

IPS-Nathan Lectures

Singapore: The Next Fifty Years Lecture I: Politics and Governance

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Introduction

Good evening and welcome to the first of 5 lectures in the IPS-Nathan Lecture Series.

I am very honoured and humbled to be the first SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, and I think Mr Nathan truly represents the very best values of the pioneer generation of which he ranks among its most illustrious representative, and I'd like you to join me to acknowledge his presence here this evening.

When asked to undertake this fellowship my first reaction was a bemused surprise. I've been called a lot of very bad names in my lifetime but never an academic. So I thought I might as well try that word on for size. And contrary to what Tommy said, I didn't quite see this as an award; having to prepare for these lectures has taken away my best past time, which is watching movies on long plane rides. So I'll be very happy when this fellowship is over so that I can go back to watching movies on SQ flights. I am not an academic, as anybody would know; it took me 9 years and 3 universities in 3 different countries, to just secure a simple Bachelor's degree.

But on the other hand, I am not totally unqualified either. I first embarked on the study of Singapore in 1974 -- some 40 years ago -- as a bright-eyed, idealistic but somewhat naive 22-year old journalist. Although that particular career ended somewhat unpropitiously, the journey of discovery has continued and I have approached my citizenship as both a right and a responsibility.

Many of you people in the audience, the younger people, are not much older than I was at that time, and although the world and Singapore with it, has changed a lot, I hope you too will engage with the life of this nation and society with an existential passion rather than a cynical apathy.

Every Singaporean knows the significance of next year -- the 50th anniversary of our independence. We do have indeed much to be proud of; the Singapore Story is all about the creation and then sustainable continuation, of what can only be described as an improbable nation.

How we did it, however, is not the focus of my lectures, though of course understanding history is vital to foresee the future. I don't want to look backwards, but rather, forward to the next fifty years. I will refer to past events only as background to illustrate the foreground, and will simply assume that everyone here has a pretty broad knowledge of Singapore's history.

In addition, I will use very data sparingly, partly because I am not good at research, but mainly because I prefer to be provocative and speculative, and as a wise editor I used to have once told me, never let facts get in the way of a good story!

My main motivation for being an SR Nathan Fellow is to stimulate discussion amongst the younger Singaporeans below 35 years old. I hope that this will be an interactive dialogue, where we can collectively explore some of the issues I will be raising.

The five broad topics I propose to cover are: for the first lecture, Politics and Governance; the second will be on Economy and Business. The three remaining topics will be Society and Identity; Demography and Family, and Security and Sustainability. In what sequence these will be addressed, I haven't yet figured out, and I don't know how many of you will actually follow me through to the last lecture.

But, shall we start?

The Three Elephants

To set the stage, I would like to make three major observations which fundamentally orientate the direction and content of this entire series of lectures. I call them my three elephants in the room, which no one can fail to notice even if they make not a squeak of noise.

1. The first but not always recognized elephant is the fact that national sovereignty can never be assumed and the external environment can certainly turn hostile in the next 50 years. That we have had a consecutive streak of 50 years of uninterrupted economic growth and national sovereignty is not an immediate guarantee that our grandchildren will have the same good fortune.

Ironically, it is in prolonged periods of peace that a national identity needs to be forged even more vigorously. History has shown that nations can decline and fall entirely due to internal decay. Without an external threat to galvanize a people, the unravelling of social cohesion becomes easier. This is one theme that will run through my lectures; namely, that internal cohesion will be even more important, and perhaps more difficult to achieve, than in the first half century, when external challenges united us all.

For now, I will simply assume that Singapore will still exist in 50 years' time. But we should not take this assumption for granted and in a later talk on security and sustainability I will examine the challenges to this assumption.

2. The second elephant is the obvious question: after stunning economic success, what next? Another 50 years of 3 – 5% economic growth? What is the second act of this great Singapore miracle?

Some observers have argued that Singapore's best days have passed, because it has reached economic prosperity and there is very little to motivate the present versus the pioneer generation. Middle age flab is therefore the cost of maturity, so this argument goes. Others argue that economic growth by itself is a sufficient vision or motivator of people: being doubly or triply richer than now is the prize for hard work.

My answer – assumption really -- is that neither is the case. Instead, I think we are at a watershed moment in history whereby our economic prosperity now allows the younger generation the opportunity to realize their society's full potential beyond just the economic realm. As spectacular growth rates taper, the vision for a new Singapore can now embrace a more holistic spectrum.

Because the foundations of economic growth and the pillars of political stability have already been laid, today's young generation can – and will -- define and then set out to achieve its own definition of what a developed society means in terms of social justice, an egalitarian culture, political maturity, cultural creativity, and all the other markers of the truly exceptional nation which we can be.

