we are and it is still evolving.

It's exciting that a lot of people have given their views, and have been actively participating in different ways. Can we incorporate everything? Probably not. But we can distil the spirit behind it and create improvements. I also expect that we would continue to have arguments over what it should be, but let's find a common space where we can build something, and see how it evolves.

As for Bukit Brown, the plan to redevelop the cemetery for housing had been made public for a long time. The main issue was the proposed road through the cemetery to alleviate traffic jams in the area. The public discussion for that began only after the decision to build the road through Bukit Brown was final.



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<sup>1</sup> Malaysia's railway network historically extended to a terminus deep inside neighbouring Singapore. Following an agreement to relocate the terminus, most of the lushly overgrown "rail corridor" was handed in 2011 to the Singapore government, which then faced public calls to preserve its natural and cultural heritage.

<sup>2</sup> Singapore's historic Bukit Brown Chinese cemetery is the largest of its kind outside China, with many ornate tombs of important personalities, set in an overgrown quasi-jungle setting. Civil society groups have objected to plans to demolish thousands of graves in order to build a major road through the heart of the cemetery.



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There were a number of reasons why we could not discuss some of these plans openly. One was that they constituted market-sensitive information that could have an impact on nearby residents' property values.

So that starting point was much more controversial than the Rail Corridor. That's because in the first place, not everyone was convinced that we needed a road. Not everyone was convinced that we should do it there. Heritage buffs asked, "Why don't you just expand Lornie Road [another road in the area]?" But that would impact the nature reserve nearby. So, there are different views. And that, unfortunately, became one big sticking point that never quite went away.

● **There are always trade-offs, but in the case of Bukit Brown, some would say it is heritage – and irreplaceable – while housing is replaceable.**

Philosophically, it's also about our perspective on heritage. The other day I was at Chung Cheng High School, an old school. I asked the students, when the time comes, would they all fight to preserve the building and the answer was yes. But what was there before the school? It could have been somebody's home or some *kampung* [village] that had meaning to a number of people. It could have been ecologically rich. At which point do you draw the line?

I actually agree with most of the things people are saying about how it's our heritage, and once you lose it, you won't get it back. But I'm

01 The Minister taking photos at the rail corridor, with Nature Society members Dr Ho Hua Chew (centre) and Mr Leong Kwok Peng (right).

02 Then Colonel Tan Chuan-Jin with Indonesian Minister for Social Affairs Bachtiar Chamsyah during a post tsunami relief mission in 2005.

03 Mr Tan learning about the historic graves at Bukit Brown cemetery.



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also saddled with the responsibility of figuring out where that balance is. If I only wore one hat and didn't have the responsibilities in urban development and housing, then I could quite imagine I would be championing the heritage issue too. But when I have to weigh the competing demands, I have to decide how best to strike the balance.

We often see progress as regression, i.e., you lose something. But whatever is of sentimental value from the '70s or '60s was itself progress from what was in the '30s, which I'm sure was valued by people of an earlier generation. You have to decide what to keep, what to discard. Twenty or 30 years later, the things we are doing now will be seen as tremendously valuable. And today with better technology, I think we can do a lot more.



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● **Would you say that's where the public engagement comes in because there is a need to derive a collective sense of what is meaningful to people?**

In theory, you have that discussion. When you talk about it, you realise there are different starting points and perspectives. What are the common things we can work on and where are the common areas we can collaborate to do something? There are areas where we can talk to death and never see eye to eye. That is the reality of things. So you end up fighting. Or you end up finding a common space to work on – and just accept that there would be differences.



● **In some places, consultation is legislated. What do you think of that in Singapore's context?**

In theory, most people may say, why not, we should. But what does it mean? In some countries, you use the law and that's why you end up with the gridlock that you see. Because it's binding, you have to give due regard to the process. Having it means you could subject yourself to potentially crippling delays, and be held ransom by groups who activate certain clauses.

I won't say I'm against legislation, but I would be wary of legislating for its own sake. For effective



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01 & 02 The Minister observing efforts to document the graves before they are demolished.



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01 Mr Tan posing with two Bukit Brown documentation project field workers.

02 The Minister visiting the former Bukit Timah Railway Station, a conserved site on the rail corridor.



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governance, you do need more engagement across the board. But I do not believe that it means the same thing for every topic in every area.

The government ought to see engagement as an important process, but it is not a blank cheque to engage to death. As a leader, your job is to create consensus if you can. If not, at some point you have to make choices and some of these aren't popular, aren't easy. If you make mistakes, continue your engagement even after that, because you can refine it, get better. Sometimes you might change because obviously you are not going to get every single thing right all the time. But fearing you're not getting it right shouldn't freeze you from action because I think that is a dereliction of duty.



● **What are some of the lessons about public engagement that you could share with readers of URBAN SOLUTIONS?**

A big part of engagement is about establishing some sense of shared clarity. Trust-building exercises help. I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all approach to every single issue.

What you need is to have a good feel of the ground. That comes from engagement, dialogue, and having a sense of people's needs and concerns. You need to make sense of that and eventually your role is to make decisions in the best interest of the people.

It has to be in the best interest of the people as individuals, and of them as a society. These don't always overlap. You also have to think about the present and the

future. So in a way there are these four factors that inform policy-making. But they don't always add up so the government needs to decide.

You need to frame the dialogue and depending on the space you have, think about how you engage. For e.g., if you're going to build a new nursing home, what is the outcome you expect when you consult?

Perhaps nobody wants it. If you ask, we all like nursing homes – but “not in my backyard”. So in such a context, what does it really mean to consult? Is it consultation, is it engagement, what is it? Once you're clear, you can differentiate the different context and approach it.

At the end of the process, you would need to be able to make decisions. And you should not be paralysed by engagement either just because that's what is happening in some countries. And it's costly – in Hong Kong, for example, it has cost the government billions. I'm not saying minority interests aren't important, but they actually end up costing the taxpayers.

Eventually the society decides what it wants. That is where I think the Singapore government has to learn and I think we are also in the process of grappling with how best to lead and govern in the current space.

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