

IPS-Nathan Lecture Series:

CAN SINGAPORE FALL?

Lecture II: The Fourth Generation

Lim Siong Guan

4TH S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore

10 October 2017

**Shaw Foundation Alumni House
National University of Singapore**

Introduction

Thank you for coming to this lecture, my second in the series on the theme, “Can Singapore Fall?”

I am gratified by the many reactions to my first lecture. Contrary to what some took away from my reference to John Glubb’s Age of Intellect, I am not against debate and discussion at all.

For Glubb, the Age of Intellect’s “most dangerous by-product is the birth and growth of the notion that human intellect can solve all the problems of the world, when in fact the survival of the nation really depends on its citizens.” Intellectualising is not a problem in itself, except when it stops us from taking concrete steps forward. For Singapore, the danger is if we develop a “complaint and blame” culture where people do not bear responsibility, and we end up with a deep pessimism about Singapore’s future.

My preference is for us to focus on issues that involve all Singaporeans who are concerned about where our country is going. Let us reflect on what we have, that should be retained, modified or abandoned, and on what we do not yet have that we should bring in. Hopefully, with an understanding of our common purpose and endeavour, more Singaporeans will decide to take action, individually and as a nation.

This was why I accepted this Fellowship: it was precisely to instigate this conversation, as a call to action in the service of Singapore and our fellow Singaporeans—those here today and future generations yet unborn.

The Accidental Nation

At the close of my first lecture on “The Accidental Nation”, I posed the question, “**Where Do We Go From Here?**”

I had explained why Singapore was the Accidental Nation. We had achieved independence, which was unplanned and unexpected. But we survived and we succeeded for 50 years. Now, is our future success or failure a forgone conclusion? Shall we let it be another accident depending on the natural progression of time and society?

Or, can we make our own future, through a conscious decision to work towards a specific strategic end?

I referred to the essay by John Glubb on “The Fate of Empires”. It is one way to think about the future. We may wonder whether Glubb’s analysis of the rise and fall of empires holds lessons for small nations. Is the decline that he writes about inevitable and unavoidable? I do not believe so; it is complacency and inaction, or ill-conceived action that would make the decline inevitable and unavoidable.

So, I do not mean to be pessimistic at all about Singapore or Singaporeans. Indeed, those who know me know that I am often unreasonably optimistic.

In fact, I am here to say that we can and must choose to make our future. Let us see if we can start again a new Age of Pioneers, characterised by an extraordinary display of energy, courage, and innovation. I think it is a choice we can make, instead of falling into the trap of NATO—No Action, Talk Only.

I ought to add that Glubb was not unique in his analysis of the rise and fall of nations, going through the stages from the Age of Pioneers to the Age of Conquest, to the Age of Commerce to Affluence to Intellect, and on to the Age of Decadence and Decline. In remarks that have been attributed to Alexander Tytler, a Scottish advocate, judge, writer and historian in the 18th century, he observed that “Great nations rise and fall. The people go from bondage to spiritual truth, to great courage, from courage to liberty, from liberty to abundance, from abundance to selfishness, from selfishness to complacency, from complacency to apathy, from apathy to dependence, from dependence back again to bondage.” And a friend sent me “Lessons from the Ottoman”, which put it even more succinctly: “Hard times create Strong Men; Strong Men create Good Times; Good Times create Weak Men; Weak Men create Hard Times.”

First World Society

Today, Singapore has reached the status of a First World Economy. But what is the First World Society we wish to be, that would be right not just for the current generation but also for the generations to come? This is the crucial issue here.

We should think of this in two ways: First, what would be good for the future, not simply what would be convenient or comforting for us today, but what would be good for our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, so that Singapore would still be the best place for them to be in—we will never be perfect, but we can be the place where they can make the best of their talents and abilities. Second, our thinking should be oriented towards action; to talk by way of assigning blame and passing responsibility for action to others is one way, but to talk with a view of refining ideas that lead to us taking action would be a better way.

Singapore in 50 Years

What kind of Singapore do we want in the next 10, 20, 50, 100 years? To help us concentrate our minds, let me specifically pose the question as, “What is the Singapore we would like to see (if we were still alive then) when SG100 comes around?”

