

Our Singapore Conversation: Bridging the Great Affective Divide

Introduction

In 2012, after having obtained its lowest-ever electoral results in Singapore's history in both parliamentary and presidential elections, and facing an unprecedented outpouring of discontent towards policies such as spiralling property prices and rapid immigration, the Singapore Government was faced with a conundrum: how could it rebuild trust with Singaporeans?

The spectre of a 'Great Affective Divide' between the Singapore Government and the people was not a new one. As early as 1994, it had been coined by novelist and political commentator Catherine Lim in a *Straits Times* article.¹ She wrote, "It is no secret that while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard." The article earned her a sound rebuke by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who challenged her to enter politics if she wanted to express such opinions.

Almost two decades later, the political climate in Singapore had changed considerably. Articles critical of prevailing government policy dominated blogs and social media platforms, where opposition parties and their supporters were free to express themselves with a savvy that their counterparts in the People's Action Party (PAP) had not truly mastered.

¹ Lim, Catherine. "The PAP and the People: A Great Affective Divide." *The Straits Times* 3 (1994).

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It was in this context, a year after the elections, that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced “Our Singapore Conversation” (OSC), a year-long public engagement initiative by the Singapore Government. It was driven by a recognition that the government needed to work with the people in order to confront the challenges Singapore faced in an increasingly complex world. As Minister Heng Swee Keat put it, “How, in such a world, can any one group of people have the answers to everything? If we are to work together towards a future Singapore that stirs our passion and pride, we must get everyone involved.”²

The Conversation was framed with the following questions: “What is the Singapore we want to see in the future? What are our priorities, as a nation? Where do we want to go as a country, as a people?”³

A 26-member committee led by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat was appointed to facilitate the national conversation. Emphasising inclusiveness, the committee comprised Singaporeans from many different backgrounds: grassroots, private sector, unions, voluntary welfare organisations, academia, sports and the arts community and political office-holders. Apart from seven political office holders, the committee also included a taxi driver, a polytechnic student, an artist and a television host. Minister Heng explained that the national conversation would be an opportunity for all Singaporeans to “reaffirm what is good and still relevant; recalibrate in areas where we have gone off course; and refresh and innovate, and break new ground.”⁴

The civil servant in charge of implementing Our Singapore Conversation was Melissa Khoo, the newly-appointed Director in charge of the OSC Programme Office. Melissa and her colleagues were tasked with designing the OSC in order to reach out to the maximum number of people, through an authentic process of engagement that would include people from all segments of society, including vulnerable groups whose voices were not normally heard. Civil servants were also encouraged to facilitate, participate in, and contribute to the OSC process. In an unprecedented move, the Government also announced that a long-standing gag order

² Accessed from: “Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation”, available at <http://oursgconversation.sg/reflections/OSC.pdf>

³ Accessed from: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/parliamentary-replies/2012/10/people-engagement-process-for-.php>

⁴ Accessed from: <https://www.oursgconversation.sg/about-our-singapore-conversation/>

preventing public servants from speaking publicly on government policies would be lifted, although they were still not allowed to talk “about their current work or policies they worked on.”⁵

Melissa understood the challenges of the massive task entrusted to her. On one hand, she had to satisfy the Singapore Government’s demand for an authentic citizen consultation process, albeit on its own terms; on the other, she had to respond to government sceptics who were keen to portray the OSC as yet another tool for the government to “co-opt” its critics or “pretend” it was listening to the people. How best could Melissa and the OSC Committee design a process of citizen engagement which could bridge the divide between the government and the people?

Background of the OSC Process

Previous Public Consultation Exercises

The OSC was not the first instance in which the Singapore government had attempted to engage the citizens through a public participation exercise. Indeed, the OSC’s predecessors, such as *The Next Lap* in 1991, *Singapore 21* in 1999, and *Remaking Singapore* in 2003, were designed in a similar manner, and tended to take place after critical periods in Singapore’s history, such as political or economic crises.⁶ Academics in Singapore had often expressed the view that such exercises were attempts to channel dissent and educate the public, without genuinely viewing citizens as equal partners. In particular, Garry Rodan had argued that far from weakening the PAP state, participation enabled an expansion of the state; it promoted “co-option” rather than contestation, reinforcing regime stability; and it was circumscribed by certain limits. It should not, for example, ‘undermine the government’s standing’.⁷

⁵ Accessed from: <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/civil-servants-can-take-part-dialogues-gag-order-lifted-20121016>

⁶ Kenneth Paul Tan, *Our Singapore Conversation: Telling National Stories*, in <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/GIA-19-final.pdf>. It is perhaps noteworthy that Minister Lawrence Wong disagreed with this view: “However you see it, it will always be after elections”, he commented. “Not because 5-6 years we do one, but more like we recognize [that] the world is changing quickly, policies have to be kept updated, we need to constantly renew and review policies.”⁶ Another committee member, however, commented that the OSC had been convened because the PAP had been “made humble by the vote”.

