

## **Geneva of the East, Venice of 21<sup>st</sup> century**

**Tommy Koh**

**The Straits Times**, 19 August 2009

THIS year, Singapore celebrates 50 years of self-government and 44 years of independence. We can be proud of what we have achieved. We should, however, never be complacent. We must continue to strive to build a more perfect Singapore. In that spirit, I would like to share some of my aspirations for Singapore and Singaporeans.

First, I wish we would be less obsessed with money.

I have always heeded my mentor S. Rajaratnam's warning that we should not become a people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing. I think we are in such danger.

We seem to calculate everything in terms of money. We think that a person's worth is measured by the amount of money he or she makes. We have imitated one of the worst aspects of American capitalism, by paying our senior executives inflated salaries while, at the same time, stagnating the salaries of our middle and lower strata. As a result, Singapore has become a more unequal society than the United States.

I am glad that President SR Nathan recognises annually outstanding members of the professions that do not pay well but contribute enormously to our society - such as teaching, nursing and social work. I also thank the media for showcasing selfless Singaporeans who help the poor and the disadvantaged.

Money is important. We all need enough of it to live in reasonable comfort. But money cannot buy you a happy family, good friends, good health, peace of mind and joy. We should not allow the greed for money to weaken the moral fabric of our nation and to undermine the integrity of some professions, such as law and medicine.

Second, I would like Singaporeans to be kinder and more gracious.

Are we a kind people? I am inclined to say 'yes' when I remember the generosity with which we responded to the victims of the Boxing Day tsunami, Cyclone Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake. I am impressed by the letters in this newspaper thanking Singaporeans for the kindness they have shown strangers.

At the same time, I am shocked by the unkindness of some Singaporeans towards foreign domestic workers and foreign workers generally. As for the reports of wanton cruelty towards animals, I wonder who are these monsters. And as for graciousness, there is much room for improvement in our driving manners and in the way we conduct ourselves in trains, buses and elevators.

Third, I would like Singapore to become the Geneva of the East and the Venice of the 21st century.

Singapore can become a diplomatic centre like Geneva. It is a comfortable, efficient and secure venue.

Venice existed as a city state for nearly 800 years. One of the reasons for its longevity was that it welcomed talented people from different countries and civilisations. In the same way,

Singapore should continue to welcome the talented from all nations. It can also act as a facilitator of inter-faith and inter-civilisational dialogue.

Fourth, Singapore can be the cultural hub of South-east Asia.

It has the best cultural infrastructure in the region. Because of its small size and short history, it has no choice but to collect, research and display the heritage of the region. As a result, we have the best collection of the visual arts of South-east Asia, of the 19th and 20th centuries. When the new National Art Gallery opens, it will showcase this collection.

Singapore can also serve a larger region. It can bring together the civilisations of South-east Asia, North-east Asia, South Asia and West Asia. The Asian Civilisations Museum is a symbol of our aspiration to be an exemplar of the Asian cultural renaissance.

Fifth, Singapore can be Asia's greenest city.

It is already Asia's greenest in the physical sense. It is green too in its policies on water, sanitation, air pollution, land use and transportation. But Singapore can and should do even better.

There is room for improvement in the efficient use of energy. We should progressively phase out incandescent light bulbs in favour of energy-saving bulbs. We should emulate the examples of Japan and the US to encourage car-owners to switch to hybrid vehicles. We should follow the example of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to require commercial establishments to separate food waste from other waste for recycling.

We could be more energetic in promoting renewable energy. We should consider adopting Hong Kong's rule that no building below the age of 50 can be the object of an en bloc sale. We should develop Singapore as a centre for the financing of green business and technology.

Sixth, I would like Singapore to become an intellectual centre.

We are making progress. The National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University are already recognised as world-class universities. I am confident the Singapore Management University will soon join them.

Our schools, polytechnics and arts colleges are much admired. As a result, Singapore is attracting many foreign students. Our think-tanks are expanding in quantity and quality. There has been a quantum leap in the percentage of our GDP that is invested in research and development. Our respect for learning is growing. What more can we do?

I would suggest three things: more funds for research in the social sciences and humanities; greater willingness on the part of the Government to release official data to and de-classify documents for researchers; and a stronger culture of tolerance for alternative and dissenting views.

Those of us who attended this year's National Day Parade were inspired and moved. Sitting at Marina Bay, I could feel the spirit of our people - their unity, resilience and optimism.

Majulah Singapura!

*The writer is chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions. An earlier version of the above essay was part of an address to Raffles Institution on the occasion of its 186th Founder's Day.*