

Lim Siong Guan to deliver lectures as SR Nathan Fellow

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Can Singapore fall? That is the question that former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan will discuss in a lecture series starting this week.

The implied answer to the question is yes, he notes. But what he wants to warn against is a Singapore that declines gradually, by “unconsciously making our way there”.

To Mr Lim, there are already signs that old thinking on the economy is not going to cut it. Officials have pointed to slower growth ahead – this year’s initial forecast was 1 to 3 per cent, before being narrowed to 2 to 3 per cent last month.

Asked whether 1 to 3 per cent growth is the “new normal”, Mr Lim says: “This is your new normal for old behaviour – if we don’t change.”

To break out of this mode, Singapore needs a “culture of innovation”, he says. Innovation has to “fill you, and even overwhelm you”.

It has to be ingrained in our beliefs and how we run our lives, he added. This requires “a comfort with being the first to try something out” as well as taking in one’s stride what others might perceive as failure.

Mr Lim, the Institute of Policy Studies’ fourth SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, will deliver the first of three lectures tomorrow evening at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House at the National University of Singapore.

The previous SR Nathan Fellows were former head of civil service Peter Ho, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan and Banyan Tree executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping.

Mr Lim, 70, has a reputation for transforming the organisations he

led. As permanent secretary of the Finance Ministry, he introduced an award called the ERRward, to embrace the apparent failure that comes from trying new things.

The son of a taxi driver and a teacher won the President’s Scholarship to study mechanical engineering at the University of Adelaide, where he graduated with first-class honours in 1969. Upon his return, he began his career in the sewerage department, rose through the ranks and became permanent secretary for defence, finance and education.

He was also chairman of the Economic Development Board and group president of GIC.

His astute reflections about the future earned him the moniker Yoda – the wise Star Wars character who is able to see into the future.

What advice would Mr Lim give the young? “Chase opportunities, don’t chase the money. Look for opportunities to try new things. You never know where you’ll end up.”

On the prospect of Singapore “falling”, Mr Lim points to the well-known essay, *The Fate Of Empires*, by British soldier-scholar Sir John Glubb. It tells of how nations rise due to the drive towards affluence, but how this drive also brings about an internal decay that ultimately leads nations to fall.

To fight this rot, Mr Lim calls on

Singaporeans to build a gracious society: “Do you say thank you to the driver when you get off a shuttle bus? It’s about the little things.”

Individuals have a bigger role than government in forging everyday graciousness, he feels.

Take neighbourly ties: “You wake up and you say, ‘How come my neighbour doesn’t appear to care about me?’ Your neighbour is asking the same question about you. Answer the question for yourself.”

Some might say engaging neighbours leads to quarrels. This is true, he says, but interactions are necessary for deeper trust. Unengaged neighbours “may not end up with little quarrels day to day, but your chances of a big quarrel, coming from big misunderstandings, are much greater”, he argues.

Another example he cites: people keeping to the left on an escalator – do they do it as a rule and a social norm, or because they genuinely care for those who need to go faster? Caring for others, he says, has to be authentic, because people can tell when it isn’t.

“Even my granddaughter – a three-year-old – she can figure out who is authentic in thinking about her and loving her, and who is not.”

“We all can feel that, right?”

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