⁷ ‘Singapore “Exceptionalism”? Authoritarian Rule and State Transformation’ in Joseph Wong and Edward Friedman (editors), *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose* (New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 231-51). See also Chua, Beng Huat. “The Relative Autonomies of State and Civil Society in Singapore.” *State-Society Relations in Singapore* (2000): 62–76.

Past attempts at consultation were also shaped by the political context of the time – what Chan Heng Chee called an ‘administrative state’ characterised by PAP hegemony and devoid of ‘real’ politics⁸. It was also what Chua Beng Huat called a ‘communitarian’ state, with the government trying to maintain power by being the arbiter between different communities⁹. Within this context, consultation initiatives were also influenced by specific events. Firstly, election results in 1984 which saw the end of the PAP monopoly in parliament preceded the setting up of the *Feedback Unit* in 1985. In 1987, Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) were set up to enable PAP MPs to play a more active role in questioning government policies.

Soon after the 1988 elections, the government set up the National Agenda, an intra-party attempt to better engage citizens. In 1989, a Cabinet sub-committee was tasked to develop a broad agenda, known as *The Next Lap*, for Singapore's long-term development. Formed by Goh Chok Tong and chaired by George Yeo, the committee drew on the ideas put forth in the past by government and private groups. Included were those from Vision 1999 (1984), the Economic Committee (1986), Agenda for Action (1988) and the 1989 reports of the six Advisory Councils on the disabled, the aged, sports and recreation, youth, culture and the arts, and family and community life.¹⁰

In 1990, Goh Chok Tong became the second Prime Minister of Singapore. He promised a more consultative style of governance, and public consultation attempts under his leadership could be seen as an attempt to establish his credibility. This new inclusiveness was manifested in a variety of ways, such as the adoption of a national ideology known as the Shared Values¹¹, and the setting up of the NCMP and NMP schemes¹² and Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs)¹³. Such institutional innovations provided ‘alternative voices’ in Parliament while co-

⁸ Chan, Heng Chee. *Politics in an administrative state: where has the politics gone?*. Singapore: Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, 1975.

⁹ Chua, Beng-Huat. *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore*. Vol. 10. Routledge, 2002.

¹⁰ Accessed from http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_165_2004-12-23.html

¹¹ Accessed from http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_542_2004-12-18.html

¹² The NCMP (Non-Constituency Member of Parliament) scheme allowed the ‘best losers’ from opposition parties to enter the Parliament, while the NMP (Nominated Member of Parliament) scheme created a category of parliamentarians who were representatives of civil society organisations and other interest groups.

¹³ GPCs examine the policies, programmes and proposed legislation of a particular government ministry, provides the ministry with feedback and suggestions, and is consulted by the ministry on issues of public interest. They are backed by resource panels that members of the public are invited to join.

opting civil society groups and the public, thus reinforcing the PAP's political longevity. Moreover, institutions such as the GRC system and the Elected Presidency served to consolidate the PAP's hold on power while making symbolic appeals to 'inclusiveness'.

Therefore, these consultative overtures did not come at the expense of the government's political hegemony. Control over the media and civil societies remained tight. Indeed, in his response to Catherine Lim's 1994 article on the 'Great Affective Divide', then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented that "while Singaporeans will have more space for political debate, it does not mean that the Government is vacating the arena". He added that those without a 'hidden agenda' did not need to fear rebuttals from the Government, but those out to undermine the Government or wrest political control from the ruling party could expect 'an extremely robust' response.¹⁴

After the 1997 and 2001 elections, two public consultation attempts were launched: *Singapore 21 (S21)*¹⁵ and *Remaking Singapore*. Academics commented that these exercises appeared to have a pre-set agenda. For instance, Terence Lee pointed out that S21's top-down approach in selecting five pressing dilemmas¹⁶ and specially selected committee members caused it to be an exercise in "pseudo-participation". He called it "yet another motherhood statement by the self-proclaimed all-knowing Singapore government".¹⁷

Despite its limitations, however, S21 was significantly different from previous attempts at public consultation. For example, compared with *The Next Lap*, which had been formed by a Cabinet sub-committee, S21 was made up of five committees comprising 83 MPs, unionists, teachers and welfare organisation representatives, among others. S21 emphasised the partnership between government, the private sector and citizens, but also highlighted Singaporeans' social and political apathy and called for Singaporeans to become "participants, not mere observers" and to "learn not only to express their views or suggest alternative solutions, but also to put suggestions into action." It also emphasised 'civic' participation rather

¹⁴ Beng-Huat, Chua. "'Asian-Values "Discourse and the Resurrection of the Social." *positions* 7, no. 2 (1999): 573-592.

¹⁵ Terence Lee, *Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore*, (Oxon: Routledge), 2010, p. 89.

¹⁶ "Every Singaporean Matters"; "Strong Families"; "Opportunities for All"; "The Singapore Heartbeat" and "Active Citizenship".

