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Tan Cheng Bock [Singapore, Member of Parliament]

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Interviewee: **TAN CHENG BOCK**
Interviewer: Tony Lai
Date: 9 December 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:19

[Tony Lai](#)

Good morning, Dr Tan Cheng Bock. Very happy to have you, and welcome to Digital Narratives Asia. Your early life, your early childhood, we go back to how things started in school. Your loss of your dad and your ability to carry on in school. Tell us a bit about those years.

0:00:37

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

I remember that very clearly. When I was age sixteen, my father passed away. Now he passed away because he had tuberculosis, and his lungs were all so damaged. But it was very devastating, because he shared with me a lot of joy. Although he's not educated, he will make it a point to sit by my side when I'm studying. He will bring, he will go and get, collect all these old newspapers, and he will mark out the things I should read.

He said, "You must read, because I cannot teach you." He told me, "You must gain knowledge through The Straits Times editorial." So, I forced myself to read the editorial, I half understand what it was saying because it's quite deep.

When he died, I was actually lost. So, I was in two minds, whether I should continue to study, or shall I just go to work. But then my mother told me that my father, being a member of The Singapore Harbour Boards Union, would be entitled to about some money, a gratuity fund from the union. So, I went to the union but I, imagine you're sixteen years old, you go to this union, my goodness, they are all so huge guys, so big. I got intimidated by them. They're actually nice, but they're very intimidating. So, I asked them, "I come here to get, to collect my father's gratuity fund. He's a member of the union". They said, "No, no you're not entitled to, because he didn't pay his subscriptions." So, I went back. I told my mum, I said, "Let me see dad's belongings." Going through his belongings, I found one receipt, and that receipt was the latest before he passed away. So, to me, my simple thinking then, was, this is valid. I went to ask my uncle. My uncle said, "Yes, this is valid." So, I went straight away to the union, and the union said, "No, no sorry young man, this is not valid, this is... he only paid for the last one, he didn't pay for the others." But at that point, I wasn't so sharp. But I went back, I was thinking, how can it be? You would not have given me a receipt, unless I paid the full. So, I went back again, they said no. Then they said, "The constitution has changed, your father is no longer entitled to \$28,000. You're only entitled to \$14,000."

So, I went back to my uncle. My uncle said, "Very hard to explain to you, but it's going to be a rough ride to get this sum of money." As a young sixteen-year-old I was quite gung-ho in the sense. I went to the neighbourhood, I knocked at every of my neighbour. I said, "Was there a constitutional change to cut it down from 28 to 14?" Everybody threw me out? My father's friends all abandoned him also. So, I was quite sad that the neighbourhood actually didn't help me. So, I said. "I have to be on my own."

I went back to study, but then that time, money is so hard to come by. Your mother is chasing you, you got to give tuition, and tuition until... I remember I almost failed my pre-medical school, but I went on. While everybody all enjoying, I was rushing from the union to the school, until I told my friend, my classmate, another of my classmate, I said, "I think I got to quit RI (Raffles Institution)." But happen that my RI batch, quite a lot of chaps, their fathers are quite big shots. One of them, his father was a court judge.

I went to see the father. The father was very kind. His is name is Justice Chua. He said, "No, you must go to Legal Aid Bureau, because they will help me to draft the letter better." So, I went to Legal Aid Bureau, they drafted for me.

So now I got three places to run. First, I went to Legal Aid Bureau, who gave me such beautiful letters. I went to the union, the union said, "Wait, wait, wait." I got to go back to RI to study, I got to go to tuition, I got to... I said, "Wah, die, you know". At the end of the day, I told the Legal Aid Bureau, "You must tell me why it's so difficult." His reply was, "It's political." I said, "What's so political?" I went back to the union. Union said, "No." Then I went, and studied the union. The union belongs to the PAP (People's Action Party), and the leader is Lee Kuan Yew. Jamit Singh was the Secretary General there. So, I put two and two together, "Aiya, how?" I'm the type, I'm quite determined. I go and sit outside the Legal Aid Bureau until they said, "Sorry, no result." Go to the union again... I tell you it was the most difficult part of my life.