And so, far from having peaked, the best is yet to be.

If we do not accept, almost as a point of faith, that our economic progress must now be matched by a more holistic maturation in other spheres of life, and that this flowering of the Singapore garden is the central task of the younger generation, then we are fated to either decline through thoughtless hubris, or flounder in equally thoughtless self-doubts and anxieties.

It becomes obvious, then, that it is in the domestic socio-cultural and political realms that change will be the most evident and the most dramatic in the next 50 years. These changes will also involve a process of continual self-invention, so that the Singapore narrative, while hopefully remaining vibrant and relevant in a constantly evolving world, may not necessarily resemble what it was before.

It will not be a tension-free evolution and we will see more heated, so-called culture wars where the government will hopefully not intervene in a heavy-handed and patriarchal manner, but instead allow players from a wide spectrum of civil society to engage and find some mutually acceptable resolution between

themselves. This journey towards socio-political and cultural maturity will, in my view, define the next two decades.

For example, the quote attributed to the French philosopher Voltaire as the hallmark of a free society, and I quote *"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"* is an attitude which should be held fervently by all sides of the political spectrum, including those – from angry bloggers to defensive ministers -- who tend to deprecate people rather than respectfully disagree with just their views.

3. Now, the third elephant in the room is equally big and obvious: the biggest player in our political drama before and after independence.

It is widely acknowledged that the PAP's dominance of not only the political process, but almost the entire national culture, was in large part the reason for Singapore's rise from Third to First World in a single generation. The flip side, however, is that this very same dominance is also a main reason for concern in the next 50 years. Can that dominance be maintained? If so, how? And if not, what are the possible changes and the ramifications?

Whither the PAP : Some Scenarios

As I will discuss the two other elephants in later lectures, let us now look more closely at the last elephant. Incidentally, I should note that I'm happy to choose a more regal animal like a lion or dragon, or more cuddly like a panda bear, but note, please, all of you, that I consciously did not choose a dinosaur, because it would not be taken very well.

Like other political parties which also founded the nation, the PAP started as a political movement, then a governing party, and finally a national institution with an impact on every sphere of life.

But whereas similar parties in non-democratic nations have no problems extending their longevity by simple fiat – as in North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe – the PAP has to legitimize its primacy through periodic general elections. The fact that it has won so many elections so overwhelmingly has made some people perhaps too blasé or cynical about election outcomes.

However, the drama of the last elections for Parliament and President is certainly proof that outcomes are by no means guaranteed.

If the saying that a fortnight is an eternity in politics is true, then 50 years is almost unimaginably long and therefore unpredictable. There will be at least 3 to 4 new

prime ministers who have not even entered politics today. In only 20 more years, the youngest minister today will be retiring and there will remain no more politicians who have any working memory of today's leaders, much less the founding generation.

In the history of young nations, this is the most precarious period of transition, when new generations who have not had the slightest personal memories of or connections to the founding generation, take on the mantle of leadership.

I grew up only knowing slightly the first generation leaders, who were my parents' age and some of whom they knew well as friends. But their passion, dedication and sacrifices were real to us, even though they were already becoming the stuff of legends. To my children, all these people – their ideals, values, and exemplary lives -- are all just historical footnotes in school textbooks. Passing on policies is easy; transferring ideals and values requires continual collective connections between generations of living, breathing people.

The history of Third World economies striving towards First World economic and socio-political maturity is replete with failures, running the entire A to Z spectrum, from Argentina to Zimbabwe.

To achieve consistent economic growth with broad-based gains for its entire people has already been a rarely scaled hurdle. To maintain exemplary, transparent governance with an entrenched ethos of incorruptibility is even harder. The PAP has enabled Singapore to rise to the top of the list of successful newly-independent states with these two accomplishments.

Its third challenge is not to just remain in power, nor to maintain its one-party dominance and deny the opposition its self-described role as a "co-driver" of the nation, but to do so in a manner which ensures that the party truly renews itself and retains its original vitality, vibrancy and vigor.

If history is anything to go by, this last task will be very daunting. History has not been very encouraging to political parties after three or four generations. Sustained periods of power breeds complacency and hubris, which are always the seeds of self-destruction.

The PAP has been in power for 56 continuous years, starting from its victory in the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections. The longest continuously ruling party in a democratic nation is Mexico, where the PRI or Institutional Revolutionary Party lasted for 71 continuous years before it lost control of government.