¹⁷ Terence Lee, *Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore*, (Oxon: Routledge), 2010, p. 89.

than ‘civil’ participation, putting the emphasis on citizen responsibilities rather than citizen rights. Finally, it highlighted the benefits *to the government* of greater citizen participation: drawing from a wider pool of technical expertise and helping to preserve regime stability¹⁸. In this regard, S21 was a significant milestone in Singapore's public participation history in terms of the government acknowledging the importance of civic participation, and beginning to consult the people directly, albeit within limits.

The next exercise, *Remaking Singapore*, shed more light on what these ‘limits’ were. Convened after the Nov 2001 elections and September 11 attacks to look at new ways to make social, political and cultural changes, *Remaking Singapore* sought to complement the work of the Economic Review Committee, which had been set up in Dec 2001 to fundamentally review Singapore's development strategy and formulate a blueprint to restructure the economy. After an extensive consultation process, both inside and outside the state, the committee put up 74 recommendations, of which 60 were implemented by the government. The 14 proposals ‘without consensus’ which were not incorporated into the committee’s recommendations included “changes to defamation laws to enhance free speech; liberalisation of the media to improve the range and accessibility of information; and changes to the political playing field, including that electoral boundaries be announced a reasonable time in advance of elections and that a transparent process of redrawing electoral boundaries be introduced by an independent electoral commission.”¹⁹ These were an indication of the ‘out-of-bounds markers’²⁰ that signalled the limits to political change resulting from public consultation. Would the OSC be any different?

Origins of Our Singapore Conversation

The OSC appeared to share similar origins as previous initiatives. It was convened a year after the 2011 General Elections and Presidential Elections, both of which saw the PAP government's

¹⁸ ‘Singapore “Exceptionalism”? Authoritarian Rule and State Transformation’ in Joseph Wong and Edward Friedman (editors), *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose* (New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 231-51).

¹⁹ ‘Singapore “Exceptionalism”? Authoritarian Rule and State Transformation’ in Joseph Wong and Edward Friedman (editors), *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose* (New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 231-51).

²⁰ The term ‘OB markers’ had been coined by then-Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts George Yeo in 1991 to describe the boundaries of acceptable political discourse in Singapore.

lowest-ever electoral scores since Singapore's independence. The fact that 40% of Singaporeans voted for the Opposition over the PAP government with its proven track record indicated a sense of unhappiness with the direction of government policies in recent years. Immigration, housing and transport had emerged as hot-button issues during the elections. Many Singaporeans took to the Internet and social media platforms, which were less regulated than print media, to lament that the Government appeared to be prioritising economic growth over social welfare. Academics noted that inequality had significantly worsened in the past decade, with wages at the bottom stagnating,²¹ and social commentators argued that rapid immigration had contributed to the doubling of property prices²² and to public transport infrastructure bursting at the seams.²³ Thus although public consultation exercises were held at regular intervals throughout Singapore's history, the 2011 elections could be seen as a 'focusing event' which brought the need for citizen consultation to the heart of the government's agenda.

Kenneth Paul Tan, another member of the OSC Committee, proposed three lenses to help explain the OSC. In addition to being an exercise in developing deliberative democracy, he commented that the OSC could be viewed variously as a high-profile activity to satisfy a more assertive middle-class desire for recognition, as a state-led public ritual, or as a spectacle of nationhood and active citizenship. Although it performed a conservative ideological role, he argued that the OSC also held the promise of creating new possibilities for political change.²⁴

However, expressing that the OSC "started off on the wrong foot", he lamented the "unmistakable exclusion" of opposition politicians, prominent activists, and public intellectuals known for their more controversial views in the OSC Committee.²⁵ Some other committee members felt uncomfortable with the over-representation of PAP members in the Committee and expressed uncertainty over whether they themselves were being co-opted and

²¹ Accessed from http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/SP2012_Bkgd-Pa.pdf

²² Accessed from <http://www.ipscommons.sg/index.php/categories/economics/140-rethinking-singapores-housing-policies>

²³ Accessed from <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/could-answer-transport-woes-lie-immigration-policy-131812406.html>

²⁴ Kenneth Paul Tan, *Our Singapore Conversation: Telling National Stories*, in <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/GIA-19-final.pdf>.

²⁵ Accessed from: "Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation", available at <http://oursgconversation.sg/reflections/OSC.pdf>

instrumentalised in the pursuit of government objectives that they might not necessarily agree with.²⁶

Policy Dilemmas

Melissa, Kenneth and their colleagues in the OSC Committee faced a number of challenging questions in the design of the OSC process. How could they make this OSC different from past consultation exercises?