I got to take care of my mum. I got to get the money. So, I wrote two books. I only hope the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) people will forgive me. Because I wrote How to Pass PSLE, geography and science. I borrowed it from my old teacher Ratnagopal, and I wrote the two books, I sold. I got some money. So, at least that could cushion some of the thing. But it was a little bit of pressure for me, because my mother is always asking, "Why is it so difficult to get?", but she didn't understand. One day, one morning, I saw the newspaper. There was a big political fight and the PAP had split into Barisan Sosialis, and the PAP proper. I told my mum, I will get dad's money back. I went to Legal Aid Bureau, I said, "I want my money, please, can you help me?" The response quite friendly now, quite good. I went to the union, union also quite friendly now. I said, "When can I have my money?"

After a while I got my money back, I got \$14,000. But I tell you, it was very bad, but that changed my life. It made me grow up. It made me that you are your own man. Nobody's going to help you, and nobody's going to care for you, you fight your own battle.

0:07:25

[Tony Lai](#)

We move a bit ahead, you are now the village doctor. You've been helping the people every day as a practitioner in the medical field. Serving the people, versus serving the nation. The decision to step out from just being a doctor, to be a Member of Parliament, to enter politics. Tell us a bit about that period of your life, the stories, and how were you thinking about those choices?

0:07:55

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

Medicine has always been my first love. Politics is a calling. Just like those priests. I had a feel it's a calling, but I was not enamoured with the PAP.

My concern was I want to be a doctor in a rural setting. I don't want to be just a person who treats cough and cold. I want to be challenged. I want to put myself in a situation, where I feel that my help is really needed. I enjoyed the ten odd years of my life there. Because you felt that you are not only a doctor, you are also a social worker. I was quite happy there, but having said that, I had also a lot of people who approached me. They were from the Opposition, because they said, "Doc, you are so popular here, you should stand and fight the PAP." I said, "Why should I fight the PAP?" They said, "No, the PAP threw you out when you were in National Service. You had a big bad spell in National Service." I fought them, I got out, and I got rejected. The Government didn't give you a job. True, I was not given a job. I was banned, I was barred from all government departments. But, when the Opposition asked me to stand, I said no. When Chok Tong asked me whether I want to be, I said no. Then he said, "Lee Kuan Yew want to see you." So, I went to see Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Kuan Yew was a very smart man, very clever. He looked at me, he said, "You're a doctor? Did you know doctors are bad politicians?" I said I agreed. Why? Because we are of our own mind, we think for ourselves. So, I was wondering why you want to get me again, I might also become a problem for you, what for? But he made one statement that got me thinking. He said, "I'm looking for a second generation of leaders, and I need good men, and if you people don't come up, I would take third-graders to run this country." He gave me no choice.

When I went there, I remembered my interview with them wasn't so cordial, because when they asked me, I said, "Look, you all treated me badly when I was in National Service. I sent so many letters to the Minister of Defence; you all just threw it into the wastepaper basket, but you never, ever... and you all actually made my life miserable." I was without a job, and my mother cried, because she

said you are a doctor, you cannot get a job? I said I cannot. I got a bond with the Ministry of Health. For seven years, my bond. They just don't want my bond. So, I had to go out and work, and where do I go and work? I found nobody want to employ me also, all scared. So, at the end who employed me? Sheng Nam Chin. And who is Dr Sheng Nam Chin? He's a Barisan Sosialis chap. So, I landed myself again into deep waters by moving into the Opposition camp, although I'm not an Opposition member. He wanted me to take over his clinic, but I said no. I want to go back to get a country practice.

