

Singapore Perspectives 2015: Choices amidst Change and Challenges

By Sim Jui Liang
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In the months leading to that momentous day of 9 August 1965, Singapore was at a crossroads. Negotiating with the Malaysian leadership, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues stood their grounds: if their proposal for a non-communal, multi-racial and multi-religious polity as envisioned by the notion of a Malaysian Malaysia was not accepted, separation would be on the cards.

When he entered into discussion with Tun Razak in July the same year, Dr Goh Keng Swee was already committed to securing Singapore's independence. Hence, he ignored the option of entering into a looser confederation with Malaysia and instead suggested the necessary constitutional instruments to engineer Singapore's independence.

That period, said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Director Janadas Devan during his opening remarks at the Institute's Singapore Perspectives 2015 Conference, was the finest hour of Singapore's founding generation. "For if Singaporeans had allowed themselves to be cowed, we might still have been offered 'one country, two systems' as late as August 1965," he added.

The decision made for Singapore to chart its own destiny also aptly captured the Conference's theme of "Choices", a timely choice given the country's golden jubilee as we reflect on the choices made by the country's leaders and the pioneer generation to surmount the obstacles confronting a newly-independent nation, in addition to assessing the relevance of these choices as Singapore looks to the future.



(From left): Speaker Prof Evelyn Goh and chairperson for the first panel Prof Tan Tai Yong

Held on 26 January 2015, the conference saw the attendance of over 900 participants, including academics, researchers, policymakers, professionals from the private sector and the non-profit sector, and tertiary students. The first portion of the conference consisted of two panel discussion sessions, with the first session covering the theme of “Sovereignty”. Chaired by Professor Tan Tai Yong, Executive Vice President (Academic Affairs) at Yale-NUS College and Nominated Member of Parliament, the panel session featured Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Adviser of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Professor Evelyn Goh, Shedden Professor of Strategic Policy Studies at the Australian National University.



Speaker of first panel Mr Bilahari Kausikan

For small states, according to Mr Kausikan, relevance is not to be taken for granted and there is no magic formula to the creation of relevance: “The world is constantly changing and since the world will not change to suit our conveniences, we will have to constantly adapt to it.” He added that to be relevant, small states have to be extraordinary. Professor Goh’s presentation meanwhile centred on Singapore’s future in a world of hybrid sovereignty; she noted that state authority has become hybrid, depending on the issues at stake and states’ control over information or financial networks. For effective participation in global networks, states must leverage on multiple systems of rule and authority to achieve national objectives.

From politics and diplomacy, the subsequent panel trained the spotlight on the Singapore economy, under the theme of “Global City”. Speaking at the panel were Professor Tan Kong Yam of the Division of Economics at the Nanyang Technological University and Professor Linda Lim of the Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. The panel was moderated by Dr Lee Soo Ann, Senior Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the Department of Economics at the National University of Singapore.



Chairperson of the second panel Prof Lee Soo Ann (centre) addressing the audience

A salient point made by Professor Tan was on the income disparity in Singapore. He noted that the real median wages of Singapore's employed residents in the lower 50th percentile of society have been stagnating, in contrast to the rising real wages of those in the top 10th percentile. He suggested that for a small open economy like Singapore, its government should act as a "collective risk insurer and diversifier and a social and political stabiliser" and not pass the uncertainty in housing demand to individual households.

That the world is experiencing de-globalisation was raised by Professor Lim, who observed a slowdown in macroeconomic growth as characterised by the more mature stage of development for booming markets and the increasing importance of services — at the expense of manufacturing — in global value-chains. Under such circumstances, she continued, Singapore could play a role in regional rather than global networks, and move from "manufacturing physical goods for customers richer than we are to providing services to customers poorer than we are".

To ensure the conference's participants would be exposed to a diversity of perspectives on the choices made by policymakers and the challenges facing Singapore today, an intergenerational component was incorporated into the following debate segment and the ministerial dialogue.

