

SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND CO-ORDINATING MINISTER FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AT THE 70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT ON FRIDAY, 29TH DECEMBER 2017 AT 1530 HRS AT THE FULLERTON HOTEL, SINGAPORE

“Maintaining the Integrity of our Democratic Process through Free and Fair Elections”

Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister in Prime Minister’s Office,
Mr Leo Yip, Head Civil Service,
Returning Officers, Election officials, ELD staff,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Congratulations to the Elections Department, or “ELD” in short, on your 70th anniversary!

2 I am happy to commemorate this key milestone with you. As the custodian of the election process in Singapore, ELD has contributed to 70 years of free and fair elections and upheld the integrity of our democratic process.

3 ELD was established as the Elections Office in 1947 under the Colonial Secretary’s Office to conduct the first Legislative Council election in 1948. There were just 14,000 voters as only British subjects were allowed to contest and vote. That election saw six members of the 22-seat Council elected by popular ballot. In fact, ELD’s first office was right here in Fullerton Building.

4 In 1962, ELD also conducted the national referendum on the merger with the Federation of Malaya, a highly-charged event which was a milestone that shaped the history of Singapore.

5 Over the past 70 years, ELD has conducted 69 elections in all. 48 of these were conducted since we became independent in 1965, comprising 5 Presidential Elections, 12 General Elections and 31 By-Elections. At our last General Election in 2015, over 2.3 million voters cast their votes to elect 89 Members of Parliament.

6 I commend ELD and our officers for their efforts in administering a fair, reliable and trusted election system.

7 The processes and procedures ELD has put in place for all the elections in Singapore have not been called into question, and this reflects the strong trust of candidates, political parties, voters and Singaporeans in ELD’s work.

8 But ELD, which has only 28 regular staff, does not conduct the elections alone. As the election administrator, ELD prepares and organises the Public Service to conduct elections fairly and efficiently. It works with partner agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, Housing and Development Board, Home Team agencies,

Attorney-General's Chambers and Ministry of Communications and Information, to name a few, to prepare for, and always be ready to conduct future elections.

9 The Returning Officer for each election leads 35,000 election officials from across the Public Service to help in the smooth and efficient conduct of elections in accordance with our laws. This is truly an example of One Public Service working together to deliver a key service with integrity and excellence to Singaporeans.

10 Let me take this opportunity to also thank ELD's partner agencies for your strong support in past elections, and most recently in preparing for and conducting the 2017 Presidential Election, our first reserved Presidential election.

Continuous Improvements to better serve Singapore

11 Over the years, ELD has made many improvements to the election process. Our officers are always looking for ways to improve our system.

12 Let me recap a few key moments in this journey. In 1954, automatic voter registration replaced voluntary registration, and in 1959, voting was made compulsory. Singaporeans take their civic responsibility to vote seriously, with voter turnout at Presidential and General Elections above 94% on average. This is comparable to other countries with compulsory voting such as Australia, Belgium and Luxembourg.

13 With more Singaporeans working and studying overseas, ELD worked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide for overseas voting. This was first implemented for the 2006 General Election. We now have ten overseas polling stations in major global cities distant from Singapore, where we have overseas missions, allowing thousands of Singaporeans overseas to vote.

14 Random sample counts were used in previous elections as an internal check. From the 2011 Presidential Election onwards, candidates and their counting agents were provided with the sample counts¹. The release of the sample counts for the first time to the public in the 2015 General Election gave an early indication of the possible outcome on Counting Night, and helped to prevent speculation and misinformation from unofficial sources while counting was underway.

15 ELD is also always looking to make improvements for the convenience of our voters. Many polling stations are already planned at convenient locations for voters, such as community centres, HDB void decks and schools. ELD is also preparing for an ageing population and ensuring barrier-free access to all polling stations - and wheelchairs are already available for those who need them. The ballot paper has also been improved since the 2011 Presidential Election to include photographs of candidates, and re-designed to make it more intuitive for voters to indicate their choice of candidate.

¹ At Presidential Election 2011, during the counting process, election officials counted and recorded the sample counts at the counting tables, in full view of the candidates and counting agents present. Candidates and counting agents could observe the sample counts taking place and take note of the counts.

16 ELD will also expand and enhance its website and eServices for voters and candidates. Voters can now check their voting status on-line and register themselves to vote overseas. Election candidates are also able to submit their required information online. ELD will also implement eRegistration at polling stations, where election officials will scan the NRIC of voters to register them, so as to shorten their waiting time before voters proceed to the ballot booths to cast their votes.

Conclusion

17 As the agency responsible for the election process, ELD has contributed to nation building and by upholding the integrity of the democratic process in Singapore. This would not have been possible without all of you working together as one Public Service. This afternoon, ELD has put together an exhibition which showcases the major events and process enhancements over the last 70 years and I look forward to viewing the exhibition with you later.

18 All the staff of ELD, past and present, can take pride in the progress and contributions that ELD has made. And I would like to make special mention of Mr Puteh Bin Mahamood, who has been working in ELD for 70 years, since ELD was formed. Mr Puteh is now 84 years of age and he is still fit and healthy. He remembers the first Legislative Council election in 1948 and meeting personalities such as Mr David Marshall and Mr Lim Yew Hock. Mr Puteh is here today and exemplifies the dedication and commitment that ELD staff have for their work.

19 Once again, congratulations and I thank all our officers, past and present, and the many thousands who helped in the conduct of free and fair elections.