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VALUES AND QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

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We are asked to think about the values and qualities of leaders we need in the future. How do we think about the next decade? Actually, ten years into the future is not far away.

2   Let me begin by asking you to backcast ten years ago when it was 2011. It is useful because you can see how much has changed and also how little has changed in ten years.

3   Our politics was verging on populist and the results of the GE 2011 was a minor political earthquake for Singapore. I say populist because some of the issues were about jobs, immigration, elitism, the poor and the old, and the left behinds. There was a strong desire to see a bigger opposition presence in parliament. The Workers' Party won their first GRC -- Aljunied. The PAP lost three ministers in one slate. It was sobering for the ruling party. They did a reset, listened to the ground, brought in the right policies, social and economic, and in 2015 recaptured lost ground. Think GE 2020, some issues were the same. Jobs and fear of loss of jobs. Immigration was still an issue and of course the

government handling of COVID. To have more diverse or opposition voices in parliament influenced the votes of some segments of the electorate. New issues and concerns were emerging too.

4   Ten years ago, where were we in the world? The United States was just coming out of the Global Financial Crisis. We saw the beginning of a pushback by the US when they realised China had been more assertive and gaining influence and ground when they were in a funk. Today US- China relations have never been at such a low point.

5   Ten years ago, we were already talking of black swans and we were preparing ourselves for the VUCA world - volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The world took VUCA seriously watching the collapse of the Soviet Union. For Singapore we began grappling with, trying to imagine VUCA, technological disruption and the future of work. How not to be left behind. Then COVID-19 happened. It was different. It was a wakeup call. It was deeply and widely felt. COVID was the VUCA moment that brought home the uncertainty, volatility and ambiguity. Worldwide we had an ice bucket shower.

6   What came out clearly in this pandemic is that leadership matters. Think of the countries that did not have good leadership, wafflers and science-deniers, and those who politicised science. Leadership was the crucial ingredient. It was not about having the most resources, technology or medical equipment. It was how leadership communicated the crisis, responded with policy and mobilised and organised and protected its people.

7   If leadership is so crucial in a VUCA crisis how do you go about getting good leadership? What sort of leaders should we be looking for, what qualities should they have? Can they be nurtured, and can they be prepared for the testing moment? Should it be a strong man or a collective leadership?

8   In an interview with McKinsey Global Institute in Dec 2020, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked what good leadership would look like in the next normal. He talked of good leadership as a team working together building trust, but the leader must be prepared to use talent. But the most interesting thing he said about leadership was "You must be prepared for surprises and setbacks. You can do the right thing; you can make the best decision, but things can easily turn out differently. And you have to be prepared for it psychologically. Well, you've made the best bet. It didn't work. Let's play the cards from where they are."

9   Think about what he said. Spoken from experience as the leader of a country. Good advice. You will be surprised and there are setbacks, but you've done your best, but you must move on and do the best you can to recover.

10   I would add three other qualities to leadership in a discussion on this topic. You can say it is the point of view of a citizen and someone who has studied politics for many decades and politics in Singapore. I will not talk about the obvious qualities such as charisma, skills in communication, ability to connect with people. It is obvious good leadership, successful leadership must have the right amount of these qualities.

i) In the next decade, the world and the region will undergo great changes brought on by great power rivalry and by the COVID pandemic. There will be restructuring. We see countries emerging and countries slipping behind because policies have not kept up and because of incompetent government. In Singapore the level of competence in government is high and we should do our best to maintain that.

The quality I would like to see in leaders, our leaders, is the ability to be **bold and seek to instil a culture of daring to try**, to push us on so we will not slip behind. Many of us have talked often about our shortcomings of complacency and kiasuism (fearing to lose).

I have a story which illustrates our character brilliantly. A foreign architect told me that he noticed one difference between Singapore and Dubai. When he shows his plans to his Singapore clients of a very innovative and unusual structure, he would be asked. "Has this been built before? How many times? Three times, four times? Good. We'll do it." In Dubai, if the plans are shown to his Emirati clients, they would ask "Has this been built before?" If the answer is yes, they are not interested. They want something that is totally new and never been built before. I understand we in Singapore do not want to be reckless, but we can be over cautious. And it is hard to try something new when we have used one playbook over the years and have been successful going along with it. It is hard to let go of what works even though you know it won't last much longer and change is necessary. I think business people have the same problem, not just political leaders. When a business strategy or model has worked for a long time, why would you change it until you run into real trouble. Some degree of risk taking is

a necessary quality to be innovative and relevant and to be ready for the political landscape of the future.

ii) The leadership circle should reflect the diversity of the population and understand the evolving diversity of the population. This is a quality or qualities crucial for leadership everywhere, but in multiracial Singapore, this is at the heart of politics and society. Globally, identity politics has become more salient. In the US, it has become rancorous and highly divisive.