We could take the attitude that SG100 would happen anyway—just be patient and wait. But this could simply then be a case where “To wait and see is to wait and die.” Let us honour ourselves by choosing deliberately.

SG100 will be the time of the fourth generation of Singaporeans since independence in 1965, if we count one generation for every 25 years. For many of you young people in the audience, it is not the generation of your children or even your grandchildren. It is the generation of your great grandchildren.

You may find it ludicrous to think of Singapore in 50 years when no one can even be clear what the future would be like in 10 years. But if we think that way, then we are thinking in a reactive mode, where we need to know a situation before we can think of what to do. This is the mental posture of the hopeless and helpless: we must refuse to be that. We should be thinking of a future we can shape and create, even though we may be small as a country, and subject to events and developments in the world that are often beyond our control.

Last November, I had the privilege of helping in a workshop of more than 60 young people in their 20s and early 30s, to address the question: “What kind of Singapore would you like to see in 50 years? Describe it in five phrases at most.” The “five phrases” rule was to ensure focus so that there can be a concentration of effective effort, yet not so narrow as to force a limited view. The

workshop divided the participants into groups of six or seven, each group discussing amongst themselves, and finally agreeing on what they considered to be the five most important characteristics of the Singapore they wished for in 50 years. We then put up all the ideas from the groups, clustering similar ideas together. Next, we gave every participant five votes to select the five ideas that most appealed to them individually.

The top five ideas the participants selected were:

1. Gracious Society—Doing the right thing even when no one is watching
2. Beyond Academics—Focus on character and passion
3. Active Ageing—Focus on the 30s and 40s, physical and mental health
4. Beyond Geographic Advantage—Focus on innovation and e-commerce
5. More Sensitive And Tolerant People—Focus on values

I do not know how you feel about this. But I was both encouraged and inspired. And I note again that these were young people in their 20s and early 30s.

The year before, in 2015, I had met two groups of labour movement leaders. They were mostly in their 40s and 50s. And one of the questions posed was: “What kind of Singapore would you like to have in 50 years?”

These were their top 7 wishes:

1. Gracious Society
2. Work-Life Balance
3. Innovative/ Creative/ Smart Singapore
4. Singapore as an Economic Leader
5. Jobs Availability/ Security
6. Safe and Secure
7. Clean and Green

I found it quite remarkable, that in the small groups of Singaporeans I met in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s, the top wish for their grandchildren and great grandchildren is for Singapore to be a Gracious Society.

Each of us can undertake our own exercise of asking ourselves what kind of Singapore we should like to see when SG100 comes along. I spent an afternoon thinking it over for myself. So this was my list:

- A Singapore that continues to succeed despite our smallness
- Racial, religious and community synergy
- A gracious society
- Children proud of their parents
- Citizens proud of their country

Perhaps all of us should spend time in groups to think over SG100, and what we can and should do to influence the outcome.

Kampung Spirit

Let me explore further this wish for a Gracious Society. Perhaps the more colloquial term is “*Kampung Spirit*”—if we think of it as something that we perhaps once had and have since mostly lost.

I have a friend in Penang who remarked to me, “You guys in Singapore talk about *Kampung Spirit*. Do you know what it means? During Chinese New Year, my father gives out *ang pows* to his grandchildren, who all line up eagerly to receive their yearly collection. Many children in the neighbourhood, including the Malay and Indian children, would line up also and duly get their *ang pows*. Would Singaporeans who want the *Kampung Spirit* do likewise?”

In our busy city life, this *Kampung Spirit* is also in the Malay motorcyclist who stops in the rain to check up on you when your car has stalled by the roadside, or to help clear the traffic for an ambulance during rush hour. So there are still instances of this, indeed they are often remarked upon. Because we do not yet have a deep culture of graciousness, each of these incidents become worthy news in themselves.

Indeed, some of us might leave our home each morning and wonder, “How come my neighbour does not appear to care about me and my family?” We can be sure our neighbours are asking the same question about us. Who is going to start this process of care and concern for our neighbour?

National Values

To get some sense of Singaporeans and their idea of the *Kampung* Spirit, let me refer you to a survey of National Values that was conducted from March to June 2015, by aAdvantage Consulting, a consulting firm in Singapore, together with the Barrett Values Centre of the UK. Unfortunately, the 2015 survey is the latest that we have in the series because they normally only do it once every three years. What the survey involved was that it used an international survey instrument, which has been applied in many countries around the world. Respondents are shown a list of values and behaviours, and asked to pick from the list, values that they consider the most important for themselves personally. Then, *from the same list*, they are asked to pick the values and behaviours they see in others around them. Finally, *from the same list*, they are asked to pick what they desire for the future.

