

Does modern S'pore need a vision?

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PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the National Day Rally two Sundays ago was delivered in what has now become his trademark style.

Like his rally performances of his first four years, the Aug 17 disquisition on "Celebrating the Singapore Story" too was a formidable display of his mastery over details, his sheer intellect and his ready sense of humour.

In his speech, the most important of the annual political calendar, he raised important issues that concerned all Singaporeans. It showed that his Government was applying itself to solving them, and in the areas of inflation and babies, was putting its money where its mouth is. All in, he impressed as a man who knows what he is doing.

But, I didn't get a sense of where we are headed as a nation and what he wants Team Singapore to do to achieve that vision.

The Prime Minister's forte is as a fixer of things. His official biography for the Cabinet revealingly lists among his hobbies "tinkering with computers".

(As a geek myself, I totally share his obvious delight when he demonstrated that he could instantly upload to his website a "live" video taken with his mobile phone.) He is a true technocratic Prime Minister. That he led the economy out of the woods in the periods from 1985 to 1986 and 2001 to 2003 attests to his brilliance as a trouble-shooter.

In the last four years, Mr Lee did make two vision-type statements. For a while, they stirred the imagination of the people. In his 2004 inauguration speech as Prime Minister, he promised an "open and inclusive society". That raised expectation levels among many.

The pessimists among us would say nothing much has come out of that speech. The optimists would argue that following through on that statement takes time, especially in a country which has so many competing forces at work.

The hopefuls would have been surprised at the retention of Section 377A of the Penal Code and the proscriptions on activities such as the annual Indignation gay festival.

Mr Lee's other vision speech, an address in 2004 to the Harvard Club on "civic society" just before he took over from Mr Goh Chok Tong, also appeared to signal greater accommodation of diversity, even dissent. In retrospect, however, it seemed more a restatement of the status quo than a declaration of impending changes, though the roll back on restrictions on public discourse on the Internet he announced during his rally speech is a big, positive step.

The titles of three of his four previous National Day Rally speeches are "Our Future of Opportunity and Promise" in 2004, "A Vibrant Global City Called Home" 2005 and "City of Possibilities; Home for All" in 2007. (The official transcript for 2006 does not include a title.)

In themselves the titles do articulate certain visions. The phrase "city of possibilities" in particular has a nice ring to it. But, again the realisation of this will take time.

Perhaps a country does not need a vision. Some will point to the headline economic growth figures of the last four years and say they matter most. Some may dismiss the vision thing as mere sloganeering or public relations. Or they may say that Singapore has matured and visions are for those who have not yet arrived.

Or that in this borderless and globalised world, the big idea is a fallback to a past when nationhood and a nation's notion of itself held more meaning.

Or they may say that in a diverse, even divided, Singapore — note the battle over the criminalisation of homosexuality and the casino debate — no one vision can satisfy everyone, so it is politic not to articulate any even if you have one. Or they may point to the fact some of the self-examination exercises under Mr Goh yielded little.

There is another way of looking at it. Singapore now needs a vision — or at least a debate about a proposed vision — as much as it always has, if not more.

Singapore is at a crossroads. No less than at any time in the last 43 years of its independence, there is today much uncertainty about what kind of nation it is and is becoming.

Increased rates of immigration and influx of temporary workers at all levels, intensified globalisation and the inequality that it has engendered, the rising diversity and divergences in the population — these all call for not just individual policy responses, but also a higher-level conceptualisation or re-conceptualisation of the meaning of Singapore and being Singaporean.

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