What about the experience of other parties which founded nation-states? The Colorado party of Paraguay lasted 61 years before it was ousted. The Israeli Labor party ruled over 26 years of coalition governments before it also lost power. Nearer

home in Asia, the record is even shorter. The Kuomintang of Taiwan or the Republic of China, lasted 56 years before it was voted out. The Congress Party of India, which led its independence movement, lasted 49 continuous years. The Liberal Democratic Party of post-war Japan, governed for 38 years before it fell.

The fact is, democratically elected ruling parties have generally floundered after about half a century to three-quarters of a century. They become corrupt, riven by internal strife, and eventually prompt a previously loyal electorate to vote them out.

Ironically, however, an electoral loss often enables drastic internal reforms to occur and new reformers to gain control of the party. This new leadership, coupled with disillusionment with the opposition turned governing party, brings the founding party back to power, and a dynamic equilibrium comprising a multi-party pendulum becomes the norm. The present ruling parties in Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Mexico, are all versions of this same story.

So this has been the historical trend, but it is not to say that political precedents are as immutable as the laws of physics. In another 15 years – 2030 – which is about 3 more elections away, the PAP will overtake the record of Mexico's PRI as the longest continuously ruling party. That, I think, is very likely to happen, as it has not exhibited the signs of moral exhaustion and the onset of decay which these other parties already reached by their middle age. PM Lee is still robust in his 60s, has an acute sense of the future of Singapore and remains overwhelming popular. The PAP has openly signalled an intention to develop organizational renewal and bring in different types of leaders than in the past. And the most insidious feature of political longevity – corruption – has shown no signs of surfacing yet.

But can this longevity stretch beyond 70 years to 80, 90, 100? If the PAP can buck the trends of history, it will have set a new paradigm of longevity. And it *has* already set new paradigms of governance in other areas, so it is not an impossible goal, but possibly more difficult than earlier achievements.

Electoral politics going forward will be increasingly uncertain and difficult to predict. Unlike the dynamic equilibrium of a two-party-dominant system, where the political pendulum regularly swings from one ruling party to another, Singapore's equilibrium is stable, but *static*. There is no precedent by which a ruling party has renewed itself through defeat in the polls, simply because the PAP has never lost.

In other democracies, an entire nation self-corrects through one party taking over from another quite regularly. Obama after Bush, Blair after Thatcher, Cameron after Blair, these are all the pendulum swings of a *dynamically* stable equilibrium. Singapore after the PAP – the idea is almost unthinkable. And yet, for the good of the nation, think it we must.

One thought that I've put forward is that there are only three basic scenarios for the PAP in the next 50 years:

1. The Status Quo Scenario. As it suggests, this scenario sees the PAP controlling say 85 to 90% of Parliamentary seats, with the opposition controlling at most a dozen seats or so. This is regardless of the popular vote, where support for the PAP has dropped to a record low of 60% and may even decline further, because although the popular vote for the PAP has been declining, it is really control of Parliament that matters.
2. The Dominant Party Scenario. The PAP retains control of an important two-thirds majority, or at the very least, an absolute majority, of Parliamentary seats. This is closer to the situation in Malaysia. Assuming there are still around only 90 to 100 seats in Parliament, that means in a dominant party scenario, the opposition parties will control around 30 to 50 seats, which is almost unimaginable today.
3. Two -- Party Pendulum Scenario. A single opposition party or a coalition wins an election. Power then shifts between the PAP and the second major party in Singapore. This is pretty much the norm in all other developed, liberal democracies. A variant of this scenario is that the PAP splits and new coalitions form which alternate in winning elections.

These scenarios are quite obvious and commonsensical. It is the likelihood of the various scenarios occurring which might be controversial. Let me rate these probabilities into three categories: Unlikely, Possible, and Likely.

And let me divide the next 50 years into 3 sets of 15 years, with each set roughly comprising three elections or so.

We can therefore create a matrix for the scenarios:

Status Quo Scenario:

First 15 years:	Possible
Second 15 years:	Unlikely
Third 15 years:	Unlikely

Dominant Party Scenario:

First 15 years:	Likely
Second 15 years:	Possible

Third 15 years: Possible

Two-Party Pendulum Scenario:

First 15 years: Unlikely

Second 15 years: Possible

Third 15 years: Likely

This is my pretence at trying to be a political scientist because only when you create tables do you have some legitimacy as a political scientist; otherwise, I wouldn't have done this.

Basically, what does this say? All these scenarios foresee that the PAP will face a challenge to retain the same degree of control over Parliament as it has had in the past. So long as the very popular current PM Lee Hsien Loong remains in control – not only as PM but as SM or MM like his predecessors, the mantle of legitimacy can be extended to younger leaders. But even Mr Lee, and I mean Mr Lee Hsien Loong, will be in his 80's by three more elections. The challenge will then be considerable from then on.