But being a politician to me is not a problem. Because when I went into politics, I was quite clear in my head what I wanted. I believe that I must look after this country. So, while I play the community role as a doctor, I still want to take part in the development of the second phase of Singapore. So, we took pay cuts. Nowadays I hear all those chaps take big pay cuts. You go in, you don't care about the pay cut. What was my pay, my allowance? \$1,430 something a month. That was my pay, my allowance. When I had to give up my clinic, I spent a fortune getting a doctor, and I calculated I had to pay \$10,000 to that doctor to look after my practice. So, what is a... don't talk about money, I always angry. You just come in. You want to serve, you serve, or else, get out. Don't lament, I lost so much money. This is what I feel. We must come in with the full force of wanting to serve, or get out, or don't come in. Don't cry because you lose this, or you lose that. We lost, but we never worry because it's part of your life you created. It's a conscious decision to go in and do something for this country. I'm quite proud when I went in, of course with the condition that I be allowed to speak my mind. Lee Kuan Yew also said. "I'm not looking for yes man." That gave me the consolation.

I still feel that the passion in anyone, who wants to serve cannot be compromised. If you lack that passion, and you just want to come and serve, because you want to get something out of it, it will reveal soon. After a while, people can see through you, the kind of person you are. You must have the passion, the integrity, and the honesty to do what you believe in. You cannot, that's why sometimes, you cannot compromise. I don't compromise on quite a lot of things; they said I'm so hard sometimes. But it's not a question of hard; I've got to help to build a country, where the value system can be passed on to my grandchildren. If my grandchildren are not proud of their *Ah gong*, then I've lost, I've not done my fair share. Just like if the PAP is not strong, and if the value system doesn't really transcend, or after a while get aborted, because of certain things, then we may not have done so well.

0:14:03

[Tony Lai](#)

The NS (National Service) story, tell us a little bit about it. But link it to how heavy and how tough was it because of what happened, to make that decision to say yes to Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong to enter politics?

0:14:18

Tan Cheng Bock

After I graduated as a doctor, I received a letter to ask me to go to NS. But there were twelve of us. My first impression was that it was wrong.

It doesn't tally with the constitution's requirement. Because constitution's that NS all must go in. Anyway, I went to NS very reluctantly. I said, "Why you choose us twelve?" They said, "We looked at the records, you guys have got leadership qualities." When I went there, my first question was asking them, "I know you need doctors in the army, but Singaporeans also need doctors in the hospital. Show me your scheme." No scheme. I said, "You allow me to write a scheme for you?" I drafted the whole scheme for them with my friends. How to strike a balance between doctors going into the army, and doctors going into the National Service. They rejected it. They said, "This is, cannot... So, what to do?"

We went through the training, and we all trained very well. But it was the non-military side that we were always trying to get it correct, because to me, it's a wrong. My philosophy, I cannot perpetuate a wrong, I must correct it. If I believe in that philosophy, I must correct this wrong. So, we wrote letters, and letters, to all the ministers, to every fellow whom we know can help. All went to naught, zero, nothing came out of it, until one day we were being scolded by this... some of those, who use really vulgar words. Then, we all kept quiet, until one of my friends, one of the doctors, he's equally vulgar, he shot back. Then, they said. "We're going to put all of you into that... Detention Camp." But they didn't, they all bluffed.

But the main crux was, they said, "No, we're going to change. Now, doctors will no longer be Captain. Yes.

0:16:28

Tony Lai

Really?

0:16:29

Tan Cheng Bock

Really. All doctors will in future become Second Lieutenants. So, I told them this is again wrong. Then they said, "Why?" I remembered I told the commander, "If I have not come into the army, and having trained for these couple of weeks, and you gave me Second Lieutenant, I probably accept, because I don't know, but now, you cannot. Because as I know, rank now is very important. My rank will allow me to make certain decisions at the battlefield, because of my rank. So, I will not compromise. Captain or no deal. So, quarrel, quarrel. At the end of the day, again want to send us to prison, and all that. But then all call it bluff, at the end, they didn't.