The top 10 values and behaviours the respondents in Singapore picked as representing what they considered to be the most important for themselves personally were, in order of priority:

1. Family
2. Responsibility
3. Friendship
4. Happiness
5. Health
6. Caring
7. Honesty
8. Compassion
9. Positive attitude
10. Respect

It is, of course, a highly commendable list, and we all should be proud of it. Of the 10 items, I would say only one clearly involves the government, namely, “health”, which perhaps is something

like 50 per cent personal responsibility and 50 per cent government provision. All the others involve personal behaviour.

Next, bearing in mind the respondents were choosing items from the same list, the top 10 values and behaviours they saw in the others around them were, in descending order:

1. *Kiasu*
2. Competitive
3. Materialistic
4. Self-centred
5. *Kiasi*
6. Blame
7. Security
8. Education opportunities
9. Effective healthcare
10. Peace

I grant that the last four items—Security, Education opportunities, Effective healthcare and Peace—are principally the responsibility of the government. But the first six items—*Kiasu*, Competitive, Materialistic, Self-centred, *Kiasi* and Blame, reflect the life attitudes of individuals.

Before exploring the Singapore situation further, we should note that the corresponding lists of what the current values are like in the US and the UK, for example, come out quite differently from the Singapore list, though I should say the data available are a little outdated for the US and the UK. The top 10 items reflecting current culture in the US in 2011 were:

1. Blame
2. Bureaucracy
3. Wasted resources
4. Corruption
5. Materialistic
6. Uncertainty about the future
7. Conflict/ aggression

8. Crime/ violence
9. Unemployment
10. Short-term focus

And for the UK, the top 10 items reflecting current culture in 2012 were:

1. Bureaucracy
2. Crime/violence
3. Uncertainty about the future
4. Corruption
5. Blame
6. Wasted resources
7. Media influence
8. Conflict/ aggression
9. Drugs/ alcohol
10. Apathy

The Singapore list of *Kiasu*, Competitive, Materialistic, Self-centred, *Kiasi*, Blame, Security, Education opportunities, Effective healthcare, and Peace is so different, and in many ways more positive, than that for the US and UK. Nevertheless, the interesting question is why what is *perceived in Singapore society* is so different from what the survey respondents said were their *personal values*: Family, Responsibility, Friendship, Happiness, Health, Caring, Honesty, Compassion, Positive Attitude, and Respect. That is what Singaporeans say are most important for them. So if everyone is saying these are the most important, the question is how come we are not seeing it? If the personal values were actually lived out, we should reasonably expect that at least some of these values would be reflected in a description of current culture. But, at least in 2015, not a single one of the personal values was reflected in the prevailing culture as perceived by the respondents.

One explanation for the incongruence is that the list of personal values did not reflect the truth because respondents wanted to present a positive image of themselves. But there is a second fascinating explanation: both the lists are honest and true; the most important value for the individual is “family”, so because *my* family is the most important, I would cut queues for the sake

of *my* family, I would argue with my daughter's teacher because *my* family is most important, and so forth. Others may see my behaviour as *kiasu*, whereas all I was doing was living out my belief that family—*my* family—is most important to me. You can decide for yourself what the correct explanation is.

As for what they desired for the future, the top 10 items that respondents in the Singapore survey listed were:

1. Affordable housing
2. Caring for the elderly
3. Effective healthcare
4. Compassion
5. Quality of life
6. Caring for the disadvantaged
7. Peace
8. Employment opportunities
9. Caring for the environment
10. Concern for future generations

A cynical view would be that practically all the items are for the government to do—the future that is desired is for the government to do it all, almost.

When Singapore attained internal self-government in 1959 and then independence in 1965, there were only four critical deliverables for the government, namely, jobs, homes, education and health. Jobs were created through industrialisation and a supremely welcoming environment for foreign investment spearheaded by the Economic Development Board. Homes were built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), and financed for individual ownership through the Central Provident Fund system where many homeowners could pay off their mortgages without having to top up from their monthly income. Education, particularly to create futures for the children, was met with massive expansion of school places. And health was delivered with basic health care, as the population was still young.