A first question concerned the *scope* of the Conversation. How many participants should the Conversation reach out to? How would they balance the needs of the so-called ‘silent majority’ whose voices were seldom heard, and the ‘vocal minority’ which dominated critical discourse, particularly on the Internet? The diversity of the OSC Committee, which comprised representatives of different segments of Singapore society, granted them access to different networks, through the People’s Association, media, labour unions, and other groups. But who should be included in the dialogue for it to be truly representative of all Singaporeans, and how should the OSC Committee reach out to them?

A second question was the question of *format*. What was the best way for members of the government to interact with citizens? Melissa and her colleagues felt that the era of town hall-style meetings – where one minister faced hundreds of people – was over, and it was imperative to design a different engagement format where government representatives could interact more closely with citizens. Yet how could this be done? Moreover, in the age of the Internet, how should the committee balance online and physical engagement sessions for effective dialogue?

A third question was that of *credibility*. Even before the OSC had started, the Committee faced an uphill task trying to prove to government sceptics that this process was a genuine attempt on the government’s part to solicit useful feedback for policymaking. The relatively pro-establishment composition of the OSC Committee had already, it seemed, proven some critics

²⁶ “I was sceptical if it would work, if the efforts were sincere, or if there were other ulterior motives,” Kuo Jian Hong commented. Accessed from: “Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation”, available at <http://oursgconversation.sg/reflections/OSC.pdf>

right. What could be done to salvage the situation and convince the sceptics that the Government genuinely wanted to hear their views?

A fourth question was that of *process*. The initial driving question of the OSC had been quite general: what did Singaporeans want to see in 2030? Some critics had pointed out that such an open-ended question was not likely to lead to any policy change. How could the OSC committee members frame the discussion around this open-ended question, yet eventually make it focused enough to get to the heart of citizens' concerns? What methods could be used to find out the most pressing concerns of citizens?

A final question was that of *outcomes*. What, or where, would the OSC lead to? Minister Lawrence Wong emphasised that there were no deliverables, or pre-determined policy recommendations. The emphasis was on the process itself, on getting people to engage with each other on what was important to them. Other committee members, such as Kenneth Paul Tan, saw the OSC as an important step in “building capital, rituals and institutions to deepen public participation” and ultimately creating “a norm of citizens who think together” outside the ambit of the government.²⁷ Given these divergent objectives, how could the success of the OSC be evaluated?

Melissa and her colleagues were faced with the arduous task of bridging the ‘affective divide’ between the Singapore government and a restive citizenry. How could she and her committee best design a consultative process that would rebuild trust between government and citizens?

(Suggested responses to these questions and a detailed evaluation of the OSC process are provided in the Teaching Notes attached to this case.)

²⁷ As cited in an interview with Prof Kenneth Paul Tan, 13 September 2013

Exhibit A²⁸

What message does the Our Singapore committee send?

Posted on Sep 11, 2012 11:21 AM



By [Jeremy Au Yong](#)

jeremyau@sph.com.sg

The national conversation kicked off in earnest on Saturday with the announcement of who would be on the 26-member panel. And since then, there has been a wide range of reactions to the announcement.

What caught the eye for Netizens was not so much those who made it onto the committee but rather those who didn't. Many voiced disappointment that opposition party members were nowhere to be found on the committee. Others, perhaps spurred by a sloppy reading of reports on the committee by The Online Citizen, were up in arms about how bloggers might be excluded from the national conversation altogether.

For me, a large part of the seeming negativity to what is otherwise an innocuous committee announcement stems from the fact that the line-up does not carry with it a coherent narrative. As one goes down the list of 26 names, it is not quite clear what objectives the organisers had in mind while putting this group together.

Was this a committee set up to be as diverse and representative as possible? Evidently not.

Otherwise, bloggers and opposition members would likely have been involved. The Prime Minister has made special effort to reach out to the online crowd so it would make little sense for a committee trying to be representative to not save a seat at the table for at least one blogger.

The committee's chair, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, in fact, does indicate that representativeness is not the aim of this committee even though they national conversation will include all. I quote from a Straits Times article about the members of the committee:

Asked why "alternative voices" such as bloggers and opposition MPs were not included, he replied: "This is not a partisan exercise."

Rather, the members were chosen for their individual perspectives and experiences, and not as "functional representatives of particular groups or to advocate particular interests".

²⁸ Accessed from: <http://www.singapolitics.sg/views/what-message-does-our-singapore-committee-send>

He added: "Every Singaporean is welcome to provide their views, including members of the opposition, and the committee will be happy to receive their feedback and ideas."

In other words, the committee does not necessarily include recognisable "alternative voices" because it is not meant to be a committee that represents everyone. Since functional representation is not a factor, it is perhaps natural that some functional groups might find themselves without a corresponding committee member they can directly identify with.

Yet, this claim that they were not going out to be representative is contradicted somewhat by how representative it actually is. If this had been a 10-man committee featuring only Cabinet Ministers, there would be few who would quibble with why so-and-so has been left out. It would already be immediately clear that the committee's role is only administrative.

But while there are no bloggers or Workers' Party MPs, almost every other stone is covered in this committee.

