

Singapore Perspectives 2018

Opening Remarks

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We return this year to a one-word theme for Singapore Perspectives – “Together”. Last year’s was two-words – “What If?” – unlike the previous five: “Inequality” in 2012; “Governance” in 2013; “Differences”, “Choices” and “We” in the following years.

Looking back on this series over seven years, it occurs to me they disclose a certain obsession. Again and again, IPS has returned to the potential fault lines in our society. We were among the first institutions here to look at the question of income inequality – that was in 2012. We have returned repeatedly to questions of racial and religious diversities; of gender and sexuality too; and of class and social mobility. In other words, how our diversities can be a bane; of how they might be a strength; of what might divide us; and of how we might be kept together.

These obsessions are in keeping with IPS’s research agenda, which consists of

- 1) Managing diversities of all kinds – both what we are familiar with (race, religion, language) as well as newly emergent ones (like sexuality);
- 2) Managing the challenges of an ageing society; and also how we might exploit and accentuate the benefits of an ageing society;
- 3) Inequality and social mobility; and
- 4) Governance of a global city-state – the problems peculiar to a city-state, of which Singapore is the pre-eminent and almost sole example in the world today.

What I would like to do in this opening is frame the demographic issues we will discuss today in the context of Singapore being a city-state. For it is crucial we recognise the centrality of this island-nation being a city when we consider questions pertaining to our population. We are not an ageing society in a large country. We are not a society trying to accommodate a large immigrant population in a country with lots of space. We are not an advanced global city with a large hinterland. We are but a city-state; we are *only* a city-state.

I touched on this subject in last year’s Singapore Perspectives, and will repeat some of the points I made then.

Singapore is a country as well as a city. We don’t always keep this obvious fact foremost in our minds — we forget — but Singapore is a city that happens also to be a country; a country that is only a city; a country that has no country — as in “country-side” — outside the city. Or to put it differently, there is no country beyond this city; this city is all the country that we have. This fact informs — consciously and unconsciously; perceptibly and imperceptibly -- every facet of our existence. This is how I illustrated this point last year.

One, Singapore is the only city in the world that has a military. London doesn't have a Navy; we do. Tokyo doesn't have an Air Force; we do. Shanghai doesn't have an Army or Terrexes on its own, for that matter; we do.

Two, all of Singapore's gateways — its port, its airport — have to be located within the city. You can't put Changi Airport, for instance, somewhere out in the boondocks, a couple or so hours outside the city — like Narita or Heathrow or KLIA — for the simple reason Singapore doesn't have a boondock. You disembark at our gateways and you're already within the city; not so much as a drawbridge or a moat separates the city walls from the outside.

Three, unusual among global cities, Singapore has a sizeable manufacturing base — 20 per cent of our GDP. There are a number of reasons why this should be so but one is because we are a city as well as a country. If we were to have a purely service economy — like London or New York or other global cities, with high-paying jobs in finance and banking at one end and low-paying jobs flipping hamburgers and providing in-situ services at the other — our income inequalities would be far worse. Indeed, our Gini coefficient is already high — but compared to other countries. When compared to other global cities, we are considerably better off — in large part because we have a substantial manufacturing base providing a range of jobs in the middle.

Now, guess how much land — physical space — do these three activities, which this city has to undertake because it is also a country, occupy: Military (for training, airbases, naval bases); Gateways (airport, port); Manufacturing?

Whenever I ask this question of students or civil servants, the guesses vary from 15% to 25%. The correct answer is 42-43%. That's right, just a little less than half of this not considerable little red dot — and I've not included the land that we have to devote to water reservoirs (5%), housing (17%), roads and rail (13%), parks and nature reserves (9%), and all the other accoutrements of civilised existence — almost half of this city's land area has to be devoted to functions that we have to perform because this city is also a country.

You see, Singapore is a most unlikely country. There is no other city of this size in the world that is also a country. That is why our founding fathers, every one of them, began their political lives believing Singapore, a city, couldn't survive on its own, that it had to be joined to a hinterland, Malaya; and believing that, they fought for Merger, only to be ejected from Malaysia after less than two years, to become a country with no country-side, a city-state with no hinterland. That Singapore should exist — as a city and a country — is a miracle.

But it is a miracle that contains a contradiction inherent in it being both a city and a country. And sustaining this miracle means somehow straddling this contradiction, riding it, managing it — not overcoming it, as such, for it cannot be overcome so long as we remain a sovereign city-state. Let me illustrate the contradiction:

Japan as we know is a rapidly ageing society. Indeed, its population shrank by 400,000 last year. If current trends continue, its population will shrink further,

from 126.5 million now, to 88 million by 2065 and only 50 million a hundred years from now.

Note, I said Japan, not Tokyo – which isn't shrinking, as yet. Japan is facing an existential crisis. But I dare say there will still be a Japan if there were only 50 million Japanese, as indeed was the case at the beginning of the last century. But there can be no city – a global city, Tokyo – that shrinks at this rate. Ditto Singapore.

Another illustration: take the question of “talent”, which has become something of a dirty word in Singapore by dint of it having been associated with “foreign” for some time.