But looking at the list of desires for the future, can the government really deliver on all the items listed by the survey respondents, despite the best of its intentions? Desires today are a lot more varied than in the 1960s. Can the government meet them all? Is creating the society and country that Singaporeans desire something more for citizens to undertake than the government?

Hidden Wealth of Nations

David Halpern, in his book, *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*, observed, “Richer nations are happier than poor nations, yet decades of economic growth does not seem to have increased the happiness within them... This paradox is explained by ‘the hidden wealth of nations’—the extent to which citizens get along with others independently drives both economic growth and well-being.” In short, there is a critical hidden wealth of nations that lies in the quality of relationships among its citizenry. Does this premise hold for Singapore too?

The CIA World Factbook 2017 lists Qatar as the country with the highest GDP per capita on a purchasing power parity basis, and Singapore as No. 5, coming after Luxembourg, Macau and Lichtenstein. I suspect Halpern would be correct that Singaporeans would not be happier even if Singapore should become the country with the highest GDP per capita in the world. It would seem that there is something instinctive when Singaporeans in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s all say that the most important characteristic of Singapore, which they would like to see in 50 years is a Gracious Society, not economic success. But how practical would it be to expect such an outcome, given the survey of national values I mentioned earlier, which found the dominant perceived cultural characteristics of Singapore to be *Kiasu*, Competitive, Materialistic, Self-centred, *Kiasi*, and Blame?

The most critical observation we have to make about Gracious Society or *Kampung* Spirit is that it reflects the state of relations among individual citizens. In other words, this is not an outcome the government can produce. **The government can encourage and facilitate, but Gracious Society is something we the citizens have to produce.** Can we do it? Do we want to do it? Is it important enough? **While the Singapore we wanted in its first 50 years may have been defined in economic terms, it is rather clear that the future Singapore we want in our next 50 years ought to be also defined in social terms, without neglecting the economic wherewithal to maintain our living standards.**

Our practical Singaporeans might say, Gracious Society is nice to have—but does it have to be the top priority now, is it really urgent? My view is that **we can only get there if we think in terms of a change that happens over a generation—and because it is a long-term outcome, it requires conviction, tenacity, and action now.** Even though little money would be required, the heart and the mind must want it almost as a “life and death” issue.

A Gracious Society could be exactly the kind of antidote to the social degradation and national decay that Glubb finds to afflict nations, both large and small, once they reach high levels of affluence. But let us first think about what a Gracious Society would be like so that we can have a clearer idea of whether we want it, and whether we can get to it.

How a Gracious Society Can Look Like

Often when people think of a Gracious Society, their minds imagine the displaced and the handicapped, the poor and the misfits, and how those groups of people should be taken care of. But Gracious Society or *Kampung* Spirit is really about the countless little interactions between neighbours and everyone else we mix with or have to work with every day of the week. It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society.

I know there are already many initiatives for people to help one another and be kind to one another. There have been many occasions where people reach out to help others in trouble. This gives us optimism that in a crisis, people will not simply think of themselves and their families, but will extend their hearts and hands to those around them. But what I am advocating is graciousness as a part of our character as a nation, not just episodic acts of kindness. This is culture: an integral part of our make-up as a people.

Honour (Singapore)

I am the Founding Chairman of Honour (Singapore), a charity whose mission is the promotion of a culture of honour and honouring for the well-being of the nation. The impetus for founding Honour (Singapore) was SG50; my conviction that SG50 should not just be about celebration, but should be a time of reflection as to how Singapore had managed to survive and succeed since independence. Honour (Singapore) is multi-racial and multi-religious in its perspective, doing what it can to enhance the well-being of the country for the benefit of all.

One of our major projects is sponsoring young filmmakers to produce short films on the theme of honouring the “invisible people”, these being the people who serve us and do good for us day after day, but whose presence and service we often fail to register or acknowledge. The invisible people are the bus drivers, the lift attendants, the “aunty” in the office keeping the place clean, and the domestic helpers. We have films on our website [www.honour.sg] giving honour to the SMRT technician, ex-prisoners, the undertaker, our first women Olympians, nurses, firemen, a family with a member who has Down syndrome, and many more. Let me show you an example with a film entitled, “*Ayah*”, which features an SMRT technician who is dedicated to his duties but whose daughter at first misunderstood him as not appreciating her efforts for his birthday. You can find the film on our website, under “Short Films”. [<http://honour.sg/portfolio/ayah/>]

If we open our eyes and our hearts to the world around us each day, we can see a lot that is worthy of our honour, our care and our support.