One day, we discovered that we're given a letter. The letter was very clear: We're going to discharge all of you. I looked at it, my men said... I said this is a real screwed up move. The people, who are planning this, no idea about National Service, no idea about constitutional matters. I said we accepted. So, they said, "Doc, we accept? What are we going to do?" Then the commander, I remember he said, "If you all sign on the dotted line--I'll never forget that--you will not get any job in the army, in the government service." So, I told him, "If I go to medical school, I spend six years in medical school, and you tell me that I will be lost when I leave this place, then all my training in the university... useless. I'm sure I can fend for myself." I signed. Everybody followed me, all signed, so all twelve went out of the army. It was a serious move, which I made. I know I'm going to pay a price for it. The price was, when I went to apply for a job, all no job. Everybody, no job. We lost six good men, who gave up their citizenship on the spot, and went away. I persuaded them to stay, I said, "No, don't go away." They said, "No, we've no use! this country, don't use!" I said, "If you believe something is wrong, we got to fight it, and stay, and fight, and don't go away! They all scolded me when I joined the PAP. They said, "Useless! Betray me." I said, "No, because if I cannot win outside, I'll win inside! I'll fight from within." My philosophy is if you are wronged, you stay and fight. If you run, nobody fights. So, I stayed. But they said, "Doc, you stay you suffer." I said, "What is suffering? It's nothing. This is a way of life, I always think.

0:19:27

[Tony Lai](#)

So, your Parliamentary life, pragmatism versus principles, right? You stood for principles, but you must have been accused that you're not being pragmatic. How do you juggle between pragmatism and principles?

0:19:44

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

Let me tell you it's very painful. I think the most traumatic event for me, I would say, was the Foreign Talent. The Foreign Talent, that time, I was very unhappy. I agree with the Foreign [Talent], we need good people to come to Singapore. When they asked me, I said, "Yes." I supported the policy. But this is where it ends. Because I disagree with the manner, in which you all are going about it. So, I went to the papers, and I gave some interview, and Lee Kuan Yew read about it. He was very angry. I think he was very angry. To make matters worse, one day at the height of it, I made one of my strongest political rallies. I said, "For whatever this discussion is all about, we must think Singaporeans first. But when I said the words "Think Singaporeans first", everybody... like it's a bad word, like I've said something wrong. Everybody looked at me, all the frontbench... "Do you know it's a very dangerous statement to make now? You frighten the foreigners away." So, George Yeo stood up and said, "You will frighten all the foreigners away." I said, "Wrong! You are frightening our Singaporeans away. You're making our Singaporeans look small. Why do you have to care so much for the foreigners? I'm

not against foreigners but you over... you raise their pedestal so high... and make our Singaporeans so low. I said, "I disagree." I continued. I still give interviews on this type of things. Then one day I received a phone call from the press. They said, "Doc, Lee Kuan Yew scolded you in public." I said, "What did he scold me for?" He said, "You are wrong." He said I am wrong. He said, "If Singaporeans--you have to choose, whether you believe Dr Tan Cheng Bock, or you believe me--to see you through this country. I said, "That's a very loaded statement." But then the press asked me, "How?" I said, "I cannot argue against a statement. But if you want to have a dialogue, then we can argue. But if you say that you have to choose between Tan Cheng Bock and him, it is a statement made by him. I cannot ask people to choose me, no, I cannot. So, I said, "I leave it to that. If that is the decision that he thinks that is, I take it, I don't want." We never talk after that.

For a long time, we never talked. I don't dislike him, I still think he's a good man. I think without him this country will... We won't be where we are, but we have differences. I'm prepared to discuss the differences, but it doesn't mean that you hold all the ideas. You don't have the monopoly, I don't have the monopoly. If all of us want to have the monopoly of ideas, then this country will go to naught, because there is no discussion, there's no debate, we just make statement, statement, statement. To me that is not my style.

0:22:54

[Tony Lai](#)

Doc, your time with the Feedback Unit. People wanted a voice; a channel was created. Tell us a bit about that journey you went through and running the Feedback Unit. What were the challenges, dilemmas, you grappled with?