There is a good mix of races, with Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian all covered. There is a good mix of ages with members ranging in age from the teens right up to the 60s. There is also a wide variety of backgrounds. There are students, businessmen, a taxi driver, an actress, media personnel and academics.

It is such a diverse bunch that Nee Soon GRC MP Lim Wee Kiak rightly looked at it and praised it for how representative it was.

He said: "It's good they are trying to represent the entire population, not just professionals or degree holders, and with different age groups including students."

And the presence of so many people with diverse interests does not buttress the argument that members are not there to play the role of representatives of any functional group or special interest. The reality is that they will likely do just that.

Their functional groups and special interests are, after all, what they know. A 19-year-old student is unlikely to come to a table of this calibre and speak generally. He is going to come and offer the perspective of a 19-year-old student. He will voice the concerns of a 19-year-old. Similarly, one does not expect a taxi driver to resist the temptation of raising concerns that taxi drivers face.

And so, if not representativeness, what actually went into selection process? There are also these unanswered questions:

How did we arrive at the number 26? Is it that these people represent the best and brightest of Singapore? Or perhaps they represent the best communicators or they all have certain skills that are critical to facilitating a national conversation? And if they were chosen because of unique ideas and perspectives, how did anyone find out about those ideas and perspectives? Was there a warm-up national conversation that took place with a selected few?

It is unfortunate that how this committee was put together has left a lot of room for speculation over why some people are in and others are out.

One way or another, this is a committee that must now get down to the unenviable task of engaging a nation on the issues that matter. It is a pity that before it can facilitate a single conversation, it has become the topic of one. Still, it is not too late to set some things right.

TAGS: NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Exhibit B²⁹

Biggest success may lie in nurturing habit to speak up, listen

BY KENNETH PAUL TAN

PUBLISHED: 14 AUGUST, 4:02 AM

Inclusiveness is one of the most important qualities of public deliberation. As a national-level public engagement exercise, the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) needs to be a space where as many representative voices as possible are heard, taken seriously and engaged with openly. This gives the people of Singapore a basis for regarding its discussions and decisions as legitimate.

When I was first introduced to the OSC, I thought that it had begun on the wrong foot. Its claim to inclusiveness was compromised, at least in terms of the composition of its committee, by the unmistakable exclusion of opposition politicians, prominent activists and public intellectuals known for their more controversial views.

Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation to volunteer on its committee with the hope of contributing positively to a process that was, even with the best of intentions, bound to be complicated for political as much as practical reasons.

I later understood that the OSC's idea of "inclusiveness" was actually tied to its efforts to engage with Singapore's "silent majority", a borrowed term that originates from the ideologically partisan world of American politics.

THE INVENTED 'SILENT MAJORITY'

On one level, the silent majority is a romanticised construct. Projected onto the political landscape, it is an imaginary image of a mass of people whose views, interests and values are somehow authentic, moderate and conservative, but whose voices remain unheard. Lacking the motivation, the ability or the courage to speak in the public sphere, the silent majority is unable, maybe just unwilling, to raise its voice above the more articulate, often agitated, and sometimes shrill tones of a "vocal minority".

On another level, the silent majority and vocal minority are ideological constructs, an invented dualism that enables politicians to assume moral authority by claiming to protect the "moderate" interests of a majority against the "extremism" of sectarian interests. Politicians around the world have often taken the liberty of speaking on behalf of the so-called silent majority. Through tokenistic gestures, some politicians have invited the participation of acceptable people they claim to be representative of this silent majority.

²⁹ Accessed from: <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/biggest-success-may-lie-nurturing-habit-speak-listen?singlepage=true>

An invented silent majority can thus become a useful ideological resource for justifying resistance to pressures for change, while maintaining political paternalism without sacrificing democratic credentials.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the notion of the silent majority should emerge in Singapore as a counterpose to the recent rise of anti-establishment views expressed especially well in the alternative media.

But if it seeks to engage the silent majority while visibly excluding the so-called vocal minority, the OSC runs the risk of becoming an ideological instrument of the political establishment. Given the sharpened critical sensibilities of the public today, this will not go unmissed. In the worst case, it will lead, at the end of the year-long process, to cynicism, political divisiveness, and an erosion of public trust and social capital.

REMOVE BARRIERS TO ENTRY

So rather than target an imaginary group of Singaporeans, a less divisive approach might be to focus on removing barriers to entry and enriching the quality of public engagement when it happens.

While structured citizen dialogues and sharing sessions may be among the most efficient modes of engaging Singaporeans and extracting information and insights from each conversation, the formal nature of these activities may actually turn off those who communicate better in a vernacularised and less directed way. They could also be intimidating for people who are not used to standing up to make an argument, supporting it and then defending it against the criticisms of others.

It is clear to me that the organisers have been extremely mindful of this challenging problem and have creatively employed a range of devices to stimulate dialogue and imagination, for instance, by introducing the element of “play” in the design and facilitation of these discussions.