Someone described a situation in Japan where at the end of lunch he was asked if he would like to have coffee. Yes, he would like to have coffee, but he found that all his Japanese friends at the lunch decided not to. His friends later explained to him that they had noticed that other people were waiting for tables to clear so that they in turn could have lunch, so his friends decided the right thing to do was to release their table as quickly as possible, thus declining coffee.

Another person was telling me about his experience in climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge with a group that included several Japanese. At the end of the climb, everyone was given a towel to wipe off their sweat. But he saw that the Japanese also used their towel to wipe the safety gear the group had been equipped with. They were doing it in consideration of the next group who would be making the climb.

I remember flying to Tokyo and being picked up by a chauffeur arranged by my sponsors in Japan. After helping me to get to the carpark with my luggage, he told me to wait at the kerbside, and proceeded to *run* to the car. This was his expression of considerate service.

I also recall taking a walk in the Japanese countryside. *Every* child and *every* adult I came across freely greeted me, “*konnichiwa*”—the Japanese informal greeting for “hello”. They would not have

known that I was not Japanese, but the earnestness and spontaneity with which they said “hello” was spirit-lifting.

Allow me just one more example from Japan. A friend told me that his wife made a point of sweeping the road in front of their home with the help of her children. He assured me that this was not unusual—it was simply doing something they had grown up with, looking after the neighbourhood and helping to maintain a clean environment.

I apologise that all my examples came from Japan. I think Japanese culture, nurtured in children from young, fosters social consideration and responsibility, a looking out for others. I quote Japan not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones, but to show that it is possible to have a social environment where people feel a sense of being recognised and being treated with respect and consideration. These are the little day-to-day things that we all can do. If we look beyond our own immediate needs, and actually notice others and their needs. We can learn to see anew and act; we can get to a Gracious Society if we think it important enough.

Singapore has had the Courtesy Campaign in the past, which has since been absorbed into the Singapore Kindness Movement. Can we do more? *Should* we do more? Can we get to being a Gracious Society faster?

Caring about others and doing good is basically a matter of the heart. This is not about religion; it is about beliefs and values and morals and ethics, which may come from religion, or a personal study of civilisation and culture, or simply the way we have been brought up. Indeed, our disappointment and frustration are particularly great with those who claim to be religious but do not live up to their religious precepts of caring and doing good. All religions teach virtually the same social mores of good and right, but there are many atheists and agnostics who practise the same standards out of the goodness of their hearts or something deep within them in their consciences, which tell them what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong.

Start with the Young, Start with the Parents

The Chinese have a saying, 三岁定终身 (sān suì dìng zhōng shēn), which means, “At the age of three you can know what one will be like for the rest of his life.” What a remarkable statement drawn from thousands of years of Chinese civilisation! Three years old is before the kid even turns

up in nursery, not to mention kindergarten or Primary One. The lesson is plain: parents and the child's earliest environment hold the key to the behaviours the child will display towards others as they grow up, and their attitude towards life and work in adulthood. Speaking to teachers of children in the lower primary levels, I found that many of them feel that what they are having to do, often with only limited success, is to undo the damage parents had caused at home, from what they had done or failed to do.

If three years old seems much too young for you, you could take comfort from a saying by the Jesuits, an order in the Catholic Church. They say, "Give me a child till seven and I will give you the man." In other words, they believe that a child can be moulded for life within seven years.

Whether we decide to take the word of the Chinese of old or the Jesuits, the point simply is that parents and the family have the most fundamental of responsibilities in guiding and shaping the child before they get to kindergarten or school. I am speaking here of values and attitudes, which are more *caught* by example than *taught* by instruction in our youth.