0:23:11

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

They created the Feedback Unit after we--I think it was after 1984--when there was a swing of 12%. So, we wanted to see how best we can reach down to the ground. They created this Feedback Unit. Now the Feedback Unit, when they gave me the terms of reference, I must say I didn't truly follow the terms of reference, because I have never been in the civil service. I don't care about this Standard Operating Procedure. I said, "I'm from the private sector. I have no idea about your civil service. If you want me to run, I'll run it my way, you know.

The Feedback Unit was necessary at that time, but I think they were hoping that the material I give them will be like doctored in a way, in the sense that I would send them something very nice to read. But it was contrary, I said that if I sent you the feedback, it must be the raw form. I will tell you exactly what the feelings of the ground are, and how issues are looked at, by the ground, not by what you hope the ground would like to look at those issues. So, I conducted a lot of sessions. In the sessions, I was trying to assess how people would debate in a forum, and how

people would hold dialogue sessions in a manner, in which there is no anger, no personality involved, and so on. I come to the conclusion that we are not ready. We are not ready to have two parties talking. Why? Because somehow or other, it will become very personal. The chap who lose the debate feels very like... he's personal and... I still don't understand, you know. I said, "If you want to, you all talk about British style of debate. You debate, you quarrel, you fight, you go out. We still shake hands, we still drink wine, we drink whiskey and happy. Still, we don't worry. That was what I wanted to try to develop during the Feedback Unit, so that all Singaporeans can go there, and talk. I asked them, "You can be free to talk." But every time they talk, "This one, don't quote me, don't this." Like, so scared. I said, "You speak. Don't worry." So, they will talk. Then after all this, I collated all this information. I sent it to the various ministries. But some of the ministers not very happy, because the things I write in are never always pleasant. Sometimes, they were not so, not so pleasant. I remember one minister, one day--I don't know whether he spoke in jest--he said, "Doc, any more feedback? Any more worthwhile feedback to give me?" I said, "I take it as an insult. So, from today, my unit will not give you any more feedback. Then he said, "Are you serious?" I said, "Yes. I'm serious, because I spent hours telling my men to give you those feedback. I tell them no doctoring of feedback. Take it! If you don't like it, you don't deserve, I don't give you." I didn't give him. So, the minister very angry, complained, I think to Goh Chok Tong. Then Chok Tong said, "Doc, you touch on his raw nerve. He doesn't care for you." So, I didn't send him, and he's one of my good friends also. I said, "Too bad." After a while, then I gave him back the feedback. So, this is the way I think we must... how I manage it... because I want it to be authentic. I don't want it to be like, something to please you.

They asked me, "What is wrong with your Feedback Unit?" I said, "I can see the wrong... The Feedback Unit... I can write beautiful language. My all these scholars can write nice letters, how good and how good... but there's one important element missing." He said, "What is it?" The emotional element he explained to him, is not, you don't realise. You read it in the written form, you don't really feel for it. I remembered they asked me, "What do you do?" You must go down to the ground, you must walk the ground. That's why a lot of ministerial walkabouts. I like to believe that that was partly due to my telling them: you got to go down to the ground. Because if you don't have the feel, you're talking like in the air. You don't know, really.

Many people accused me of I, personalising the Feedback Unit. I said, "I don't apologise. If you think I've personalised the Feedback Unit, I've personalised it. Because I want to be close to them. I want them to know, I want them to feel comfortable when they come and talk to me. I don't want them to feel restricted. I don't want them to be constrained. I want them to come and tell, this I disagree, this, this, ... then I know he's coming from his heart. He's not just trying to please me. So, this is the feedback they tell me. You are too accommodating to them, but it's not accommodating... you want to create a climate, not a climate of fear. There's a very strong climate of fear at the ground level. Everybody's scared to talk. "Don't,

don't quote me, you go to the government.” All the taxi drivers talk to me, “Doc, you are MP (Member of Parliament)? Die man, I talk to you so much, and the government will know, I would have...” I said, “Don't worry, just talk.” So, this climate of fear, we will have to try to overcome that. It's difficult because the government has a hold in everything now.

