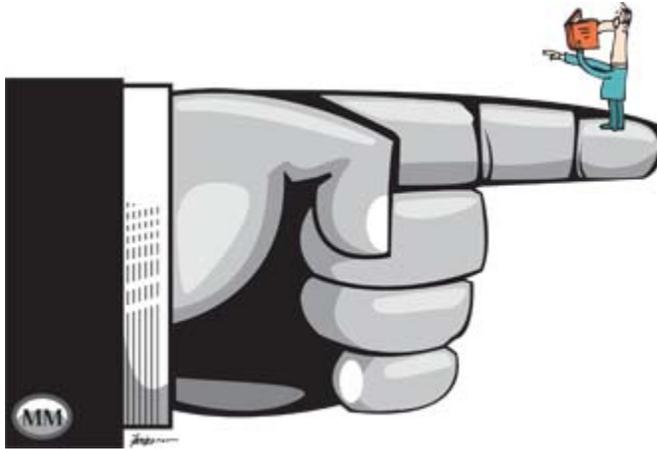


Disagreeing with some hard truths

Tommy Koh

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WE MUST thank Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and the seven Straits Times journalists for sharing with us *Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*. Taken together with Mr Lee's two-volume memoirs, the three books constitute his intellectual legacy. The Q&A format of *Hard Truths* and Mr Lee's trenchant and unvarnished views make the book both interesting and easy to read. I also found the endnotes, at the end of each chapter, helpful.

We owe it to Mr Lee to take his views seriously. They are distilled from the experiences and reflections of an extraordinary man and leader. I agree with many of his hard truths. I agree with his assessment of the United States, of the historical importance of Deng Xiaoping and his deep belief in meritocracy and integrity.

However, we also owe him the responsibility to contest his ideas if we disagree with them. It is in this spirit and with great respect that I wish to comment on the following three points.

First, I do not agree with the Minister Mentor's view that Singapore is too small and lacks the critical mass to produce a world champion in manufacturing. His conclusion is that we will always be dependent on multinational corporations. We should accept the truth that, because of our small size, we are destined to play the secondary role of being suppliers and contract manufacturers. I am glad that Mr Michael Dee and Mr Sam Goi have expressed their disagreements with Mr Lee's view in this newspaper.

Is the view supported by the facts? I do not think so. Let us look at the achievements of some small European countries.

Switzerland, with a population of 7.6 million, has 15 companies in the Fortune Global List of 500 Companies. Sweden, with a population of 9.2 million, has five; Finland, population 5.3 million, has one; Denmark, 5.5 million, two; and Belgium, 10.7 million, five.

The point of this survey is to demonstrate that it is possible for small countries to produce world champions. In a globalised world, it is possible for small countries to overcome their limitations

by borrowing the land, resources and talent of other countries. Thus Singapore builds industrial parks and new towns in other countries and welcomes foreign talent to work here.

If size were destiny, we would not have produced SIA, NOL, PSA, Changi Airport, Keppel, Sembawang, Temasek, GIC, SingTel, Tiger Beer. The Singapore Story - of which Mr Lee is the chief architect - is the story of how the people of a small country dared to dream and overcame seemingly insurmountable odds.

Second, I wish to comment on Mr Lee's assessment of the state of nation- building in Singapore. His view is that we are not yet a nation and that you cannot create a nation in 45 years. He thinks that it may take us another 100 years before we become a nation. He also thinks that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

But according to the results of surveys and polls carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and others, it would appear that Singapore is more of a nation than Mr Lee believes. The overwhelming majority of our citizens regard themselves as Singaporeans first and, only secondarily, as Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and so forth.

This happy state of affairs is due to the success of our proactive policy of mixing Singaporeans of different races in our schools, housing estates and in national service. It is also due to our policy of meritocracy. Finally, it is due to the evolution of a set of shared values uniting citizens of all races, religions and languages.

Again, it was Mr Lee himself who was the chief architect of these policies - and I wish to assure him that he has succeeded to a greater extent than he gives himself credit for.

I do not agree with his assessment that the surveys by our think-tanks are unreliable because the respondents were merely giving politically correct answers. I also do not agree with his view that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese PM. I think I speak for the majority of Singaporeans when I say that we are ready, should one emerge who is the best in his or her cohort, as all our prime ministers thus far have been. We do not regard race as a criterion for high office in Singapore.

Third, I was disappointed with the Minister Mentor's views on race. He revealed that if his daughter had wished to marry a black African, he would have had no qualms telling her: 'You're mad.' He also expressed reservations about inter-racial marriages.

We should not judge a person on the basis of colour, race or religion. There are good men and bad men, good women and bad women, of every colour, race and religion. I know some black Africans who are smart, kind and honourable. If I had a daughter and she had wanted to marry such a man, I would be supportive and would certainly not call her mad.

I know of many happy and long-lasting inter-racial marriages. One of the Minister Mentor's closest comrades, the late S. Rajaratnam, was married to a Hungarian. The marriage was a very happy one and endured till the end of their lives.

The writer is the chairman of the Centre for International Law, NUS. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's research and tertiary institutions.

Response to Prof Tommy Koh's article

- *Today*. 2011. [A hub is not a home](#)  4 March