This is not actually a radical conclusion – almost everyone I informally surveyed agreed with it broadly, but differed in their estimation as to how many years it would take before the PAP would lose an election, and how many terms it would stay out of power before bouncing back. Because history also shows that most founding parties after it loses, undergoes a period of drastic reform, and bounces back.

In fact, Mr Lee Kuan Yew himself has publicly pointed out that the PAP will eventually lose an election, but he did not foresee a date or a cause. It was in fact, to mitigate what he considered the risks involved with this inevitable event – which he dubbed a “freak” election – that the Elected Presidency was created. But as the last Presidential election showed, this controversial measure may well backfire and simply prove that the law of unintended consequences is actually very powerful.

A so-called “freak” *presidential* election – meaning unexpected by and unfavourable to the PAP -- may happen sooner than a so-called “freak” *parliamentary* election. Another controversial measure, the creation of Group Representation Constituencies to require a minority-race MP in each GRC, but which has been criticised as also a convenient hurdle for opposition parties to win in GRC's, may also backfire.

So, my conclusion is that, I think measures to mitigate more so-called freak elections will not be forthcoming.

Causes for Loss of Power

So far, historical trends elsewhere point towards an election *loss* by the PAP in the *second* half of the next 50 years. Or to put it another way, it would be extraordinary if that did not happen. The issue we should now consider is: what might cause the PAP to lose a general election, given its current overwhelming dominance?

There are, in my view, three basic possibilities: first, an accidental or freak election. Second, a split within the PAP resulting in a loss to an opposition party which might not *otherwise* be stronger than a united PAP. And third, an anticipated, outright loss to an opposition party.

Freak Election

1. Advocates of the freak election thesis note that the near--absolute control of Parliament by the PAP is not reflected in the total anti-PAP votes in every general election, which has averaged between 35 to 40%.

This has been due to the first--past--the--post Westminster system which intentionally favours a strong ruling party rather than multi-party coalition governments. And so a party winning only say 60% of the total votes cast in an election may control some 90% of Parliament – as is the situation in Singapore.

However, this can also give the PAP and its supporters a false sense of security. If sufficient voters want more opposition Parliamentarians than the paltry 10% at present, or are unhappy about a particularly policy, but do not necessarily want a change of government, this might result in a relatively small swing in the total votes cast – say, 8 to 10%.

This could result in a small majority still for the PAP of say, 52% against 48% of total votes cast. But it could also result in sufficient constituencies – especially the big GRC's --- being lost, to actually tip the balance and result in an unintended loss of power by the PAP.

Split in the PAP

2. The second cause of a loss of power would be if the PAP split into two. History shows that internal differences must be extremely severe to split a ruling party, because opposing factions are self-serving enough to thoroughly dislike each

other but remain unhappily married in order to remain in power. Japan's LDP is an example of convenient marriages between extreme divergent factions.

Currently there are not any foreseeable issues nor distinct ideological rifts which can be so controversial as to cause a split. Over the long course of history, perhaps a re-unification with Malaysia, or a complete end to National Service, might qualify as fundamentally radical enough to split a party, but these sorts of issues aren't on the cards. It is hard to imagine issues of the scale of say, Scottish independence or Hong Kong's system of elections, on the Singapore horizon.

Recent issues which did not have a consensus within the PAP or Cabinet, such as granting casino licenses, or legalizing gay sex, are hardly divisive enough to cause a split in a party which has prided itself in being a broad church and upholding pragmatism as its operational philosophy.

Nevertheless, the last elections have shown that retired PAP MPs do not necessarily toe the party line, and with each passing election, challenges to current leadership by current or past MPs and ministers may well grow, without the overwhelming authority of Mr Lee Kuan Yew to squash dissenting voices. In itself, the PAP now is becoming a more pluralistic party with a greater diversity of voices in its ranks, which of course is no bad thing, but carries along its own dangers.

Massive Loss of Legitimacy

3. The third possibility, that of an outright, convincing and even widely anticipated win by an opposition party – such as occurred recently in the Indian general elections -- is only possible if there is a long, irrecoverable and *massive* loss of legitimacy by the ruling party.

This is not likely to happen just because of honest policy mishaps, perhaps partly due to an innate Asian conservatism towards regime change and an Asian deference to authority. On the flip side however, Asian electorates are increasingly intolerant about corruption in public office, partly because it is so prevalent.

China's President Xi Jinping is keenly aware of this. Widespread corruption, and not the demand for democracy or unhappiness with specific policies, will lead to the demise of the Chinese Communist Party through its total loss of legitimacy. Singapore achieved its unrivalled, enviable record of incorruptibility largely because Mr Lee Kuan Yew set a tone of governance which equated to an almost

ascetic personal lifestyle. His colleague Dr Goh Keng Swee even referred to the PAP as a priesthood, a calling which involved deep personal sacrifices.

