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2-6-2016

Joseph Conceicao [Singapore, Diplomat, Member of Parliament]

Joseph Conceicao

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Citation

Conceicao, Joseph. Joseph Conceicao [Singapore, Diplomat, Member of Parliament]. (2016). 1-17.
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Interviewee: **JOSEPH CONCEICAO**
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh
Date: 24 March 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

All right sir, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. Now you grew up at a pretty interesting period of Singapore's history, but you were also working during the Japanese Occupation, right? Can you recall those times?

0:00:35

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I had to carry bricks for the Japanese to build an extra building in St. Patrick's School, where I came from. Because I didn't like the treatment, I tried to do something else, and that was to cut grass. I was a grass cutter during the Japanese Occupation.

0:00:55

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was it within the same St. Patrick's compound or somewhere else?

0:00:56

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

No, no, it was in the Amber Road area. We were paid fifty cents an hour, sorry, fifty cents a day, but they gave us some food, which was what we had. After that I joined some company that was breaking, breaking the steel oil tanks. They were empty, so I joined them, to help them. I was only on the administrative side while the Chinese, especially Cantonese were doing the demolition.

0:01:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now I want to ask you some questions about your political career. How... was it you who maybe signaled that you were ready for a political career, or did Mr. Lee himself approach you? Or was that... how did you get into the PAP (People's Action Party) and then get recruited into the Parliament, or to stand for election?

0:01:48

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I think the person who spoke a lot about me was Maurice Baker. Yes, and he gave them a kind of an outline of what sort of person I was. Later on, in 1968, Goh Keng Swee called me up. He said - I did not know that it was Maurice, it was later on that I found out it was Maurice - he called me up and said, that he wanted me to stand for Parliament.

0:02:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Baker did that for a few of you, right?

0:02:24

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I said I was not happy, because I knew nothing about politics. Then he told me he knew nothing about politics also. [Both laugh]

0:02:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But you were in Parliament for what, nearly twenty years, right?

0:02:38

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Till '84.

0:02:39

[Kirpal Singh](#)

'84, yes, so just two three years short of twenty years. How were those years? They were exciting for you?

0:02:45

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

The early years were very, very exciting.

0:02:48

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. Do you remember one or two of the more sorts of...

0:02:51

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Wait I'll tell you why they were exciting. Because very soon after I'd been elected, I was called up by Mr Lee Kuan Yew. I went to his office. He was very polite, very chummy, and he passed a paper over to me. He said, "Read it." It was from the CPIB (Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau). He said, "You do something about it. It was about some people in my constituency showing dirty films in one of the... in my branch office."

0:03:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

In your estate... in your branch office? Wow!

0:03:30

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

So, he said, you do it. I went back and I did it. I did it, I sacked the fellow, wrote back to him, the matter was dropped. Years later, when we were having a meeting at Parliament House... parliamentary class... parliamentary group, having a meeting. It was all very chummy and very happy. We were all looking very satisfied. So, he got up, pulled his pants together, which is his usual habit, and he took his file, and went off and then he turned back and said, "By the way, Joe, don't show me... don't show any dirty films in your constituency." [Both laugh]

0:04:12

[Kirpal Singh](#)

He had a sense of humour too, huh?

0:04:15

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

This is what I tell people, he had a sense of humour in that sense. That sense of humour also had a bit of sting, because he is the kind of person when anything happens, he looks for the nearest person. Joe Conceicao happened to be there. From then on, the whole group of parliamentarians roared with... said "Joe, why didn't you call me, we could have watched your... "

0:04:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Watched the films. [Laugh] So, now that the man himself is gone, and we all are wondering about his great triumph and his legacy and all that, what would you say impressed you most about Mr. Lee's leadership?

0:05:03

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

His wisdom was actually... it was practical, it was very practical wisdom. Everywhere he went, he looked at the practical side. He decided on things... on a very pragmatic and practical sort of... What I learned from the very beginning of the PAP (People's Action Party) was that... clarion call, almost. I'll speak it in Malay, I prefer... because that was what impressed me the most. It was "Ke arah masyarakat yang lebih adil. Towards the society that's more just." That was what caught me. Moreover, I was also at that time, connected with adult education. I was one of the directors of the adult education... where I was in. I felt that was what he was trying to do. When I became MP (Member of Parliament) for Katong, I could see the crying needs of the people were. I was having a huge building, block ten, or block eleven in my constituency, which had a thousand rooms. When you entered into that block, you couldn't see anything except if somebody opened the door somewhere and light came in.

0:06:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, he wanted to change that, right?