And yet, Singaporeans can also be a very practical people impatient for results. They might prefer to get to the point in a more results-driven discussion. If the OSC does not efficiently record their concerns and yield the best ideas for policy-making, participants may disengage, convinced that the whole exercise is a waste of time.

But what we really need, beyond organising a mechanism for collective decision-making, is to enrich the quality of public life, impoverished by decades of political paternalism and the kind of political apathy that is said to have resulted from material success and affluence.

To do this, we need to create new spaces, practices and even rituals for public engagement and citizen activity — spaces that are non-intimidating, authentic to the diverse groups of Singaporeans, whose identities and interests are increasingly complex, and motivated as much by citizens themselves as they are by centralised committees.

Instituting the habit of public participation and nurturing the skills to do this well are, in my view, a more important contribution of the OSC than recording the aspirations that will feature in the final report. The enrichment of public life helps us build social capital. With more social capital, we can

better build on Singapore's successes and transcend the worst forms of polarisation and the excesses of populism.

This is not to say, of course, that we should be blindly conformist in our individual contributions to the common good. But rather than get entangled in deliberative knots, public discourse should rise above conventional wisdoms and platitudes that can emerge from both the establishment and anti-establishment. The success of the OSC, far beyond the technical achievements of its final report, will partly be defined by this.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kenneth Paul Tan, an OSC committee member, is Associate Professor and Vice-Dean (Academic Affairs) at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. This commentary first appeared in the OSC publication, Reflections.

Exhibit C³⁰

SPEECH BY MR HENG SWEE KEAT, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, AT THE NATIONAL DAY RALLY ON 26 AUGUST 2012, AT THE UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE

CREATING OUR FUTURE, THROUGH OUR NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Dear fellow Singaporeans,

Encounters

1 Many people have asked me what it is like to be Education Minister. Let me share a story. Last June, days after I became Minister, a parent wrote to me, angry that his son was given homework during the June vacation. Another was upset that his child was NOT given homework. One wanted his child to excel, to get ahead; the other to relax and enjoy the vacation. It's not easy to be Education Minister! But I will do my best.

2 Earlier this year, I had breakfast with a group of students at Kheng Cheng School. I asked them what their hopes and dreams were. Indeed, I have been asking this question each time I meet students.

3 Many of our young have big and interesting dreams. They want to have jobs that I had not heard of before, such as 'character directors and 'texture artists' in the animation industry. They want to create the next Star Wars.

4 I met a group of NUS students on an entrepreneurship programme in Beijing. They were awed by the vast market, and wanted to create the next big thing in China.

5 I am also very heartened that many people, young and old, volunteer their time to make life better for others.

6 But I also have concerns.

7 An elderly resident, Mr Lim, urged me: "Mr Heng, we will need an elder care facility

³⁰ Accessed from: http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/bt_files/NDR_Speech_Heng_Swee_Keat.pdf

here. We'll need it later, but better build it now, before too many people object!"

8 His concerns were not misplaced. A young man actually asked me to relocate an entire school, because it was too noisy.

Why National Conversation

9 Some of these encounters make me worry; some lift my spirit. But each raises an important question about our future. In the fight for space, will our elderly be pushed out? Will our young succeed here, or do they have to emigrate? Will our citizens seek to contribute, or will they just advance their own interests?

10 When I was young, most Singaporeans were poor. Our goal was to have food on the table. It was, simply, about survival. Today, Singaporeans have diverse needs and wants. Many also have more choices, and only a deep sense of belonging will anchor them here. We each seek to have more space. But we are a small island. So how do we achieve a consensus, turn diversity into strength, harness our idealism and make the right choices together? We need a national conversation about "Our Singapore".

What is Our Singapore Conversation?

11 This national conversation will first and foremost be about putting Singaporeans at the heart of our concerns. It will be an opportunity for Singaporeans to come together, and ask: What matters most? Where do we want to go as a country, as a people?

12 Many Singaporeans have since shared their views – I find these inspiring.

13 I recently had a dialogue with some students. They want a caring and gracious society. One student, Jolyn, puts it well: She wants a gracious Singapore "where we no longer need signs in MRT trains asking us to give up our seats for the elderly, because it is instinctively Singaporean to do so." And she adds "when it rains, we will share our umbrellas with anyone, spontaneously".

14 In the conversation about "Our Singapore", we will need to re-affirm, re-calibrate and

refresh:

15 First, re-affirm what is good and still relevant, especially where the fundamentals are concerned. As one resident told me, “Hey, Mr Heng, change when we have to change. But don’t change for the sake of change!” I fully agree. Our society must be anchored by core values and a constancy of purpose.

16 Second, we must ask ourselves “What has changed?” and re-calibrate accordingly. As in sailing, we may have set off in the right direction. But when the winds change, we need to adjust our course. For instance, we do have great strengths in some areas. But strengths, overdone, can become weaknesses.

