

Learning from Each Other: Singapore and Swiss Perspectives

By Woo Jun Jie and Yvonne Guo

As a small state that has thrived politically, economically and socially, Switzerland has been a model for Singapore since the latter's independence in 1965; and especially so after then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's first visit to Switzerland in 1967.

Given that both Switzerland and Singapore are, in a sense, *Willensnationen* ("nations of will"), what could each nation learn from the other's policy experience, if at all? This was the impetus for a seminar, the second of its kind, organised by two think tanks – Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Switzerland's leading think tank for economic and social issues Avenir Suisse – on 7 May 2014 in Zurich, Switzerland. The [first seminar](#) was held in Singapore in October 2013.

The discussions centred on three policy areas: migration and integration, governance processes and urban planning. The seminar was attended by senior representatives from Avenir Suisse and policymakers and researchers from Singapore and IPS.

Integrating Different Communities

The issue of social integration was of great interest at the seminar, reflecting the fact that immigrants currently make up 27% of Switzerland's population and almost 38% of Singapore's.

A Swiss referendum held in February 2014, initiated by the populist Swiss People's Party, reflected a slight majority voting for caps on immigration. In Singapore, immigration has been a highly charged issue even before the last general election in 2011, and popular discontent subsequently reached a high point at the release of the government's Population White Paper in 2013.

The two countries, however, have differed in their responses. The Singapore Government, together with the National Integration Council and grassroots organisations have crafted a coherent, nation-wide response to social integration. This has included policies to preserve a Singaporean core in various economic sectors; a ramp-up in infrastructural development to ease congestion; and programmes to facilitate cross-cultural understanding at schools, workplaces and in the heartlands.

At the seminar in Zurich, the Singapore speaker Professor David Chan of Singapore Management University explained that this effort recognised the “need to integrate the cosmopolitan openness goals of a global city and the national solidarity goals of a cohesive country”. Civic activists and the Singapore Government have re-doubled their efforts to ensure that even Singapore’s migrant workers find a semblance of home here with their accommodation and recreational needs properly attended to.

In contrast, the Swiss have a separate issue to contend with: the country is caught between its bilateral obligations and the will of its people. While the free movement of people had been a cornerstone of Switzerland’s relationship with the European Union (EU), the expansion of the Union, coupled with perceived competition for jobs with EU nationals, had led to voices calling for the renegotiation of this agreement. The recent anti-immigration referendum was also an assertion of the Swiss sense of sovereignty and independence, and a signal to policymakers to be more considered and precise in the ways in which a larger population of different cultures can be integrated into the cities and suburbs.

Interestingly, despite their shared commitment to multi-lingualism and multi-ethnicity, both countries’ national narratives — Singapore’s Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others model, and Switzerland’s German-French-Italian-Romansh model — do not account for the linguistic and cultural diversity of new immigrants. Pointing out that “ethnicity cannot be a guarantor of a person’s capacity to assimilate”, Professor Chan expressed the need to find a way to recognise the “multiple social identities” inherent within each individual.

Integrating Government with Citizens

Integration applies as much to citizens and leaders as it does to new immigrants. While there was a general recognition of Singapore’s efficient civil service and its ability to attract top talent, a more subtle but nonetheless important factor underpinning Singapore’s successful civil service was its attempt to integrate civil servants into its geopolitical realities. Both countries exist as extreme acts of political will — Singapore with its will to survive in spite of the separation from Malaya, and Switzerland, with its sovereign choice to maintain its neutrality in the midst of great powers. Speaking at the seminar, former head of the Singapore Civil Service Lim Siong Guan described Singapore as “a human economic and social creation based on integrity, reliability, hard work and trustworthiness”. To him, Singapore, like Switzerland, “is a country built on the basis on the word of honour”. Referencing the existential concerns that drive both countries, he described the deep socialisation process of top civil servants to the Singapore’s geopolitical realities and its framework of governance values. He highlighted this as a key factor in the success of Singapore’s civil service, superseding even the role of administration and management skills and its complex human resource and remuneration schemes.

Swiss participants at the seminar were interested in Singapore’s elite governance model, which contrasted sharply with the Swiss “militia” system, where political service was seen as a form of volunteering rather than a deliberate state-driven policy. However, they pointed out that the desire to volunteer was waning and the complexity of governance seemed to require

higher levels of professionalisation of governance in the Swiss setting. The referendum on integration also suggested the need for more extensive political communication on national issues.

The audience asked how sustainable both countries' models were and specifically, how Singapore was adapting to the greater demand for public participation within what has been characterised as elite governance. Mr Lim responded that in addition to the traditional roles of control and regulation, the current orientation towards "facilitating and nurturing" means, governments need to play the role of "convening and aggregating" ground-up energies, with the confidence to put resources behind new ideas. In short, "political integration" would require new forms of engagement between government and citizens.

Integrating Liveability and Sustainability Demands into Urban Design

The next theme was "spatial integration". Both countries are small and Singapore is barely a third the size of Switzerland. Both countries also have growing, albeit ageing, populations. While living in dense urban spaces has been an accepted fact of life in Singapore, the Swiss have expressed a preference that urban development make no further encroachment into their natural spaces and that buildings are kept low and eco-friendly.

While little can be done about Singapore's physical size, it can do more in deciding how limited space is used. In particular, urban design needs to take a long-term and integrated approach that focuses on liveability and sustainability amid density. Taking pride of place in Singapore's urban policy are its public housing estates, which are designed to be community-centric, integrated with transport linkages and to foster social inclusion and mingling.

Housing Development Board Chief Executive Officer Dr Cheong Koon Hean noted that such a deliberate designing of social inclusion and liveability into Singapore's public housing requires a visionary and stable government. She also emphasised the extent to which citizen engagement was critical in ensuring that development masterplans were workable. The keynote speaker, Minister of State for National Development, Dr Maliki Osman shared with the audience the plans for Kampung Admiralty, an example of how "ageing in place" was being designed. He explained how its melding of "hardware" with "heartware" is expressed through the spatial integration of seniors with community, recreational and social services in one block of public flats. "The greatest challenge," declared Dr Maliki, "is to build the soul of the city."

Swiss and Singaporean planners are now collaborating on the best way to integrate the need for ecological sustainability in its buildings and cities, and perhaps joint technological solutions are on the way for the rest of the world too. The new eco-town at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University will be a prime manifestation of that. Demonstrating their capacity for "integrative thinking", Singapore's urban planners have taken great care to incorporate wind, shade, water, waste and now energy systems into the planning and also the design of our city and the buildings within. As Dr Cheong pointed out, "the successful

city-state of the future will be one capable of maintaining its innovative edge, reinventing itself many times over.”

Both Singapore and Switzerland may be among the most economically competitive countries in the world today but their governments and people are also concerned about how they live — particularly, the ecological impact, social inclusion and well-being of all their residents. The contrasting and complementary experiences of Switzerland and Singapore provide illuminating insights to each other. While Singapore’s top-down solutions display the visionary foresight of government policymakers and help ensure predictability and long-term planning, bottom-up solutions demonstrated by the Swiss are able to secure consensus between the stakeholders of every policy decision and bestow upon citizens a sense of empowerment and responsibility for their individual and collective lives. The seminar suggested to us that we each want a little bit more of what the other has mastered.

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