

# CITATION FOR SENIOR MINISTER *Tharman Shanmugaratnam*

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The last time I spoke on this very same stage with a Senior Minister in the audience was in 2006, when I was SMA President and we conferred the SMA Honorary Membership on our Guest of Honour, then Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. That evening, when Senior Minister Goh spoke after me, he reminded me that there was this CCTV attached to the ceiling and it was recording everything. It is still there.

I will keep this brief, as I am reminded that everyone remembers Abraham Lincoln for his 271-word Gettysburg Address, but no one remembers the person before him who spoke for two hours at what was known as the Gettysburg Oration.

Guest of Honour, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Mrs Shanmugaratnam, President Lee Yik Voon, honoured guests, Honorary Members, colleagues and friends, the SMA Honorary Membership is the highest award the SMA gives to an individual for services either to the nation or to the profession.

The previous SMA Council unanimously decided to nominate then Deputy Prime Minister Shanmugaratnam for the Honorary Membership, because the council members believed that as a leader of this country, Mr Tharman embodied all the values the SMA holds dear. All this is obvious. But there is more to Mr Tharman than just achievement. He is in fact quite a bit of a paradox.

But first, let us digress a bit and talk a little about some interesting facets of our Honorary Member:

- ▶ Firstly, Mr Tharman spent many years in a school with the word “Chinese” in its school name, yet the school is paradoxically well known for being extremely bad in Chinese. That is something I am proud to announce the two of us have in common.
- ▶ According to his friends there, he was an avid sportsman and he represented the school in no less than four sports and apparently did not study very hard. He only buckled down and studied after he was laid low by a sports injury.
- ▶ Unlike any of our ministers, he spent a little more time in school than planned because his first attempt at the A-Level examinations was, shall I say, suboptimal. If you think life as a student is stressful nowadays, it was worse then. The school magazine actually published the results of all the A-Level students of the previous year.
- ▶ In fact, if there was streaming in those days, he may not be considered to have taken the express route, let alone the Integrated Programme.
- ▶ After leaving school a little later with a great turnaround in academic results, he went on to study at London School of Economics, Cambridge University and Harvard University.

▶ And of course, it is no official secret (pun intended) that he had a small and unfortunate brush with the law in 1992.

I would like to add that much of the above is hearsay. I have not verified if they are facts. But since the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill hasn't been passed yet, I should be OK. What I am going to say next is pure opinion, which the Act is not supposed to regulate.

Now that we are done with that short public education bit for which Ministry of Law should be pleased, let us now return to regular programming.

At this juncture, one would say that the Tharman Shanmugaratnam story is not very promising by Singapore standards. Singapore leaders often have unblemished and unbroken track records of academic and professional success before they are enrolled into political life. A uni-dimensional life of achievement in an academic meritocracy with no detours would be the usual description befitting such an exceptional life. But our Honorary Member does not quite fit into this category. He has gone through setbacks and detours. That makes him human in a crowd of superhumans.

Perhaps that is why, beyond being an **enduring** politician, of which there are many examples in Singapore, he is also **endearing**. This is a rare thing. Most Singapore political leaders are enduring, competent and honest. But Mr Tharman is all that and more. He is

both **enduring and endearing**, and that in Singapore, is quite a bit of a paradox.

He is also therefore popular. But he is **not populist**. His policies and programmes are based on sound economic principles and social considerations and do not pander to the masses. If anything, they often recognise the limitations of Government and try to engage the people to do more. Programmes such as the Pioneer Generation Package, SkillsFuture, and Community Health Assist Scheme, or CHAS in short, were all started during his watch as Finance Minister. A key facet of all these well-meaning and popular schemes is that they are funded by money raised from the current generation of Singaporeans, not future generations. In many other countries, social spending liability is foisted onto future generations, literally spending money it has not yet earned.

The third paradox I would like to highlight is that he is obviously brilliant, but he doesn't make us feel stupid, or stupider. Which in itself, is also a rare thing in Singapore. Like his late father and SMA Honorary Member, Emeritus Professor K Shanmugaratnam, who could make explaining a difficult histopathology slide sound like a mellifluous radio matinee show on a Sunday afternoon, Mr Tharman is a supremely articulate communicator. Two of the best examples of this are

his speech at a rally in Bukit Panjang in the last General Elections and his onstage face-off with a BBC host at the 45th St Gallen Symposium. If you are unconvinced, go Google these two events and see the videos for yourself.

Clever leaders are not rare in Singapore. The problem is that after interacting with them, many of us mere mortals often end up feeling stupid, especially when they explain difficult, unpopular but perhaps necessary policies. This never happens with Mr Tharman. No matter how difficult the policy is, he has the knack of explaining simply and concisely. He will convince you that the policy is good and necessary, without making you feel stupid, even though in reality, you are probably a lot dumber than him. In fact, he makes you feel cleverer. You feel that after hearing him talk, a bit of his cleverness has actually rubbed off on you. That in itself is a paradox as well.

He is both enduring and endearing. He is popular but not populist. And he convinces you he is right and at the same time makes you feel smarter. These are all paradoxes.

Like many good short stories, I will end this citation with a mystery: How does Mr Tharman do it?

Well, in all likelihood, we will never find out.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for bearing with me.

## Conferment and the scroll

I now invite SMA President Dr Lee Yik Voon onstage, to confer on Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam the SMA Honorary Membership for his services to the nation.

For this event, we have asked a Master Calligrapher, Mr Kee Meng Cheng, to write a scroll. Mr Kee is also the same calligrapher that SMA engaged when Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Mr Goh Chok Tong, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Dr Tony Tan and Mr Gan Kim Yong were conferred Honorary Memberships. His works are avidly sought out by collectors all over the region and he has been often regarded as the natural successor to the late Mr Pan Shou, Singapore's most pre-eminent Chinese calligrapher.

The four words “嘉谋善政” mean “excellent strategising and skilful governing”, which we believe succinctly describes our Honorary Member's attributes as servant and leader of the people.

A little-known fact about this scroll is that Mr Kee had to redo it. This is because the first scroll was written a few weeks ago. And then, as we all know, Mr Tharman got promoted. So Mr Kee had to redo the scroll so that the salutation is correct. But not to worry, Mr Kee was happy to redo the scroll and he didn't charge SMA more. But it was a bit stressful due to time constraints. ◆



### Legend

1. A group photo after the conferment of the Honorary Membership