0:29:15

[Tony Lai](#)

Let's talk about that point, when you decided that instead of being part of the system, you wanted to be a leader outside the system. Why? What happened? What were your thoughts? What made you step up, and step out?

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[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

So, you're referring to my Presidential Election?

0:29:32

[Tony Lai](#)

Correct.

0:29:34

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

After my political life, I thought I want to relax, I want to go away. But then as I said, Jurong Country Club people called me. They asked me, “Doc, you are too relaxed. You are not doing anything. You are wasting your time playing golf and enjoying yourself. You better come and do something for the nation.” I said, “What?” [They said,] “The Presidential Election is coming. You should stand.” But that was even quite some time. So, that actually gave me some thought. I said, “Maybe I can strengthen the system. You see, don't always think that the President is going to be antagonistic towards the system. That's where many people got the wrong idea. The President must be seen as somebody, to strengthen the system. Even the PAP now is so strong, you may need a President to strengthen it, because they themselves cannot be a guardian of their own doing. Because there will be some flaws in some of the things, and some of the things can go wrong, and you need somebody to just say, “Look, this is the way. It's better done this way, you don't have to destroy the system.”

After that it was GE (General Election). I went around GE, just to have a look. I attended all the rallies, and so on. Then also, one point that caught my attention was, the diversity. Singapore is so disunited now. I said, “If the President can be a unifying figure, it will be good for the country.” Then you have to establish yourself, and hope that one day people will receive you as somebody, who can gel

everybody together. That was one of my reasons why I thought if I, with a little bit of support from the ground, and if I can be President and I can help to unify the country, I'll be most happy. I know the task is difficult. The diversity is so wide, I know it's very difficult. Moreover, you think it over. For eighteen years, there was no election for President. You ask yourself, is this good or not? We went to Parliament to try to change the Constitution, so that the President is no longer, what you called, a ceremonial President, but becoming a custodial President. When there's custodial, there's a lot of responsibility. You got to look after the finances, you've got to look after the appointments of key personnel in the government. I thought, you must have an election. You cannot have a walkover. If there is a walkover, it makes a mockery of what you have done in the past. Every time walkover, walkover. How this walkover can be arranged? I put my man there, straightaway, everybody scared: PAP man there already, so nobody dares to put their name. Or, some people just want to come and test. No, so I said, "No. You need an election. You need to see whether we can help the country to gel." So that's where I decided.

0:32:53

[Tony Lai](#)

So, was this the point, your own clarity about what sort of society Singapore should be? Please tell us a bit more, how were you thinking about what kind of society...

0:33:03

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

I want a society like in Singapore, where people don't fear. Don't be afraid to speak your mind, and the Government in power will not create this climate of fear and make matters worse. Unfortunately, it is been pervading all the way down from Lee Kuan Yew's time.

Now during Lee Kuan Yew's era, you can understand why he had to control Singapore with an iron hand. He was dealing with a different problem. All these Communist, Communalists, and so on, which are real problems for him. So, he has to instil fear in the people. In fact, I remembered I once spoke up in parliament, about people, about this taxi driver, who feared after talking to me. I said, "Yes, why?" I remember Lee Kuan Yew said, "I have to." I think it's that people must live with a little bit of fear. No fear everybody doesn't care. So, he's already thinking along those lines. But I think over the years, we have to change, because society changed through better education, better exposure, better media coverage. All of you are so exposed all over the world, all you travel so much. We want to have a much, balanced society, where everybody can talk, laugh over jokes that may be not happy, teasing the Government, and so on. We must be able to laugh at ourselves. But everyone is so prim and proper, cannot say this, cannot. The jokes... cannot crack such jokes, because it might hurt the Government. I do hope that the

younger generation of leaders, they have gone overseas to study, they are like all of you been exposed to the... I do hope that they'll be more... not so strict. Don't, this climate of fear must slowly subside....

0:35:22

[Tony Lai](#)

Dr Tan Cheng Bock, thank you so much for your time.

0:35:23

[Tan Cheng Bock](#)

Thank you.