Why should cities exist? Why did they come into existence in the course of human history over the last 5,000 years or so, and continued to thrive despite the countless calamities that have visited them – from volcanic eruptions and great fires to epidemics; from aerial bombings to tsunamis and earthquakes? What is their evolutionary advantage?

Cities exist primarily because they are a social formation that bring together large numbers of people. That collection of large numbers in close proximity enables the efficient mobilisation and organisation of resources, including of capital and above all of talent. That was as true of Mohenjo-Daro in 2500 BCE or the Rome of Augustus Caesar around the time of Christ as it is today of London and New York. The most thriving global cities tend also to be the most diverse, the most open and dynamic, the most cosmopolitan. Cities often consist of large numbers of “rootless” people, as they say; or at the very least, large segments of their population are “mobile” or “itinerant”.

This is of course more true of modern cities; and among contemporary cities, more true of larger metropolitan centres than of smaller cities. But it was true in some respects of even cities in the past. For example, William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon; moved to London to earn a living as an actor and playwright; only to move back to the relatively bucolic setting of Stratford in his retirement. I dare say, if Singapore had remained a part of Malaysia, many of us here may well have retired to Kuantan or Mersing or Langkawi. But we are now only a city, and we can't locate so much as a nursing home for old folks outside this country.

Now, the words I have used to describe the city and city-life – rootless, mobile, itinerant people; diverse, cosmopolitan, dynamic; open to the world and welcoming of all talent – all these terms do not necessarily describe a country. Indeed, countries tend to be altogether more stable entities. They change, certainly; but not as rapidly as cities. They can be diverse; but not as vibrantly and confusingly so as cities. They can have multiple identities; but they are not as bewilderingly diffuse as cities. Think the United States; and think New York City, which only legally and politically belongs to the US. Culturally and spiritually, it lives on another plane. Ditto United Kingdom and London; China and Shanghai; Japan and Tokyo. Countries tend to be oriented inwards, towards themselves; cities tend to be oriented outwards, towards others.

What happens in the case of city-states – in the case of Singapore? Our identity is forever bifurcated between the global and the local. There is a part of Singapore that is outward looking, cosmopolitan, open; and there is another that is more oriented towards itself, if not insular; more inward focused, if not closed. We have geographic short-hands for these two Singapores: the Singapore of Shenton Way and the financial district; and the Singapore of the heartlands. The Singapore of Clarke Quay (where I work) feels very different from the Singapore of Toa Payoh (where I live). I rub shoulders with New York, London, Shanghai and Tokyo at Clarke Quay; I feel at home in Toa Payoh.

I can describe the political, economic and social contradiction between these two Singapores briefly thus: If this island-nation does not remain one of the world's leading global cities, it cannot survive as an economy; we might as well not have left Malaysia. To sustain itself as a leading global city, Singapore must remain open to the world, welcome all varieties of talents, become and remain a cosmopolitan society and culture.

To remain a nation, however, Singapore cannot be forever turned determinedly outwards. It cannot be so porous to the outside as to allow itself to be overwhelmed by the foreign. And it cannot resign itself to a diffuse and rootless cosmopolitanism. Life exists here and now, in a particular place and time, or it cannot exist at all. The global economy doubtless exists, but there is no *socius*, no society, no community that answers to it. Singapore, this island-nation, is here, now, and forever.

How do you reconcile this Singapore of home and nation with that other equally real, equally crucial, equally urgent and insistent global and cosmopolitan Singapore? You earn a living, survive, in the latter; you have your home, your being, in the former.

What happened with Brexit in the United Kingdom can happen here. What happened with the election of Donald Trump as US President can also happen here. In Brexit, the city (London) voted overwhelmingly for Europe and globalisation, while the rest of the country thought Britain could go it alone. In the tragic US 2016 Presidential elections, while both the east and west coasts, as well as almost all major urban centres, voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic Hillary Clinton, the rest of the country (fly-over country, the coastal elites used to sniff) voted for the Republican Donald Trump. On one side, the parts of America that benefitted from globalisation and trade – the high tech, connected, cosmopolitan America; and the other, the parts of America that didn't benefit from globalisation and trade, the people who had lost their jobs to foreign competition, the people whom Hillary Clinton had referred to as the "basket of deplorables" – good, ordinary, decent people who happened to feel, with good reason, that they were being looked down upon, ignored by the globalised coastal elites -- they voted for the boorish Donald Trump.

The same divisions can happen here – within the same city, between the two Singapores. And the divisions between the two Singapores can be accentuated by differences of class – and of race too, if the class divisions coincide with racial ones. It can also be accentuated by differences of age, with the young seeing their future in an open and globalised Singapore and their elders seeing

theirs in a Singapore that is relatively more closed and more stable; with the young choosing, as in Brexit, a future-directed, forward-thrusting productive economy and their elders preferring instead consumption.

This is why this conference on our demographic challenges is entitled “Together”. For it seems to me self-evident that unless we take great pains to remain together our society too can fracture. This is why I believe Government should be the place where people are brought together. Why I believe our politics and policy must always keep their eyes trained on keeping us together. For the alternative is unthinkable. The city, Singapore, cannot separate from the country, Singapore.