0:06:30

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, he wanted to change all that. He wanted us to help him of course, to try to change all that. I had to learn because in my early Meet-The-People sessions, incidentally, my group of people, we were... when we were MPs, we were there the whole time for each individual, and that's what we... we went in... When certain individual came, he was... he had a little snack shop and he wanted a temporary permit and he came to see me. In the beginning I was thinking there's a law about it. So, I told this fellow, you have got to follow the law. He was enraged. That was the first lesson I learnt. He was enraged and he leaned to me and shouted loud. Shall I shout out the same words?

0:07:34

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Yes, sure!

0:07:36

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

"Hwuck you!" he said.

0:07:37

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Really? Wow! This is one of your residents, who wanted a permit.

0:07:41

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

He was a... yes... I remember because he couldn't pronounce the word correctly. But anyway, I learnt. I told my people, just called him back. Because he walked out, called him back. I said to him, "Look, I'm sorry. I have a suggestion to make. If I were to ask the government to give you that temporary license, maybe about one year, six months, a year, will you be satisfied?" Then he was very happy. He was almost ready to embrace me. I said, "Okay, I cannot promise but I'll try." So, I went to see a person called Chandra, who was the head of the Land Office, something like that and I explained. He, at that time, the Permanent Secretaries were very understanding of our problems. So, he decided, "Alright, give him one year." So, I went back and told him that the next...

0:08:41

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, he was happy.

0:08:44

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I learnt that you should not say no. You should try to understand their problem and try to work out some way, a more sort of... not a bureaucratic approach... a more human... I learnt that lesson very much.

0:09:03

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sure, so from my point of view, that's where we come into this very interesting concept of societal leadership. What you were demonstrating is societal leadership, which is different from say leadership by just law and political leadership and all of that. So, as we are doing this interview essentially for the Institute of Societal Leadership here at SMU, what are your views about societal leadership? What makes a leader endearing to society?

0:09:35

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I'll give you another instance. In 1984, I was given a chance to return to politics, devoid...ambassadorship. I was ready, I wanted to do that but eventually it was decided that it was not easy to work that out. My constituency in Katong, one of them came to me and said, "You know, Mr. Con" - it was a short form of my word, Mr. Con - "as an MP we love you, we love you as MP." He used the word love. "We

love you. But as ambassador, we hate you!" Then I asked him...

0:10:15

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What was the point they were trying to make?

0:10:17

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

That you should care for your people and... not so much about your highfalutin job, or whatever it is.

0:10:26

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, going overseas and all of that, yes.

0:10:28

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I wanted to do but Goh Chok Tong told me, "You cannot." The arrangement is as such, there's no place. You cannot become MP for Katong, because it's taken already. So, I had to go back as an ambassador. But I was very sorry.

0:10:44

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was the move easy for you, to move from parliament to diplomacy, go from political leadership to diplomatic career, become an ambassador?

0:10:53

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Actually, I was seconded from the university, that was the same salary and all that. It was an appointment by the PAP itself, so I was a political appointee... in the foreign ministry. I was later on, shortly after they... the university said, "We don't want you anymore."

0:11:17

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You were absent too long. [Both laugh]

0:11:18

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, you stay with the ministry...

0:11:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Where was your first ambassador posting?

0:11:26

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

First one was in 1977 in Soviet Union.

0:11:31

[Kirpal Singh](#)

When Mr. Lee visited Russia, you were there for your second posting, right?

0:11:36

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes. He was... he wanted to come during my first. It was ten years before. He always wanted to come during my first posting, but suddenly Kosygin fell ill, and Mr Lee said, "I will meet anybody. The acting Prime Minister or something like that." But then the Russians did not want it. They wanted him to meet Kosygin. He had already established a relationship with Kosygin. So, they cancelled the trip. That was in 1980 or something like that. He was very angry, and he came to the conclusion that the Russians were angry with him because of him commenting on the Russian harbours in... around Southeast Asia. But it was not so.

0:12:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Not so.

0:12:26

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

When I told him ten years later what the truth was, he didn't believe me. The truth was that Kosygin had gone to his bungalow by the river. He's an excellent, and he's a very enthusiastic kayaker, and the bloody kayak overturned, and he was nearly drowned. Somebody... people rushed out to pull him out, but he was already in very bad condition. That was the real reason.

0:13:03

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, in all of this, what do you think makes a good leader? What qualities would you say makes a good leader?

0:13:09

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

The qualities that Lee Kuan Yew had: wisdom, pragmatism... a certain amount of ability to give way. The position you take is always one of firmness.

13:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But you must also allow for flexibility, is that what you're saying, that sometimes a leader has to be flexible, not always too firm?

0:13:33

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I don't think flexible. He should be friendly. I don't think he should be necessarily flexible. Because Lee Kuan Yew was never very flexible. He demanded that when you... he gave you instructions, you should obey immediately, regardless of what you were... you want any instance of this?

