

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES 2010

Home.Heart.Horizon.

Tugging at the Heartstrings: Reflections on Singapore as “One Global City”

Dr Leong Chan Hoong
1 Feb 2010

The theme for the last panel of IPS' Singapore Perspectives Conference 2010 was “One Global City”. Three prominent speakers, Mr Lee Kwok Cheong (CEO SIM Global Education), Mr Nizam Idris (Executive Director & Head of Asia Emerging Market Strategy, UBS AG), and Prof Henry Yeung (Professor of Geography, National University of Singapore), presented their views on how Singapore was poised to become a great global city in the 21st century. Notwithstanding that potential to be a terrific city to live, work and play in, a few impending challenges were highlighted -- the ageing population, increased cost of living, congestion, and the current public sentiment towards global talent and immigration.

It presented a critical but balanced perspective on Singapore's aspiration to be part of an influential league of global cities. A few thought provoking suggestions were offered. They include the ideas of Mr Nizam, on a “One Federation, Two Systems” partnership with Malaysia to expand Singapore's economic space, and the possibility of having to “work-till-you-drop” to cope with the rising cost of living and an ageing society.

In order to achieve the status of a global city, Mr Lee argued that there would need to be stronger citizen engagement. He offered a contrarian view on the need to capture the “heart” as opposed to the “head”; to give greater focus on fostering a spirited and connect community, and to cultivate soft, value-based icons of the Singapore identity were refreshing and spoken with the weight of experience from being an immigrant who has chosen build his life in Singapore.

Mr Nizam discussed the cost of Singapore's relentless pursuit to be a global city-state. Visionary leaders, progressive work ethos, the presence of multinational companies and global talent were key ingredients to achieving this objective. Singapore might also need to re-double its efforts to improve its relations neighbours and channel resources from military to social spending to deal with the implications of an ageing society, he said.

Prof Yeung highlighted the importance of developing a deep innovation and knowledge cluster so that Singapore could position itself firmly as a creative hub and a powerful node in the international network. Singapore, unlike countries such as China and India, did not have to deal with the problem of inter-city rivalry and this gave it a unique advantage of being able to formulate, coordinate and implement national policies rationally, quickly and efficiently.

I think we must take heed of Mr Lee's viewpoint most. He alluded to the fact that citizenship and identity are elusive and non-codifiable sentiments and that the “heart” of the matter was more critical than any form of rational calculation. The idea that one could foster

national pride and affiliation through a slew of economic policies and programmes simply overlooks the fact that rational calculations do not consider non-quantifiable variables like sentiments and affections.

About 10 years ago, I was offered the opportunity to be a permanent resident of New Zealand. It was definitely appealing considering the wonderful experience I had had there, the friendliness of its people and the open spaces that I loved. My wife and I turned down the invitation and we chose to remain in Singapore. It was not that we felt unwelcome in Aotearoa, or that there was a lack of economic opportunities. We returned because quite simply, we feel more Singaporean than Kiwi. Our *heart* decided that Singapore is home.

Dr Leong is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

