

Consensus: Consultation or Contestation?

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The Singapore Perspectives 2014 Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies in January, focused on the theme of “Differences”. The Conference featured a debate between Professor Chua Beng Huat, Head of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, and Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. They debated as opposer and proposer, respectively on the motion “Consensus rather than contest will secure Singapore’s future”. (As the roles of proposer and opposer were allocated to the debaters by the organising committee, views presented may not represent their personal beliefs. Hence, the terms “proposer” and “oppose” will be used throughout this article to indicate the speakers’ responses.)

Participants attending the Conference include civil servants, academics, entrepreneurs, representatives from community groups and student representatives. They were first invited to vote on the motion before the debate. About 600 participants took part in the voting. The first vote showed majority support for the motion, agreeing that consensus would secure Singapore’s future.

Not long after the debate started, both parties agreed on several common grounds: that the different voices in Singapore can no longer be suppressed; consensus must be achieved via a bottom-up approach; and that a whole new vibrant online platform and experience was created following the watershed 2011 General Election. What the two parties disagreed on was the process by which consensus can be achieved. The proposer suggested that open contestations would highlight various differences and that the situation may not be controllable despite the good intentions of the authorities to face these challenges. On the other hand, the opposer believed that true consensus could only be achieved after contesting differences, and that consensus that has not gone through contestation will eventually face criticism and accumulate mounting unhappiness.

In a second round of voting, results showed that more participants agreed with the opposer, thinking that contestation would be beneficial towards the steady development of Singapore.

In the following Q&A session, the opposer reiterated that because of the advanced development of the media, mechanisms that could previously obscure differences are no longer in place. In view of future challenges, we must have confidence in Singaporeans to be rational citizens and to support policies as long as these policies are sound, even when engaged in open contestations.

The opposer concluded that we should eradicate the imagined fear that Singaporeans will take extreme positions, so that we can move the discussion from behind closed doors into the public sphere, while making sure that we do not hastily truncate the debating process. Citing an example brought up by a participant, the opposer said that many Singaporeans do not

understand Malay culture and values precisely because cultural, religious and racial differences are often discussed behind closed doors.

As for the proposer, he felt that Singapore had lived in a special bubble for the past 40 years, and did not have to confront with hard issues (like language issue) that every other society have been confronting, or to deal with the social division that resulted from open contestations of these hard issues. The proposer added that we should be thankful that we did not have to do all these. At the same time, the proposer reminded the audience that sacrifices must be made in order to achieve consensus; the various interest groups cannot insist on their own viewpoints. The proposer also reminded the audience that open contestation may not always conclude well, and that interest groups may incite the masses for their own interests.

In the final round of voting, the majority voted for the proposer, i.e., relying on consultation to achieve national consensus.

Given the format of the debate, where both debaters had to win supporters with their arguments, the focus was limited to their own arguments, leaving little room to explore the wider dimensions of the issue. Putting the competing elements of the debate aside, what can we learn from this debate with regard to the future direction of our nation's governance? In this information age and globalised climate, which is a better way of achieving consensus in governance — consultation or open contestation?

As we approach 50 years of independence, the aim of this conference was to allow participants to review and examine the different approaches and viewpoints on the topic of achieving consensus in governance. This debate confirmed that, in essence, both consultation and contestation are tools for achieving consensus.

In my view, this debate unveils the level of commitment to understanding and supporting the involvement of Singaporeans in consensus-making (the level of civic consultation on whether a swift decision can be made in the process of consultation was last discussed in such a comprehensive manner in 1997's Singapore 21). Pragmatic advocates warn that both internal and external factors give rise to increased and pointed differences. Their argument is that several examples from other countries show a failure to manage differences, and that we should adhere to our past proven method of governance, with the elite engaging with the citizens in consultation, since an open debate with full civic participation may not result in the best situation for the country and its people.

On the other hand, optimistic advocates show confidence in the critical thinking and problem-solving abilities of our citizens, and believe that we do not need to be constantly wary of going into crisis. This rests on the belief that mature and rational citizens would surely contribute to the nation's policymaking process; that what we need to do now is to in fact catch up on lost time to face up to challenges, as well as to brush up on our contestation skills to engage in effective and efficient debates.

Experts that previously studied the characteristics of Singapore citizens have found them to be a hardworking lot, who in times of prosperity, display loyalty while exhibiting some degree of

anxiety and pessimism. If this finding is accurate, it would not be difficult to explain why the proposer won this debate. At the same time, it also reminds us to strengthen our seemingly weaker ability to contest constructively. The question then is, are you prepared to openly contest for the ideologies that you support? Are you willing to listen to and try to understand opinions that are different from your own?

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