17 Our focus on grades and achievements do help us maintain standards. But over-done, it comes at the expense of a holistic education, a happier childhood and quality time with parents. Extreme meritocracy and competition can lead to a winner-take-all society, with the winners thinking little of others. We need to restore a balance to hard-nosed material pragmatism. As Gandhi put it, we must not have commerce without morality, science without humanity and knowledge without character.

18 Third, we must refresh and innovate -- look afresh at developments and new evidence, and be bold in charting new directions. Over the years, MOE has been studying the impact of pre-schools. Our more recent evaluation show that pre-school years are important for children to learn languages and social skills. We must invest more in pre-schools and PM will touch on this later.

Conclusion

19 The national conversation that we will have will be as inclusive as possible. We will engage Singaporeans from all walks of life through multiple channels. We will seek out the views of as many people as possible, including those who normally stay silent. All of you have stayed very silent since I spoke. Thank You! But please speak up later!

20 This will allow all of us to better appreciate each other’s concerns, hopes and aspirations. Our conversation must be grounded in reason, mutual respect and an attitude of give-and-take. Singapore has succeeded so far because our own personal stories have been

woven into the big Singapore Story in a rich and coherent tapestry.

21 As Mr Kong Yew Kiin put on my Facebook, and I quote: “It will be great... to have a collage of the dreamboards of every Singaporean which will make up the Singapore Dream”. Indeed, when we pursue a common purpose, our individual dreams can come alive. When an individual succeeds, the rest of us benefit from that success.

22 My fellow Singaporeans, we have an exciting journey ahead. I urge you to take part in this national conversation about our Singapore. Together, we can make Singapore our home, a home of hope, a home of heart, a home we love.

23 Thank you very much!

Exhibit D³¹

The PAP and the people — A Great Affective Divide

By Catherine Lim

The following commentary was published in The Straits Times on September 3, 1994.

It is no secret that while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard.

It is also no secret that the Government is not much bothered by this attitude. The familiar PAP stance is: better to be unpopular and do a good job than to be popular and lead the country into chaos and ruin. At a time of peak economic prosperity and social stability, an estrangement between the government and the people must appear odd. Whence arises this Great Affective Divide?

The answer lies partly in Singapore's history. In its early years, the PAP leadership faced enormous hardships including the traumatic expulsion from Malaysia, the earlier-than-expected withdrawal of the British forces resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs, the threat of Communist influence in the unions and schools and the increasing hostility of the Chinese-educated for the newly emerging, socially ascendant English-educated. On top of all these problems was the ultimately daunting one of nature's remissness: a total lack of natural resources.

With characteristic energy and enthusiasm, the PAP leaders set about the task of taking the beleaguered country out of the woods. From the start, they decided that there was only one way to do it: establish the primacy of economic development and link it with political security to form a tight, incontrovertible equation of national survival, so that whatever fitted into the equation would be rigorously promoted and whatever threatened to disrupt it would be slapped down ruthlessly. Thus a linguistic and cultural issue — that of the English language — was resolved in its favour on the economic grounds that its adoption and use as the main language would enable the country to plug into world trade and technology. The dissenting voices of the Chinese educated were seen accordingly as subversive of the well-being of the country, and duly dealt with.

³¹ Accessed from: <http://catherinelim.sg/1994/09/03/the-pap-and-the-people-a-great-affective-divide/>

Over the years, this simple but highly effective approach has taken the country from one astonishing level of achievement to another, until today, it takes its place among the most successful nations in the world, ranking 18th among 230 countries in terms of per capita income.

Clearly, such a purposeful, uncompromising commitment to the economic imperative calls for special qualities of mind and temperament. The PAP leaders are distinguished for their intelligence, single-mindedness, sternness of purpose and cool detachment. Their methods are logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive. Their pet aversion is noisy, protracted debate that leads nowhere, emotional indulgence, frothy promises, theatrics and polemics in place of pragmatics.

This PAP approach, by reason of its amazing effectiveness, has been raised to a political credo that uniquely defines the Government.

But while the PAP ideology remains the same, the people have not. Higher education, a more affluent lifestyle and exposure to the values of the western societies, have created a new generation that is not satisfied with the quantitative paradigm but looks beyond it to a larger qualitative one that most certainly includes matters of the heart, soul and spirit. While idealism, charisma and image have a special appeal for the young, feeling in general is an essential element in everybody's life, occurring at the deepest and most basic level of human need.

The absence of this affective dimension in the PAP framework is what has alienated the people from their leaders. It is easily seen that the main criticisms levelled against the PAP point to a style deficient in human sensitivity and feeling – “dictatorial”, “arrogant”, “impatient”, “unforgiving”, “vindictive”.

The Government, puzzled and exasperated by the charges, has often invited these disaffected to come forward to explain their stand clearly and support their criticism with hard data, for instance, the oft-heard complaint that the authoritarian style of the Government has denied them freedom of expression.