So, where have we got to, starting from Glubb? His study of the Fate of Empires indicated that the push for affluence brought economic wealth and political power to nations, but affluence subsequently catalysed the nations' decadence and decline. What we would like to explore is whether Singapore could think of a way to ameliorate the weakening of the nation, and inspire a new pioneering spirit for growth and well-being. Singaporeans seem to agree that we want a Gracious Society, but developing a whole culture and value system starts from the home, reinforced by school and society. It may well take a generation, and we have to start *now*, building upon what has been done in the past, but moving in a far more deliberate, urgent, and holistic manner.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Are we merely promoting naïve altruism when we suggest that Singaporeans think and care about others? Far from it, I think it can in fact be more like enlightened self-interest. Let me explain.

I am sure most of you would have heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. When I ask my audiences how many needs there are in the hierarchy, I get responses like five or six or seven. Often, people are not sure. But when I ask them what is the highest need identified by Maslow,

everyone knows it is Self-Actualisation. Everyone. So, everyone can remember that because it is all about yourself; whether it is four, five, six, does not matter. We can all remember what is most important to ourselves.

Well, Abraham Harold Maslow (1908–1970) was an American psychologist who hypothesised that the needs of human beings lie in a hierarchy where once one level of needs is met, the next higher level of needs gains prominence. He identified five levels of needs:

- Biological and Physiological needs (e.g. food, air, water, shelter, etc.)
- Safety needs (e.g. security, stability, law, etc.)
- Belongingness and Love needs (e.g. family, friends, etc.)
- Esteem needs (e.g. status, reputation, achievement, etc.)
- Self-Actualisation needs (e.g. the realisation of one's potential, etc.)

However, further research in the field concluded that Maslow's list is incomplete, and that human beings have three more needs:

- Cognitive needs (e.g. understanding, etc.)
- Aesthetic needs (e.g. beauty, balance, form, etc.)
- Transcendence needs (i.e. helping others realise their potential)

It turns out that the highest need we all have is **the need for transcendence. That is, the need to move beyond just thinking of ourselves, to thinking of others and helping them reach their personal growth and self-fulfilment. Transcendence is ranked as the highest of all needs in the human psyche.** To put it simply, if we want to live a full life, we have to remember that it is not about ourselves, but about others.

Sure, not everyone would agree with Maslow's five needs, or this extended list of eight. But I believe that most of us derive an enormous sense of satisfaction and fulfilment when we do something good for someone else, enjoying their gratitude and having the smile in their eyes warm our hearts. Serving beyond ourselves is what gives each of us meaning and a deep sense of purpose in life and achievement.

But a Gracious Society is not just about giving. It is not about “giving until it hurts”. Certainly, it is not naïvely dealing with people who say “give and take” but really mean, “You give, I take!”

For giving to be possible, there must also be a “receiver”. And sometimes, we need to be the receiver so that someone can give. I have a friend, older than me, who tells me that, often, when he rides the MRT, some youngster would offer his or her seat. He used to turn down the offer, saying he only needed to go a short distance and therefore could stand. And the youngster often looked embarrassed that his or her offer had been turned down. One day, my friend had an epiphany: from then on, he accepted the offer of a seat, even when he only had one station to go. His humility means giving the youngster his good deed and happiness for the day. So my friend has come up with an aphorism: When you are young, you give happiness by giving with good grace and humility; when old, you give happiness by accepting with good grace and humility.

More for SG100

I have spoken much about Gracious Society. Let me go back to the other items on the list that came out from my meeting with the young Singaporeans last year. These were:

2. Beyond Academics—Focus on character and passion
3. Active Ageing—Focus on 30s and 40s, physical and mental health
4. Beyond Geographic Advantage—Focus on innovation and e-commerce
5. More Sensitive And Tolerant People—Focus on values

The last item, More Sensitive and Tolerant People, links back to Gracious Society. The fourth item, Beyond Geographic Advantage, I will address in my next lecture. Active Ageing is partly related to demographics, which I will take up in my next lecture, and partly related to social and personal well-being, which all of us should take to heart in a Gracious Society. I shall now discuss the item Beyond Academics—Focus on character and passion.

Character

Character establishes the trustworthiness of the individual. We all know how critical character is in life and work. That is how we choose our friends—can we trust them with our secrets and to look out for us? Actually, this is also how we choose who to promote in the workplace—can we trust them to always do their best and act in the interest of the organisation?

