

Weekend Today, News Comment, August 20-21 2005, pg. 9

PM Lee, second year and beyond

Citizens not only becoming more demanding, but also more active in complex global city-state

By Gillian Koh

PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his first year, has shown much courage in addressing the challenges that arise from Singapore's deepening embeddedness in the world economic system.

He has grasped the nettle on critical issues like structural unemployment, widening income gaps and poverty in a systematic manner – issuing clear policy directions and allocating the resources required.

He has set out a broad vision of how Singapore should develop the cultural ambience associated with a global city – quite apart from the jobs this will generate. He has invited public discussion on the proposal to build integrated resorts and casinos and hasn't put any stops on how this should happen – although there are those who feel they should have got a better answer at the end of it.

Of course, some remind me that the lines were drawn quite clearly when it comes to film-making. It may be cold comfort to highlight that while that right of expression seemed to have been quashed, the protagonist was not. Obviously, there are still limits on how deliberately provocative the Government will let you be.

This gives us a sense of the politics that accompanies our drive towards becoming a global city.

People will be increasingly concerned about issues related to art and culture, heritage, the environment and other lifestyle questions as part of a process of self-discovery. These will be central to the issues of identity and destiny – citizen's search for their place at home and in the world.

The consequences of becoming an increasingly globalised city-state will be even more challenging. These will throw up questions of distributional justice which might be taken up by 'active citizens' through a helping hand approach.

And such questions will most certainly be directed at the Government if it is still perceived to be heavily involved in economic planning. They will inevitably be also directed at the market – companies and employers.

In the course of these discussions, the demand for greater transparency and accountability of public institutions can only increase. In releasing his revised code of conduct to ministers and parliamentarians, Mr Lee shows he is aware of this.

I suspect that more will be expected, especially of public institutions like Community Development Councils and grassroots organizations as they are given a greater role in social development and, specifically, the disbursement of public assistance funds. The system of accountability will come under greater scrutiny – more likely by active citizens than the poor clients seeking these funds.

The people sector will not be insulated from this either. The NKF was an organisation delivering a much-needed service, with reserves that could sustain it. The NKF saga, however, demonstrated how an institution of public service and trust can be savaged if it does not keep its books open and does not keep pace with the way the public thinks it should function.

No doubt the Prime Minister will address these matters of governance in a robust and rigorous manner in the days ahead. We might even get to hear about them when he delivers his National Day Rally Speech.

But, the Government should not feel it bears the sole responsibility for this. What it must do is to ensure that there are enough channels by which systems and records of governance are put out in the public domain, and that there are independent commissions where they can be scrutinized and questioned by concerned citizens. This provides the discipline needed – without the Government having to wield a big stick.

And, if questionable practices were to surface, citizens will be assured that it is an exception. It would not result in the sort of generalized melt-down in public trust and confidence in the charitable sector in the aftermath of the NKF saga. That is something we really cannot afford in the midst of the growing complexity we face as a nation going beyond 40.

Dr Gillian Koh is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. She leads the Institute's work in the area of politics and governance.