And so, its exceptionalism on incorruptibility has allowed the PAP to get away with governance styles – the paternalism of the so-called nanny state – which might be resented by many Singaporeans, but accepted because of widespread trust that whatever its policy mishaps, the political leadership is generally acting in the best interests of the public, and never for their own personal financial gains.

The question here is whether that same exceptionalism can be maintained two, three decades from now when the priesthood which was the original PAP becomes but a quaint footnote in history books, and the party starts to resemble, as many aging political parties, a clubby, well-paid, fraternity with its own sense of entitlement.

If future political leaders become blasé about corruption, accepting it perhaps as part of the general cynicism of the New Normal, and value their occupation as similar to the well-paid investment bankers against whom their pay is benchmarked, rather than as an almost sacred mission, as Dr Goh described it, then Singapore indeed will no longer be exceptional.

And if Singaporeans become cynical about the absolute incorruptibility of their government and see their leadership as being no different than counterparts in Asean, in Hong Kong or Taiwan, or indeed in India and China, then the calculus of governance will change forever.

There is no evidence that corruption has increased in Singapore's public life, despite a few scandals involving mid-level bureaucrats. Singapore remains exemplary among its neighbours and even its counterparts in developed countries, for its low level of corruption. The high salaries paid to ministers will certainly mitigate the need for corruption, although, as we have seen with convicted investment bankers, being ultra-rich can breed an entitlement mentality that more should be mine.

But generally, massive loss of trust in the PAP is not likely to happen soon, although there is certainly some cynicism about the selflessness of highly paid ministers which did not apply to the founding generation of leaders.

A slow erosion of confidence and trust towards political leadership, such as now widely exists in Western liberal democracies, can over a period of time, this gradual erosion of trust, can be as corrosive as more dramatic causes.

One of the reasons why Hong Kong youth have reacted so fiercely to the universal suffrage issue is because their Chief Executives and deputies have lost the trust of ordinary people since 1997. If the Chief Executives were appointed by Beijing but did not represent only the interests of the rich, and were not tainted by corruption, I daresay that the issue of nominated candidates would be less controversial today. Lack of democracy and authoritarianism can be grudgingly accepted if leaders have integrity and the public interest truly at heart.

Of these three possible causes for loss of power, which have the greatest likelihood of occurring? I would rate the first possibility – a freak election – as having the highest chance, followed by an internal split, and the least likely is an outright, widely predicted loss. But this is a quite arbitrary stab in the dark.

In all likelihood, it is the interplay and combination of these three scenarios in different ways, which will pose a challenge for the PAP and its scenario-planners in future decades.

Now, just as I've highlighted three possible causes for loss of power, there are many factors which can either delay or accelerate these possible causes.

- One is demography. Singapore is one of the fastest-aging nations in the world. Old people are inherently more risk-averse than the young. They want to conserve whatever they already have, be it wealth, health, or benefits. They are not likely to risk what they have for the sake of vague idealistic notions such as freedom of speech or more opposition in Parliament.

However, the silver vote can also be vociferous about protecting their own rights. Just before the last general elections, an IPS survey showed that the percentage of elderly swing voters rose to 45.4%, compared to only 35.2% in the previous election. The only demonstrations at Hong Lim Park which have been attended by people over 60, were those protesting about CPF and Medisave issues.

Keenly aware of their disgruntlement, the government has since launched many initiatives to recognize this so-called Pioneer generation, including a S\$ 8 billion health care package. It will be interesting to see how this translates into votes.

- Another factor which could delay or accelerate the PAP's lost of power, is the PAP's organisational structure. The cadre system, found both in the Catholic Church and in communist parties, mitigates against internal fractures. As the joke goes, Lenin was in fact a closet Catholic because he admired and copied the world's most self-perpetuating system whereby the Pope chooses the cardinals

who choose the Pope, and together they control hundreds of millions of people. It is therefore virtually impossible for upstart rebels within the Catholic Church, or in a Leninist, cadre-style political party to seize control of the party or church. Nevertheless, this can also lead to internal rigidity and intrigues.

- Yet another factor is possible loss of economic competitiveness. The trade-off in fast-growth, low-freedom societies is that the delivery of a rapidly improving material life will offset the relative paucity of civil rights.

But as Singapore's economy matures and the low-hanging fruits of economic growth have all been plucked, then the economic trade-offs begin to fray, and the social compact can begin to unwind.

