

The new Singapore narrative

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Pause for a second and imagine this: you pick up a random bunch of people from the streets and line them side by side. What would be the immediate and salient observation to the naked eye?

Without prompting, most of us will talk about the visual differences, their gender, the way they dress, their behaviour and perhaps any physical indication to their racial background and religious inclinations.

The mathematically inclined may argue that one out of three is a foreigner, based on the demographic data in the statistical yearbook.

This thought process, in essence, is the typical framework in the management of diversity. Some look for differences, while others may see “deficits”.

The theme in this year’s Singapore National Day Rally has shifted markedly away from the traditional economic-centric messages to one that emphasises aspiration, identity, and belongingness — with the theme of Hope, Heart And Home.

At a time when sentiment towards foreigners is highly critical and unflattering, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has rightly and audaciously zeroed in on our social fabric as the theme of the rally.

DEFICIT MANAGEMENT

More importantly though, the message this year is not designed to address the politics of resource allocation, whether Singapore citizens receive more subsidies than permanent residents, how well or badly immigrants behave, or the importance of immigrants in augmenting economic growth.

The rally is a solemn reminder of our common future, one that cuts across ethno-national background.

The foreign-local affective divide is not new and many policies have been recalibrated in recent years to bridge the schism.

The obvious strategy involves dishing out more subsidies and benefits to Singaporeans relative to foreigners; it encourages foreigners to take up citizenship while at the same time reassures Singaporeans that the policy-makers have their interests at heart.

This strategy is quintessentially an art of deficit management. You give more to one group to minimise perceived harm or disequilibrium.

But the problem with this old paradigm is that the more you delve into the alleged injustice, the more obsessed you get with the imbalance and, hence, the more upset you get.

It is rooted in the same psychological lens as the teaser in the opening paragraph. You look for the differences, the deficits.

LOOKING FOR A COMMON DENOMINATOR IN LIFE

This year's message has transcended the previous narrative by focusing on the collective future and the creation of a new Singapore Story. It is about the dreams and aspirations that Singaporeans want and the challenges that we all face.

You look for the common denominator in life and the markers that all could identify with, like the shared memories, values and destiny.

Lee was quick to add that he did not condone inappropriate behaviours, and this is so, regardless of nationality. In the case of Sun Xu, the Chinese scholar who berated Singapore, Lee felt the repudiation among Singaporeans was justified.

Similarly, he also believes that Singaporeans should be fair-minded and not forget the good deeds and contributions by foreigners.

Has the new narrative on Hope, Heart, and Home captured the imagination of the citizenry? The post-rally polls conducted by REACH found that two out of three respondents felt that Lee's speech had resonated with them.

While the new narrative offers a silver lining in bridging the fault lines between foreigners and locals, the tagline on Hope, Heart and Home must be tingled with a spectre of realism.

SHARED VISION FOR ALL

The rift between the two will not be demolished overnight. The policies that favour citizens over permanent residents will not be reverted anytime soon; Singaporeans will continue to have to put up with changing and unfamiliar cultural norms; and foreigners may have to face prejudice and disapproval from the unsympathetic hosts for reasons beyond their comprehension.

The euphoria on the new narrative will be jaded in a while.

But unlike the foreign-local union that took place in the deficit-thinking paradigm, there is now something to look forward to in the future even if there are occasional hiccups.

The new narrative brings on board a shared vision for everyone as it emphasises the common goal in co-creating a good life. Putting together a bunch of random people is just as likely to spark a creative conversation if the aim of the exercise focuses on their shared interest.

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