0:13:55

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Yes.

0:13:56

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I was in Australia later on, of course. In 1987, I did not know what was happening in Singapore. He took action against some Catholic organisations, but then I didn't know what was happening there. But all I knew was that there was a priest coming to Australia, who was coming with a woman. And I... and Lee Kuan Yew told me to lambast the fellow. So, I said the Australians... I sent back a note which never reached him. The Australians were not interested in all these sexual peccadillos and things. Then when I received, wired to me one day, I received no word. I immediately took action against this priest. Many years later, Lee Kuan Yew... I had access to him very easily. We were many... for some reason or other he liked me, maybe because of the silly mistakes I made.

0:14:59

[Kirpal Singh](#)

No, but also your relationship went back a long way.

0:15:01

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Maybe yes. He said, "You know, Joe, you disobeyed me once. I got a hell of a fright. I said, I said, "If I disobeyed you, I won't be sitting here." "No Joe, yes you did." Then I said, "I took your words, and I took action against the priest, and things like that." He said, "No, but you demurred."

0:15:21

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Ah... demurred. Interesting word, yes.

0:15:25

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, but you demurred. So, I learnt.

0:15:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

He was very particular.

0:15:30

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

If you want some little story or... into what I'm telling you, you can draw your own conclusion.

0:15:39

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sure, sure. Just talking quickly about books and leadership. You remember the time when Lee Kuan Yew shared with us that he read Machiavelli's Prince. That was very, very interesting, isn't it? Because one of the things that the Prince encourages is trying to take ownership of a piece of land that is lying idle next to you, right? I remember when Mr Lee Kuan Yew made that public, that was quite amazing. I think it probably disturbed our neighbours to the north a little bit, right?

0:16:14

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, to a certain extent, Lee Kuan Yew, God bless him, is a Machiavellian.

0:16:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You think... his philosophy?

0:16:26

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

He's got a certain Machiavellian philosophical idea. To be strong and...

0:16:34

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That's right. Because he says there's a legal right, but over that legal right he also argued like Machiavelli, there's a greater moral kind of right. Are there abiding virtues, or abiding values that even if time changes and societies change, these values that are associated with societal leadership don't change? So, one of these virtues has been... virtue of humility.

0:17:01

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I tell you that I agree with you that humility is very important in a leader, but I disagree with you that leaders don't change. They do change, they have that... and I'm talking just in the abstract. They may have in the beginning, but after some time things happen that they... leadership changes also. But humility is a very... and I'm not talking about leadership, I'm talking about myself and that fellow that used bad words at me. Humility was what overcame that situation. You have to be humble.

0:17:43

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Because you felt his passion and his anger, yes. What about charisma? Because people say that just like humility, charisma is another of those very important qualities?

0:17:55

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I'm shifting over to Indonesia. Suharto was a man with that charisma, and he was humble too. He took that position and people understood but although people were afraid of him. But in a sense, he had that charisma. That charisma came from Javanese cultural attitudes, Javanese cultural beliefs. That's where the charisma came from.

0:18:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. So am I... because I think you're speaking in metaphor here. Am I to understand that in a rare individual, you can get that fine balance of humility and charisma, or does charisma invariably lead people to be slightly...?

0:18:44

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

You can get a balance between charisma and assumed humility.

0:18:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Assumed humility.

0:18:51

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Like Suharto. He was a very humble person, but how much of it was put on because of his position? He was willing to accept the friendship of a person, he was willing to accept the friendships of people although he used to react very strongly against those who felt... wronged him. It's something very, very complicated to describe.

0:19:21

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What do you think of the leadership in Indonesia today, Jokowi's? Do you think he's his own man?

0:19:26

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

He's getting more and more support, but it's not the support that used to be for Prabowo, and he is uncertain about the Australian prisoners. He has to... he just postponed... it's another Indonesian habit. You can't solve the problem, postpone it.

0:19:44

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Postpone it, yes. Keep them a while longer, yes. But I think that one is going to be very, very difficult for him, right? Because behind the scenes I'm sure a lot of negotiations are taking place and talks are ...

0:19:55

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

He cannot give in. The bulk of the... and by the way, the Indonesians will think that by giving in, he's completely lost his soul.

0:20:10

[Kirpal Singh](#)

In other words, a leader must not only be firm but be very, very careful not to be seen to be compromising, right? This is why Mr Lee himself hardly ever compromised, isn't it?

0:20:22

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

One instance.

0:20:24

[Kirpal Singh](#)

When?

0:20:25

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

When he went and put flowers in the Kalibata Graveyard of war heroes.

0:20:32

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But that was for the greater good, right? For the greater political good, I suppose. Is that right? Would you say so?

0:20:36

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, yes, but you said something and now you just said another.