- A final but important factor is the relative strength of opposition parties. Other than a freak election, a change of power can only happen if the electorate believes that if given the chance, an opposition party can actually govern. Recent elections have established the credibility of some opposition parties as serious-minded, competent, and constructive. The frequently made assertion that Singapore's talent pool is too small to ever have more than one credible political party, is actually quickly losing credibility.

There are also signs that the electorate is distinguishing between different opposition parties in their credibility and a sorting out process will result in only one or two strong opposition parties. One watershed event was the January 2013 by-election in Punggol East where a 3-cornered fight with 2 opposition parties and the PAP contesting should have resulted in a PAP victory. But the Workers' Party candidate won, largely because the anti-PAP voters all cast their votes for this single party which they deemed most credible, and there was no splitting of opposition votes.

The Workers' Party is likely to be the biggest beneficiary from the next elections. If and when it wins enough seats to be considered an entrenched party – there is no hard and fast rule, but perhaps 20% of Parliamentary seats or 15 – 20 opposition MPs will make it such, it will find the going both harder and easier.

Harder, on one front because the underdog effect which cushioned it from scrutiny on various levels, will be eroded considerably. It will have to demonstrate that beyond a credible policy manifesto, it must have the organisational depth and cohesion to run a country.

Easier, because it will have more organisational resources and perhaps even a geographic stronghold from which to expand. And it can argue that competent management of town councils is a stepping stone to running a city-state.

Though ideological and policy points of difference are important, the ultimate hurdle in the leap from credible opposition to possible ruling party in the eyes of ordinary, mainly swing voters, is the ability to govern. If the opposition became the ruling party, will the proverbial trains still run on time? Will my daily life become more, or less, of a hassle than before?

Focussing on the WP's ability, or lack thereof, to manage the town councils in their constituencies, will be a PAP election strategy. It may also be why the WP is relatively quiet in Parliament, preferring to prove itself on the ground through rigorous door-to-door canvassing and mundane but important constituency work. And it may also not be accidental that a special body under the PM's office was recently created to co-ordinate municipal services, recognizing its electoral significance in the coming elections.

Grassroots politics will again, as in the PAP's early years, become more important, when the opposition sets up rival community organisations in its own geographic strongholds. This may permeate into the larger civil society.

One possible negative impact may be greater polarisation, but it will be offset by the positive impact of genuine grassroots leadership being tested on both sides and more of a bottom-up rather than top-down process of leadership renewal.

Having covered the politics part of this lecture, let me now talk a bit about governance. A key issue here is governability – to what extent will Singapore be more difficult to govern, regardless of whom is the ruling party?

I can identify several trends which will affect governability:

1. First, the ability of governments to control information will continue to erode, despite sometimes frantic and illogical attempts to stem it. Because knowledge is power, and the ability to control access to information is the key to power, governments instinctively want to be the gatekeepers of information. But, as everyone knows, increasingly, social media and its incredible variety of means for people to connect even across a heavily censored internet system, is undermining government's ability to shape how people think.

Anything censored is still widely available in alternative media, and therein lies the rub: at what point will control and censorship of the mainstream news, cultural, and entertainment media, pseudo-documentaries become counter-productive by not really achieving the purpose of blocking access to information, but instead, end up alienating the social activists who, despite their small size, and their not being heartlanders, are influencers beyond their numbers?

The Singapore government has a counter-argument and it is that even if a control or censorship measure does not achieve its stated purpose, it signals the values of a society and must be enacted irrespective of the chances for success. And this was one of the reasons advanced for our continuing to try to block pornography sites. That even if it is not going to be successful, it signals the values of a society.

So against this backdrop we now have gay penguins singing To Singapore with Love, and more of this will happen in future.

2. Second, it will be increasingly difficult to hold the political centre together in the midst of polarizing extremes – liberals vs conservatives; local vs foreign; pro-life vs pro-abortion; gay versus straight, and so forth. Whilst fault lines along race and religion have been contained and have still not cracked, the so-called culture wars are intensifying.

The PAP government has steered clear of siding with any particular viewpoint and this moderate, centrist approach has been largely successful. But as the culture wars escalate, the government may well have to take a stance and offend at least one part of the electorate. But culture wars in themselves may not be a bad thing if seen as necessary growing pains towards what seems to be an oxymoron but in fact is a desirable goal, and that is cohesive diversity. We even see within the Catholic Church itself, the top leadership, meaning the Pope, having to stimulate discussions on what were previously totally taboo subjects.

3. Thirdly, diminution in the stature of political leadership will encourage the rise of so-called “non-constructive” politics. Future leaders simply cannot command the sufficient respect and moral authority to just decree what is acceptable and unacceptable criticisms. To have the authority to simply deride wide swathes of criticisms as simply non-constructive is going to be wishful thinking because people in the future are just not going to accept it.