A few days ago, in the session on "Identities and Cohesion," Ambassador Alami Musa discussed diversity in identities and the increasing **complexity of the diversity**. He beat me to it in raising the importance of the issue, but from my point of view it is what leaders should understand fully and grasp. It requires **empathy and insight**. It is not just about racial diversity which we are familiar with. And even with racial diversity, it is getting more complex with interracial, transnational marriages and hyphenated identities which Dr Sharon Siddique and I discussed in our book, *Singapore's Multiculturalism*. It is about gender diversity, first raised when Singapore was self-autonomous in the 1950s. Gender diversity continues to be important though it has taken new forms. It is not only about equality of opportunity for jobs. Women want to sit on corporate boards or see more women in politics and in office. Our proportion of women in the legislature is 29.5 % after the 2020 elections. Highest so far in our parliament. The UK is 34% by way of comparison. Actually, women are doing better in politics and in political office.

In recent years, LGBTQ has emerged as a significant gender diversity issue because it is about the legitimacy of status and rights of those who identify

themselves as LGBTQ. It is not an easy issue for Singapore as we are a conservative society with segments of the population who have difficulty accepting this. The question is whether leadership in the next decade should lead society on this issue and point to a progressive outcome or be led by society, waiting for society to change.

On diversity, I believe leaders have to pay greater attention to what the younger demographic in our society are saying and reaching for. They should listen and address the concerns or point out the misconceptions. Many have been at universities, in Singapore and overseas. Our politicians have been good in promoting the great Singapore Conversation and more recently initiating the Singapore Together Movement in partnership with people to discuss and design policies for community level partnerships. Our leaders learned that climate change is an issue that resonates with the young. It is also an issue that our leaders at the top consider an existential one for Singapore. If you go into Instagram, young people are discussing serious social issues like antiracism, racial justice and social justice. Instagram used to be about lifestyle. You would see 10 picture frames of food, social gatherings and fashion. These days there are serious discussions about gender inequality, racial inequality and inequality regarding migrant workers. This may explain the explosion of heated views and reaction to "Chinese privilege" which was discussed in the "Identities" session and trending on social media.

Allow me to digress and say something about "Chinese privilege". Minorites feel there is Chinese privilege because they encounter racism and prejudice in Singapore against them and institutional racism. I understand why they say that. We need to keep working to eradicate racism and prejudice. But I want to provide

the perspective that actually a segment of the Chinese population in Singapore totally disagree that there is such a thing as Chinese privilege. They remember that at the birth of our nation, the Chinese community was told by Lee Kuan Yew that they should put aside their claims for majoritarianism and accept that Chinese would not be the national language even though they were the overwhelming majority population. Then in the 1980s, Nanyang University was merged with the University of Singapore. That was how NUS came to be. This episode was painful for the Chinese-educated community. They were asked to attend classes in NUS in English, a language they were not equipped to handle at a tertiary level. Many dropped out. They were angry and unhappy with the government. So perhaps "Chinese privilege" is not as appropriate to use in Singapore given the history. As Prof Daniel Goh said, social science has come up with other terms to describe our situation of racial inequality.

iii) I believe future leadership must be intergenerational - a combination of generations in the leadership circle. We are in the era of the young leader. Justin Trudeau became a PM at the age of 43. Today he is 49. France elected Emmanuel Macron at 39. He is 43 today. When PM Lee said he was determined to plan succession and step down at 70, I thought he should not. But PM was aware of the trends out there then. And our younger population is articulate, with strong opinions, especially those who have received tertiary education. Increasingly they form a good two thirds of the working population. They are our PMETS. They are digitally empowered and have expectations. But leadership should be intergenerational because in Singapore we will face an ageing electorate and an ageing workforce. It is essential to have all segments reflected to ensure a good understanding of the ageing issues. In this recent election, we saw candidates who were in their 50s and 60s, and an eighty-year-old fielded by the opposition parties. The PAP's youngest of the new candidates was 30 years old and the oldest was

55. It was remarked upon so remarkable was his showing up on the ticket. That is because the PAP emphasised fielding younger candidates in the past elections. Going forward, the ruling party seems likely to go intergenerational too.

Gillian asked how we can help leaders make better decisions. There is the good old scenario planning exercise that government bureaucracies play with. This helps leaders to anticipate problems. They can game situations and work out how they will react. But that only does so much. In the end, it is the character and personality of the people in charge that will decide how they act. Then there is the sandbox approach of experimenting with a solution to see how it works before implementing on a larger scale. I have referred to our NMPs and NCMPs as sandboxes for the PAP for trying out how to debate with the opposition. China used the SEZs to try out liberating the economy and experimenting with capitalism. They opened up Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen. And what sandboxes! But in the end, leaders must want to lead, possess the passion and conviction to lead and a vision they want to implement.

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