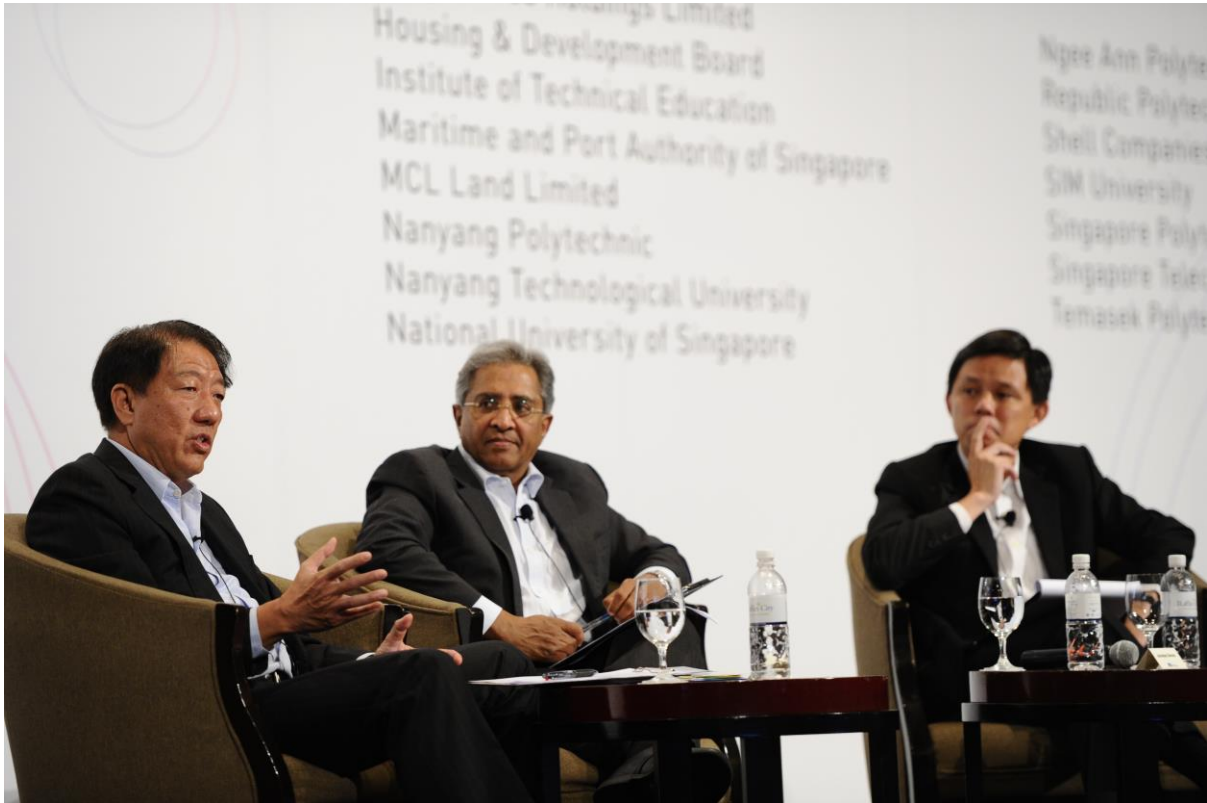


(From left): Mr Tong Yee and Prof Kishore Mahbubani debating the opposition, Mr Vikram Khanna and Assoc Prof Eugene Tan (partially hidden). Ms Debra Soon (centre) the chaired the session

Instead of a single proposer and opposer, this year's debate involved two pairs of debaters pitting their wits over the motion, "This Conference resolves that pragmatism remains important and should be retained as our governing philosophy". Proposing the motion were Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and social entrepreneur Tong Yee, Director of The Thought Collective. Opposing the motion were *The Business Times'* Associate Editor Vikram Khanna and Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University. The debate was chaired by Ms Debra Soon, the head of News Segment at MediaCorp Pte Ltd.

Pointing to the challenges in the geopolitical and economical fronts as well as the nature of being a multiracial state, Professor Mahbubani suggested that small states that stopped being pragmatic would have to cope with disastrous consequences. Associate Professor Tan, on the other hand, argued that pragmatism tends to curtail discussion, prevents alternative thinking and encourages people to opt for expedient, short cuts.

Members of the audience were invited to cast their votes as the debate progressed. A poll was taken prior to the debate's commencement and the proposition garnered an overwhelming 72.9% of the votes. As the debate entered the half-way point, almost half of the conference participants were swayed to the opposing camp, with the proposition seeing their votes reduced to 56.4%. Both teams resorted to win over the audience by proffering examples from foreign policy and education as well as quotes from eminent economists. Eventually, the proposition won the debate with 63% of the votes.



(From left): DPM Teo Chee Hean, IPS Director Janadas Devan and Minister Chan Chun Sing speaking to the audience of Singapore Perspectives 2015

Continuing the tradition of previous Singapore Perspectives Conferences, the final panel was a ministerial dialogue but this time, it involved two ministers who entered politics almost two decades apart: Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Teo Chee Hean, who is also the Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, and Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Defence. Chaired by Mr Devan, the dialogue session elicited a wide range of questions, including the role of history in the formation of Singapore's identity, the political implications of not extending the Pioneer Generation Package to subsequent generations, the strain of financing healthcare costs on families and the difficult choices made by the government with regard to foreign workers and productivity.

The last question for the ministers was succinct yet reflective; they were asked what they would say to Singaporeans feeling a sense of anxiety about the future as the country undergoes a major transition. DPM Teo noted that the concept of lifelong employment has been questioned and people have to make adjustments to the changing nature of work. Technological advancements too have quickly rendered our trained skill-sets obsolete. Hence, continual education and training has to become an integral part of our lives. There is also anxiety over changing values that used to be more uniformly accepted in society. DPM Teo suggested greater risk-pooling in a sustainable and responsible manner, such as the MediShield Life scheme, to assuage people's anxiety.

Similarly, Mr Chan was optimistic about Singapore's future and the people's ability to emerge stronger from adversity: "The crux of whether we can overcome [challenges] will

depend on whether we can stay united as a people. The crux of whether we can stay united as a people will depend on whether we can share and have a sense of shared perspective of our common challenges, put aside our individual preferences at times if you may, for the greater good, and to constantly defend and enlarge the common space that we have as Singaporeans.”

Highlights from the debate and dialogue were subsequently packaged into a 45-minute programme by Channel NewsAsia. It can be viewed [here](#).

Steering towards the future, however, requires an understanding of our past and how we as a nation have arrived. In conjunction with the Singapore Perspectives 2015 Conference and the country’s 50th year of Independence, IPS undertook a [study to examine Singaporeans’ perceptions of the country’s history](#). The study’s key findings were encapsulated in a two-part video presentation produced by students from the School of Interactive and Digital Media in Nanyang Polytechnic. The videos were screened during the conference, and among the 10 historical events the study’s respondents rated as important were Singapore’s separation from Malaya; the creation of the national anthem and national pledge; the racial riots of the 1960s; the country’s brush with the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome; and the launch of the Mass Rapid Transit system in the 1980s.

These historical events also depict a country caught during times of unprecedented changes and yet has managed to overcome challenges on numerous occasions, through the exercise of deliberated choices.

Summaries of the different sessions at Singapore Perspectives 2015 are available on the IPSCCommons website.

Panel I: [Sovereignty](#)

Panel II: [Global City](#)

Debate: [Pragmatism](#)

Intergenerational ministerial dialogue: Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing

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