However, if political power in Singapore will increasingly be shared between competing groups, as it is now in Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is important that political discourse does not descend to the theatrical farces which now characterise their legislative meetings. In these countries, a political culture of mutual respect has not been established. It is imperative that this be established in Singapore in coming years, so that by common consent of all political players – rather than by ministerial decree -- a consensual culture of constructive politics emerges.

4. Fourth, maintaining an ethos of egalitarianism in an increasingly unequal society will require more than just political oratory. Whilst Singapore was never a socialist state, its ethos was fervently egalitarian and this helped to create a sense of common purpose, exemplified by the 1970's concept of a Rugged Society, which some of us in our sixties might remember, which today sounds quaintly out-dated today but did indeed embody a particular ethos.

In recent years, the ostentatious pursuit of wealth rivalling Hong Kong standards has become fashionable. Extolling our casinos, Formula 1 Grand Prix, and highest per capita number of billionaires and Lamborghinis in the world, is evidence that Singapore has now become a world class city, such exhortations, such claims to fame, could perhaps be dismissed as the crassness of the rich, except that this ethos of the elite is occurring just when income inequality has become the worst since independence.

The gulf between rich and poor Singaporeans, not only in terms of wealth but also in terms of values, is probably more than ever before, and continuing to widen.

Even the gap between old money and its sense of responsible philanthropy, and the nouveau riche's penchant for affectation and bling, is widening. So besides the sheer economic impact of income inequality is that the ethos of egalitarianism is also unwinding very rapidly.

5. Finally, the absence of a galvanizing national mission and a sense of dogged exceptionalism that we are the little dot that refuses to be smudged out, that disappearance of this dogged exceptionalism as we grow increasingly rich and complacent, it will lead to a sense of anomie – which has been defined as “personal unrest, alienation and anxiety that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals”. Sociologists will tell you about the sense of anomie within a society. This is the disease of affluence which affects individual people as well as societies. And will we discover, we have arrived, only to find ourselves lost again?

If this seems unnecessarily pessimistic, it is because I personally think the danger of hubris right now is greater than the danger of under-confidence.

A discussion of Singapore politics would not be complete without touching on a major player in political governance: the civil service, or more accurately its *crème de la crème*, the elite administrative service.

There has historically been a close association between the admin service and the government, not simply because the civil service has known only one political master in 50 years, but mainly because a large number of Cabinet ministers came from the admin service.

This has led, on the positive side, to a very close and sometimes seamless relationship between the government and civil service, which is not seen anywhere else in liberal democracies with their changing ruling parties and a clear distinction between the starting and ending points of a political versus public sector career.

The negative side which has been most mentioned is the lack of intellectual and experiential diversity between the political and public sector elites, resulting in group-think and an uniformity of perspectives. This ultimately leads, it is argued, to a lack of creativity in solutions to problems, a blinkered view of the world and how people will react to policies, and a lack of robustness in policy debates.

A new dimension which may be emerging is the impact of the New Normal, with its increasing uncertainties over the electoral performance of the PAP in successive general elections, on the civil service. A civil service whose identity has been so closely tied to the fortunes of the ruling party can become demoralised and dis-oriented if the ruling party is increasingly uncertain of its own future.

With more electoral volatility in the future, it is imperative that the civil service work harder to develop its own sense of self, its own ethos and values. The purpose is not just to distance itself from the ruling party, but to develop a culture and identity strong, robust and resilient enough to embrace and absorb, and not become divided and uncertain, should more young civil servants hold opposing views from the ruling party. A politicized civil service would be disastrous for Singapore should the politics of the New Normal intensify in coming decades.

My final remarks are about today's younger generation, the inheritors of the future.

Fifty years is both a very long and a very short time. In this period Singapore has moved from Third World to First World, with physical and economic changes beyond

recognition. But there is a real danger that we may in reality become stuck in a kind of First World-minus, with First World economic characteristics but without the socio-political or socio-cultural attributes – what our leaders call “heartware” – which characterises a deeper, more holistic maturity.

And yet 50 years in the lifetime of a family or even an individual is not all that long. Three generations: my parents, myself, and my children – have all lived through parts of this 50 years. Shared experiences and common memories still bind people across five decades.

The deepening of a shared national identity, the pursuit of a compelling social vision, and the shaping, articulation, and moulding of that vision through a collective imagination, is the central task of the younger generation. Stumbling into the future without a clue as to what you want, and what are the promises and the perils, is quite possibly the best way to ensure that we will encounter an accidental disaster.

