

SG50: Scaling the Mount Everest of aspirations

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As we approach our 50th National Day and as a general election looms, Singaporeans are thinking deeply about the future of our nation.

At different meetings organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), foreign and Singaporean speakers have discussed the geopolitical, economic, ecological and governance trends that might shape that future.

One thing no one knows is how Singaporeans, collectively and in our respective fields, will respond to these.

What trends will shape our future?

TRENDS THAT SHAPE THE FUTURE

On geopolitics, how will we navigate a more complex geopolitical order as East Asian countries and the United States deal with an assertive, rising China?

China itself is grappling with its dual identity - as described by Peking University International Studies professor Jia Qingguo - as both a developing and a developed country; one that is poor yet rich, weak yet strong.

It also needs to be seen as a responsible global actor on many fronts.

The United States' foreign policy orientation can shift too, with the changes in the internal political balance between the Democrats and the Republicans.

While it may be decades before a new equilibrium settles, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan said this was not disadvantageous to Singapore if developments can be "analysed clinically" using the correct reference points when they are interpreted, not distorted by non-state actors, partisan politics or, worse, for these to become entry points for foreign influence. This way, Singapore can respond nimbly and in a nuanced fashion going forward.

This can only mean that the Singaporean public, civil society and civil servants should seek to understand the impulses, expressions and motivations guiding these powers and take care to ensure that the actions they undertake do not undermine the strategic interest of our country. In geopolitics, the appeal has been made for having one shared masterplan and intelligence map to shape our response.

On the second set of trends in economic development, the position on the role of multiple, non-government actors is a less ambivalent one.

While the recent narrative about technological and business trends tends to be grim - the robots are taking our jobs - techno-optimists Byron Auguste, managing director of American civic enterprise Opportunity@Work, and Mr Ravi Menon, managing director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, argued instead that robotics and all manner of computing technologies can be harnessed to unlock human potential and bring fresh economic opportunities.

How much more important will it be for a labour-constrained landscape like Singapore to grasp these with both hands.

Gone will be the mundane, repetitive, muscle-dependent tasks. Here to excite will be jobs that give expression to our creative power. The key worry is for Singaporeans who do not have the skills for those new jobs and industries yet.

This is where closer collaboration between companies that can define what skills and competencies they need and agencies that can mobilise untapped or underemployed workers through "just-in-time" skills development and education is needed. With certainty that there is a market for them, workers will take the training on offer. The nimbleness of the market and deeper connections between change agents will be where magic happens.

On the third set of trends of how climate change and a carbon-constrained world will affect us, the power of individual actions adding to more than the sum becomes the most obvious.

While our environment ministry reminds us that the choices of every household, factory and office matter, it is also the easiest aspect of life for us to say, surely my own actions will not make a jot of difference to whether we become inundated by the rising sea level at the end of this century.

However, can we afford to be free riders in the world ecological system or will being responsible for our own actions set an example and give us the moral authority to invite others to play their part in dealing with global warming? Investing in intelligent urban design, energy-efficient infrastructure and lifestyle in all our personal and collective decisions is the strategic choice. How, though, can this national orientation be developed with rising political pluralism and the mass penetration of new and social media?

This fourth trend in governance suggests that the fragmentation of the national community and a receding sense of shared interest are inevitable outcomes.

Each of us can form our own community of opinion and even mobilise for social action, as amply demonstrated in the 2013 protests against the Government's Population White Paper, and the current and vitally important discussion of elder abuse spurred by a citizen's video.

A handful of activists can draw a crowd and re-craft the national narrative about Singapore's future. Yet, these new communications technologies enable us to deliberate more widely to develop that strategic mindset among ourselves on a wide range of public policy issues.

GOVERNANCE IN CHANGING TIMES

So does our future lie in the Government and state agencies listening harder to the diverse voices on the ground and customising policy to different needs and aspirations of different segments of the population?

They certainly do not all want or need the same things. Having met the basic needs of a population rising out of poverty, the public housing policy of the 1990s in Singapore epitomised a government that had the luxury of being all things to all men (and women), providing rental housing for the poorest, build-to-order flats for the masses and executive condominiums for the affluent professional class.

Another more recent case in point: the reform of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme. The reforms add government top-ups and wage supplements for the lower-income and the elderly to bolster their CPF balances for a lifetime of retirement payouts and healthcare insurance.

Those with healthy balances have the option of choosing investment schemes with more risk and potentially higher returns than the interest rate guaranteed by the Government. These options will be improved upon in the next round of reforms.

As a country, we have not only attained the pinnacle of national socio-economic development by global standards but have also arrived at the "Mount Everest" of aspirations, as described by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at the IPS' SG50+ conference.

Singaporeans now demand more for themselves in terms of economic affluence and of themselves at the social and ethical levels.

A recently released 2015 survey of values by the international Barretts Value Centre and Singapore consulting firm aAdvantage suggests that society is at a transformational stage.

We may be transcending the pursuit of personal and basic needs as our sole mission for the soul issues of considering the needs of others, the elderly, the disadvantaged and the environment.

A government with its bureaucracy, no matter how efficient and honest, can operate only on precedence, uniformity, predictability and codes of practice.

Its mission and legitimating basis are that it is fair and just in crafting and delivering policy. Singaporeans want such a government and public service to provide the basics in life that are indeed best delivered as broad systems for standardisation, economies of scale, risk-pooling and because they must have that reach to be effective - think of the national rail system, healthcare, security and taxation.

However, that is not where the future lies. It lies in the space for innovation, for trying new ways of allowing intelligence and interests to flourish, for expressions of nuanced forms of moral consciousness. These areas for risk-taking, experimentation and path-finding are to be found in businesses, civil society and the community.

Put another way - the state is that nest and nursery we all need as it provides a warm social context to grow, build self-confidence and also care for one another.

For instance, our Singaporean instincts are that we take the collective responsibility of "levelling up" those who have not done well in the lottery of life through redistributive social policies of the state.

Yet when social activists remind the Government of this critical responsibility, they also know that only they can properly help families at risk unwind or stabilise the dire situations they face, not a government bureaucracy. So we need the appropriate institutions and change agents for each challenge.

At 50, when the sky is the limit, we must celebrate the innovative disruptors that nudge us out of that nest and nursery to do great exploits for ourselves; to take advantage of opportunities

to create what is not there yet; to surprise ourselves by our ingenuity and talent in service to our families, community, economy and even the world.

At another IPS meeting last week, the former head of the civil service, Mr Lim Siong Guan, said that opportunity, like luck, comes to those who are prepared and an efficient government can just about provide those opportunities and choices.

At 50, we are a people with choices; now, to become a people with strategic purpose.

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