0:20:41

[Kirpal Singh](#)

I know yes, in response to that. No, I agree with you because, one of the continuing debates is, no matter how strong you are — it's like a parent, and if you have got an errant child, and you have got to judge as you said and temper it with prudence and everything but there is a time also that you might want to, as a parent, show affection. Maybe this was a way of making up, or a way of saying that, maybe we have been a bit too harsh, or let's keep these things behind us to move on.

0:21:16

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

He wanted to be friendly.

0:21:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

He wanted to be friendly. Is that right? Is that your reading? That's my reading of it.

0:21:21

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

No, he wanted to be friendly, certainly. He was listening to the ambassador, and the ambassador said that this is one way. But that's not how the Indonesians interpreted. That's the question. We are nice, but they have their own interpretation.

0:21:40

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What you're saying is that cultural considerations are fundamental to leadership.

0:21:47

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Whose cultural, the other side's cultural perceptions?

0:21:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Society's, and if society has got different cultural mindsets and cultural paradigms, then we have to be attentive to all of these, right? That's difficult. But that makes a good leader. Is that what you're saying?

0:22:03

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, but he did... he did decide that okay I will, it was not an apology. But the other side thinks it's an exception.

0:22:14

[Kirpal Singh](#)

It's an apology. So symbolically, right, symbolically... So, culturally the reading of

symbols is very important.

0:22:19

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

But what the conclusion must come that he did the right thing. That's the conclusion. Never mind what the Indonesians thought.

0:22:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now looking back from today's perspective, do you think that Singapore has done well in terms of all our leaders? Or do you think there are many other lessons to learn?

0:22:41

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I think, which is a fault with the PAP insiders also. There's not enough of reach to the ground. Whatever schemes there are to help the people, still there is that distance from the ground, that's one of the faults. The PAP people... some people say that themselves. It is not a question of pride or anything. It is a question of... duty, and then it's a question of belief in Confucian ideals. The Confucian must be... he must be a tough person, he must think of family, of people and so on. He must think of their welfare. But the Confucian is always still some distance.

0:23:44

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sikit atas yeah, as they say?

0:23:45

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes.

0:23:46

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But when the sikit atas become banyak atas, that's when the leadership fails, right? Because disconnect with the ground, would you say?

0:23:54

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

I would say that this lack of understanding, lack of access to the ground is a certain

cause of problem.

0:24:07

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sir, you are also a thinker. Because the first time when we were sitting in your office and we tried to play a game of chess, you looked at me after three moves and said, "Don't ever be a politician." You remember that? I laughed and I asked you why and you said, "Your moves are so transparent." You said, "In politics, even your friend will stab you without you ever finding out who stabbed you." But looking back at it, do you think scholars make good leaders?

0:24:34

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Why not?

0:24:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Scholars do make good leaders?

0:24:36

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Yes, scholars can be good leaders.

0:24:39

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You don't believe that sometimes their academic orientation leads them to precisely move away from the ground?

0:24:46

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

If they only have an academic orientation. If they have other aspects besides their academic orientation, it's wider... take George Yeo. He would have made... he makes an excellent leader. That's why this fellow, what's the name, took him and put him to head his organisation in Hong Kong. George Yeo is an intellectual. That he made... he still made a good leader. When he opens his mouth, he talks intellectual things people don't understand. But he made a good leader.

0:25:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That's why some people said it was partly because of this issue that they in fact lost the Aljunied.

0:25:35

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

No, they lost the Aljunied, because people like Hwee Hua and even Rasheed and particularly... but not particularly George Yeo. They were not in their constituencies to meet the people, unlike myself I was there.

0:23:52

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You were there. You are Katong guy, all the time. When you look back at your own parliamentary years, I remember vividly that you were quite insistent that the abortion bill, when that was being debated, that the whip be lifted, right?

0:26:07

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

Every time you frustrate a child from being born, you're going against the very principle of life. That's what the abortion bill is all about, so I could not agree with it, and I voted against it. In fact, I gave a chance. I said, "If you say that there will not be abortion on demand, then I may just not put in a vote." So, the minister said, "No I cannot give you the grant." So, I voted against the bill because the lift, the whip had been lifted, so I was... But even if the lift had been not lifted, I have to vote against the bill. Lee Kuan Yew knew that, you see. So he ...

0:26:53

[Kirpal Singh](#)

He probably respected you more for that, right? Because you stood your ground.

0:26:58

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

No, I... There were many others. Many Catholics also, who stood their grounds.

0:27:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Yes, but you spoke up quite loudly, and that was very memorable in many of my generation. Well, sir, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview

0:27:14

[Joseph Conceicao](#)

God bless... God bless you.

0:27:17

[Kirpal Singh](#)

God Bless yes.