Universities and schools see much of their role as sharing knowledge and developing skills, rather than guiding their students towards succeeding in work and life. But those of us who lead organisations know that what we look for when we recruit or promote people is not just competence and experience, but also trustworthiness and dependability.

We ask: Will they do their best according to their talents and capabilities? Will they observe deadlines, and let us know if they will not be able to meet the deadlines? We also wonder whether our people will cooperate, collaborate and support each other. Can we trust our people in their attitude towards their work? Will they look out for each other and function as family or as a team?

Universities and schools often fail to make the point with their students that to succeed in work and life, they need to be *trustworthy*, and not just competent in their skills and abilities.

Trust is the most important currency for long-term relationships. We all know this instinctively! Trust is both critical and essential in relationships with parents and family, friends and colleagues, subordinates and bosses, business partners and customers, and with government and the community.

Passion

As for **Passion**, in all competition, the person or organisation with the most energy and imagination always wins. This demands passion—a total commitment to the cause. The Singapore of the future needs to pay a lot more attention to the drive and determination of individuals. We need to value character and passion—soul and spirit—beyond academic results and skills certificates.

Maximal Development of Talents and Abilities

In addition to character and passion, there is the need for maximal development of the talents and abilities of individual Singaporeans. Unlike Gracious Society where the government should facilitate but cannot deliver, because the quality of relationship between citizens can only be delivered by individual citizens, this is something for the government to do with the support of parents and the active involvement of the individuals themselves.

The government should seek to create an environment where every Singaporean has maximum opportunity to be what they can be according to their talents and abilities. The greater attention to early childhood education is a critical move in this direction. The whole education system should be targeted at identifying and developing the talents and abilities of every Singaporean, while the work and social environment should provide the most supportive conditions for this. Parents are a critical part of such a national exercise, because they are the ones who shape the character and life attitudes of the child before the child even turns up in kindergarten. But the critical actor is each individual, their sense of honouring their individual talents and abilities, and contributing in a way that reflects responsibility towards self, family, and nation.

But there is a fundamental change in our attitude that needs to happen for this to be possible. We must stop focusing on shortcomings and weaknesses, and instead focus on strengths and abilities. Stop looking at people as handicapped or imperfect—look instead for what they can do well. The autistic, the dyslexic, the polio victim, and the person with one hand or foot—we have to support and help each seek to discover what they are able to do. Stop thinking in terms of disabilities, and start thinking of *people*, who possess “differ-abilities”—different abilities. This demands a different perspective on the part of parents, teachers, employers, society and government. They—and we—are not burdens to bear or problems to solve, but possibilities we have to discover. It is an integral part of being a Gracious Society.

Gracious Society—Nothing Less

The Fourth Generation will hopefully have much to celebrate at SG100. But we cannot simply leave it to them to make the Singapore of their time for themselves. Certainly, many things they can, and should, do for themselves. Each generation must solve its own problems. But some things require the work of a generation or more to bring about. For these, we must start work on now, to be in time for that future. A Gracious Society is such a thing. It would be a society that makes Singapore stand out from the rest of the world. It would be a Singapore that draws out, and benefits from, what David Halpern has identified as the “hidden wealth of nations”.

A Gracious Society, because of its spirit of other-centredness, can help to induce better relationships among people and the different sectors of society, including organisations and the government. There is scope for the public sector to exercise greater sensitivity towards the people in its communications. Similarly, there can be greater attention to employee engagement in

businesses and organisations, better service to customers, and greater instinctive concern for issues like income and socioeconomic divides. Our highly educated Gen X, Gen Y—the Millennials—and the incoming Gen Z—the Centennials—all offer us much hope. Every generation ultimately seeks meaning and purpose. Our youths are no different: they want to do good but they also need their own space and the scope in society. The “bosses” at work and “parents” and “mentors” can do more to support and encourage our youths on their life’s work and journey.

A Gracious Society is one where people feel good because others care, where we flourish together because we each can be the best we can be by helping ourselves, and helping one another. We can start today to build a First World Society that our Fourth Generation will be proud of, and benefit from, because we have moved in our generation to lay the groundwork for them to flourish and prosper 50 years later. By that time, and hopefully earlier, whenever any Singaporean or Singapore resident thinks of “SG”, they will also think, “GS”—Gracious Society!

Thank you.

.....