Thankfully I have not, in my conversations with young people, encountered either the hubris or the immobilising self-doubts which I was afraid of. It is not as if the young people I spoke to were very happy with the state of affairs in Singapore today. Far from it. Almost everyone was critical of one issue or another, and to varying degrees.

But what impressed me was the overwhelming sense of what sociologists call self-agency -- the simple notion that I can change things; that I am in control of my life and my future.

As someone who has been somewhat depressed by the tired cynicism of my own peers, I found this boundless optimism -- some would call it the naïveté of youth -- tremendously encouraging. Our young people are not apathetic nor are they sycophants -- but they take the society they live in today as a given, a matter-of-fact reality for which they neither feel the same degrees of gratitude or resentment as members of my generation.

They have also broadened their vision of Singapore My Home to be more than just relentless but uni-dimensional economic progress, to include other aspirations. The thoughtful young Singaporean today recognises that the vision of a future Singapore cannot simply be a top-down narrative but will have to be co-created from the ground up.

They regard the government and the PAP as a matter of fact --- not a saviour, nor a tyrant, but somewhat like a parent who is respected but who must be grown out of.

Clearly, a paternalistic political culture is not going to excite, much less retain, the loyalty of younger Singaporeans.

Whereas in my generation the government and the PAP were always the reference point around which all discussion revolved, whether positive or critical, today's young people seem to be bored by too much purely political discussion. They want to move on, to talk about: *what next?* And what next means a myriad of civil society causes, sometimes similar, sometimes overlapping, sometimes even opposing and contradictory causes.

What unites them all is the immediacy of self-agency; not waiting around for somebody else to do something you think is needed, but doing it yourself. This kind of political DIY or Do-It-Yourself attitude has I believe in the past decade encouraged a participatory democracy which actually resembles Singapore's early years, but which then surrendered to a long period of developmental authoritarianism during perhaps my growing up years.

One striking example -- which was not imaginable in my generation --- was the response to the famous Gay Penguins episode -- which will go down in Singapore's history, I hope, as the kind of comic relief we need as a nation whilst we tackle the underlying big issues.

The fact that some bureaucrats banned some children's books as pro-gay and anti-family is not unexpected, and not dis-similar in logic to the banning of chewing gum or long hair decades earlier.

But twenty years ago, such bureaucratic actions -- not necessarily about LGBT issues but about anything else, would have been met only by grudging acquiescence.

But as a sign of the times, including the power of social media, the response this time was some 400 young parents decamping to the national library to read the banned and to-be-pulped books to their children. It was not a strident political demonstration, and more like a children's outing. But the point was clear.

And the same is true for the unprecedented 26,000 people who gathered at the Pink Dot event -- not just to celebrate gay rights nor to oppose the government, but to celebrate the increasing diversity and self-agency of civil society.

So I conclude today's talk with a hopeful view of Singapore politics in the next 50 years, simply because in the larger picture, I do not see the ossification of an aging political elite increasingly out of touch with a restless youth, such as led to the Arab

Spring; nor do I see fundamentally divisive issues such as in Hong Kong over its relationship with China; nor the exhaustion of Old Europe unable and unwilling to confront big, difficult issues.

At 50, Singapore is still a young nation in search of its own future. I do not think there are more, or fewer, challenges ahead than in the past 50 years. They will simply be different challenges. It will be the task of subsequent SR Nathan Fellows to continue identifying and debating them, and I hope I have started the ball rolling.

I just want to add an end-note to this lecture. A few weeks ago my wife and I visited the British Museum's latest exhibition in London, entitled: Ming: 50 years that changed China. This period from 1400 to 1450 saw an unprecedented flowering of Chinese civilization in the arts, diplomacy and trade. It was perhaps best exemplified not by its emperors but the Muslim eunuch Zheng He.

His armada of ships with over 20,000 people on each voyage and on ships ten times larger than any of its European contemporaries, travelled to all corners of the world a century before Columbus and Vasco da Gama. But the point was not that.

The point was what the curators noted in that exhibition -- that this golden period of Chinese civilization coincided with or was in fact caused by, a pro-active philosophy of ethnic, religious, intellectual tolerance, an intentional cultivation of diversity, and a purposeful curiosity to know the unknown. In subsequent dynasties, the closing of the Chinese mind led to centuries of darkness and humiliation which are only now ending.

The moral for Singapore is twofold: first, that 50 years is a long enough time for a people to create wonders and so we should see the next 50 years with an excitement towards what Singapore can yet become, and with a childlike amazement at each unfolding opportunity. And second, that openness, tolerance, and diversity, whilst also bringing their own risks, are the essential ingredients for greatness – a goal which is not beyond our collective grasp.

Thank you for your indulgence today, and I hope to see that some of will still show up in three weeks time at the second lecture.

Thank you.