

Singapore Perspectives 2015: Choices Past and Future

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Singapore reaches an important milestone in its national development next year when it celebrates its 50th year of independence. It has earned many accolades for the progress it has made in human resource development, trade and the governance of a multi-cultural polity situated in a tumultuous geo-political region. However, with changing demographics, resource constraints and the emergence of regional competitors, Singapore's future is fraught with uncertainty and rapid change.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) flagship conference Singapore Perspectives 2015 (SP2015) will take place as Singapore celebrates its golden jubilee. To be held on 26 January at the Raffles City Convention Centre, SP2015 will provide a timely platform for the gathering of public intellectuals, academics, business leaders and representatives of the people sector to come together and contemplate critical decisions made in Singapore's past so as to envision strategic paths that the country should take in the future.

Featuring expert speakers, including two Singaporean academics from ANU College of Asia and the Pacific (Australian National University) and the Stephen M. Ross School of Business (University of Michigan), SP2015 will focus on the key decisions made in Singapore politics, economy and society.

The two panels, a debate and an inter-generational dialogue session with Guests-of-Honour Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing carry the central theme of looking at the choices Singapore made in the past, the relevance of those choices today and the choices that have to be made moving forward.

The theme of the first panel session is "Sovereignty". To be moderated by Professor Tan Tai Yong, this session casts the spotlight on the path chosen by the founding generation of leaders — the path that has shaped Singapore as a sovereign state. Speakers Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan and Professor Evelyn Goh will consider difficult yet pertinent questions on Singapore's sovereignty, especially in light of the myriad challenges of globalisation.

To be chaired by Dr Lee Soo Ann, the second session, on "Global City", rethinks the viability of Singapore's economic model, one that has made the global market the linchpin of its economy. Professors Tan Kong Yam and Linda Lim will discuss the sustainability of the global city model, and whether we need to modify the model that has worked so well for Singapore thus far.

The third session will be a paired debate on the motion “This Conference resolves that pragmatism remains important and should be retained as our governing philosophy”. Professor Kishore Mahbubani from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Mr Tong Yee, Director of The Thought Collective, will propose the motion. The opposers are Mr Vikram Khanna, Associate Editor of *The Business Times*, and Associate Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University. The session will deliberate if Singapore must move beyond traditional measures of “success” and focus more on the quality of life that its citizens experience, if the government should modify its social compact with the people in light of changing aspirations and increasing pluralism in society, and if pragmatism is necessarily soulless.

The final session will be an inter-generational ministerial dialogue to explore how Singapore can retain its adaptability in the face of global change, the lessons it can learn from the past to improve future policy-making and the difficult choices Singapore has to make in order to build resilience for the future.

In line with reflecting on Singapore’s past, IPS has conducted a survey of 1,500 Singaporeans and a series of focus group discussions to understand what citizens think of 50 significant historical events. The events include historical milestones such as merger and separation from Malaysia, Konfrontasi and the Asian financial crisis in 1998, and other occurrences that affected many Singaporeans, such as SARS in 2003. The historical narratives of a nation-state offer a rich repository of a country’s identity, ethos and psyche. The meaning and significance attributed to the stories of key events of the past offer a window to the nation’s soul, with different generations of Singaporeans selecting their own narratives and the lessons they have gleaned from them. A video showcasing the most influential Singapore stories and why they are so will be presented at SP2015. This video will also highlight the dynamic richness of being Singaporean by bringing together an inter-generational set of Singaporeans to share their thoughts on some of the key events in Singapore’s history.

SP2015 will look back so as to look forward. It will highlight how being Singaporean is always a matter of choice, about “becoming” as much as it is about “being” — a complex process that is never complete and always subject to the continuous play of choices.

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