

Is there an ideological cleavage in S'pore?

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FOR a very long time, Singaporeans appear to have had a shared belief in the following values and principles:

Free trade and investment

Market economy

Globalisation

Foreign talent

Meritocracy

Several recent events, however, have prompted thoughtful Singaporeans to wonder whether that consensus is breaking down.

Speaking in London on Thursday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong hinted at the problem.

Unlike many other global cities, he noted, Singapore has no hinterland. This made getting the balance "between national identity and cosmopolitan openness, between free market competition and social solidarity" especially important.

Are the stresses and strains associated with the drive to be a global city producing a potentially destabilising ideological cleavage?

Free Trade and Investment

I AM quite confident that Singaporeans believe in free trade and investment. Singaporeans know that our policy of free trade and investment, beginning in 1819, has brought jobs and prosperity. As a consequence, there is no protectionist sentiment in Singapore.

This explains why Singaporeans have reacted with equanimity when iconic landmarks, such as Raffles Hotel, and iconic brands and businesses, such as Robinsons, Tiger Beer and F&N, are sold to foreigners.

I wish, however, to make a point here. Singapore is a nation of traders, willing to sell such landmarks and icons without compunction. In that sense, Singapore is more like the British than the Swiss. The British have sold all their great auto companies to foreigners, while the great Swiss companies remain in the hands of the Swiss.

Do we want to be like the United Kingdom or Switzerland?

Market Economy

SINGAPOREANS, unlike the Americans, are not an ideological people. They are pragmatists. They believe that both the private and public sectors have a legitimate role in the economy.

Singaporeans accept that the market economy is the most efficient model for the allocation of investment and for the production and distribution of goods and services, as well as for determining prices.

However, they also recognise that the market is imperfect and the Government has to intervene when there is market failure. Singaporeans do not believe in a winner-takes-all model of capitalism. They want the Government to intervene in order to ensure justice and fairness.

Singaporeans want to live in a market economy. They do not, however, want to live in a market society. That is, they do not want to live in a society in which everything is for sale, where everything is monetised, and where the making of money is a key performance indicator of both the private and public sectors.

Thoughtful Singaporeans remember the warning contained in one of the holy books that the love of money is the root of all evil. They fear that Singapore has already become or is in danger of becoming a market society.

Globalisation

GLOBALISATION is an irresistible force. It is driven by technology, open borders, human mobility, trade, capital, business, culture and religion.

Globalisation is both a force for good and a force for evil. Small and open economies, such as Singapore, have benefited enormously from globalisation. We should therefore support and defend globalisation.

One of our ambitions is to be a global city. To be a global city, our doors must be open to the inflow of people from all over the world. Our windows must be open to ideas from all quarters.

Singapore is, however, not just a city. It is also a country, a home for 3.5 million Singaporeans. Is it possible to be both a country and a global city? I think it is possible, but we have to manage the contradictions.

For example, we welcome the many wealthy foreigners who have come to live and work here or to buy a second or a third home. One negative consequence is that they have raised property prices and the cost of living.

Another example is the growing resentment felt by many Singaporeans that wealthy foreigners are free-riders. They come here to make money and lead very comfortable lives, but give little or nothing back in return. To make matters worse, some of them have a disrespectful attitude towards Singaporeans.

Foreign Talent

AMERICAN business school gurus such as Dr Gary Hamel have managed to convince Singapore's leaders that there is a global competition for talent. In order to succeed, Singapore cannot rely only on its home-grown talent. It must look outward and recruit talented people from all over the world, to key positions in both our public and private sectors.

The hunt for foreign talent became a national obsession. As a result, Singapore was in danger of overlooking its own talent.

I am glad that there is a more balanced attitude today. This is the result of two developments. First, Singapore discovered that some so-called foreign talent was not really very talented. Second, there was the discovery that, in some cases, when a foreign chief executive officer was hired, he or she discriminated against Singaporeans when hiring staff.

My conclusion is that Singapore should continue to welcome foreign talent. But it should do so to complement Singaporean talent, not to supplant it. Everything being equal, Singapore should give priority to its own talent.

Meritocracy

ONE of the cardinal principles of Singapore's public policy is meritocracy. I believe that our adherence to meritocracy, together with a firm stance against corruption, is one of the secrets of Singapore's success.

My sense is that there has been no retreat from our commitment to these principles. Singaporeans do, however, have some concerns. They want to be assured that meritocracy is accompanied by social mobility.

They would be unhappy if talented children from humble families do not have the opportunity to rise to the top.

In order to level the playing field, most Singaporeans support the view that the Government should play a role to ensure that good quality and affordable childcare and early education are available to all Singaporeans, and not just to the rich.

Conclusion

IS THERE an ideological cleavage in Singapore? I do not think so. I think there is still a consensus to support free trade and investment, meritocracy and free enterprise.

I do not see a rejection of the market economy, but I do see a rejection of the market society.

People want to see a greater emphasis on fairness in our society.

I think the greatest challenge is to manage the contradictions between our ambition to be a global city and our ambition to make Singapore an inclusive society based on justice and equality.

But Singapore has to do a better job in managing the rising cost of living, the inflation of property prices and escalating rentals.

It is important to ensure Singaporeans continue to feel that this is their country, and foreigners, though welcome, are our guests.

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