But the disaffection remains largely coffee-house and cocktail party rhetoric only. Singaporeans continue to prefer the cover of anonymity. One reason may be the fear that the outspoken person will be marked out and victimised; another may be the sheer presence of so much proof of concrete well-being, such as a good job, a good bank account, a comfortable lifestyle.

Whatever the reason, the negative feelings go underground. Now subterranean hostility is all the more insidious for being that, and has a way of surfacing in the most trenchant way, for example, applauding any rambunctious opposition party member in pre-election rallies. A once-in-five-years occurrence, it shows all the intensity of unbottled resentment. The most serious consequences, as the Government is very well aware, is the giving of the vote to the opposition, simply to deny the Government majority that would presumably make it more arrogant than ever.

The Great Affective Divide has created a model of government-people relationship that must be unique in the world: solid, unbreakable unity of purpose and commitment on the economic plane, but a serious bifurcation at the emotive level, resulting in all kinds of anomalies and incongruities. A kind of *modus vivendi* appears to have developed, by which each agrees to live with the other's preference as long as both work together for the good of the country. Hence the Government continues to say: "We know you dislike us, but ...", and the people continue to think: "We are totally grateful to you for the good life you've given us and will vote you again, but ..."

Judging by the results, it is not too bad an arrangement, and many governments who were wildly popular one year and fell the next must be envious of the PAP for being returned to power at each election by a people who allegedly don't like them. The conclusion is that in the large equation of Economic Prosperity and Party Continuity, the factor of feeling cannot be a significant one.

Or can it? Is the equation as stable as it looks?

Concerned Singaporeans must be aware of the emergence of a secondary equation that could bust the major one and create a whole range of unexpected problems. It is the equation of the PAP with Singapore. While in other countries, political parties come and go, but the country remains the rallying point for the people's feelings, in Singapore, the Government has become synonymous with the country. Indeed, Singapore is often seen as the creation of the PAP, made to its image and likeness. Hence, dislike of the PAP, even though it does not translate into dislike of Singapore, effectively blocks out any spontaneous outpouring of patriotic emotion. The best evidence is in the attitude towards the national flag. Singaporeans continue to be reluctant to put it up in their homes on National Day for fear of being thought PAP supporters and sycophants.

If loyalty towards the country is blocked, it has to be directed elsewhere.

In Singapore, it is directed at the good life which the country has come to represent. Hence, the object of the people's fervour is not the Government, nor the country, but the good life made possible by the first in its successful leadership of the second. There is by now an almost adulatory quality about the attachment of Singaporeans to the affluence which their parents never knew and which came their way so quickly. It has been wryly described as the new religion of "moneytheism".

This kind of loyalty is, of course meretricious. It changes with its object. Hence, when the good life diminishes, so will it. When the good life disappears, so may it. But the most insidious aspect is its mobility. It will uproot and move with the good life. Hence, if economic prosperity is no longer in Singapore but moves to Canada, Australia, the United States, China, it will re-locate itself accordingly. This is already happening, say some cynical observers: the current buying up of properties and businesses in other countries by the more affluent Singaporeans may be more a quiet preparation for this eventuality than a straightforward investment.

Such a volatile, mobile loyalty is of course a travesty of the patriotism it has displaced and a mockery of all the earnest effort that the Government and the people have put into the building of the country over three decades.

Even if such a sinister scenario does not arise, a growing emotive estrangement between the Government and the people is not a healthy thing. It could create a schizoid society where head is divorced from heart, where there is a double agenda and double book-keeping with people agreeing with the Government in public but saying something else in private.

Neither side of course wants this to happen. Both want this discomfiture to go away. The slogan of "a gentler, wiser society" borrowed by the Prime Minister to signal a new dispensation of greater sensitivity, concern and communication, reinforces an earlier one of "gracious society". The new concern with the aged, the handicapped and the destitute is clearly an attempt to put a human face on public policy that is often accused of being elitist. The new encouragement of the arts is an acknowledgement that man does not live by bread alone but also by creative expression, energy and passion. In the process of narrowing this Affective Divide, the Government will learn that lecturing and hectoring are sometimes less effective than a pat on the back, that mistakes may be just as instructive as success and are therefore forgivable, that efficiency and generosity of spirit are not mutually exclusive, that compassion is not necessarily a sign of effete-ness.

The people, on their part, will learn to praise and commend as readily as they are to criticise and complain, to appreciate the hard work of the leaders and possibly the personal sacrifice and frustrations that must lie behind some of the achievements that have contributed to the good life and above all, to realise that whatever the Government now says about its accepting the fact that it does not have the people's regard as long as it has their respect, it needs and wants both. The Great Affective Divide is an incongruity, to say the least, at a time of phenomenal achievement and intense awareness of the need for a national identity. If openness and tolerance are to be the new temper of the times, they must, first and foremost, address this problem, a definite thorn in the side of the body politic.