

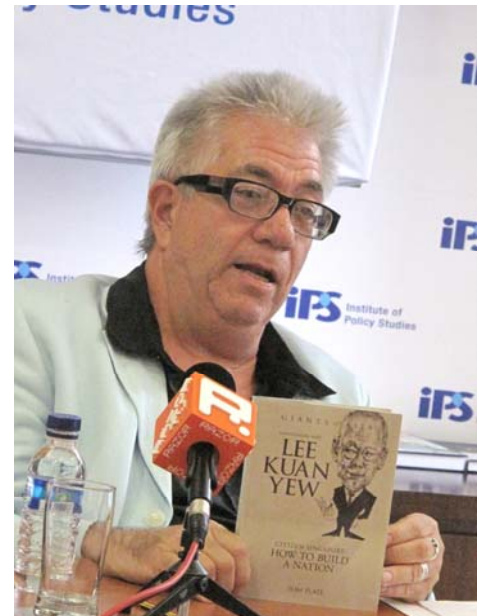
IPS Roundtable

On “Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew”

Speaker: Prof Tom Plate, Syndicated Columnist and Director, Pacific Perspectives Media Centre

24 May 2010

Journalist and former full-time professor of media and ethics at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Tom Plate spoke to an audience of about 20 on the subject of his new book, *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew – Citizen Singapore: How to Build a Nation*. Launched last week, the book is based on two interviews conducted last year with Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew which came up to about five hours. Prof Plate said the book is the first in the “Giants of Asia” series he intends to write. He plans to feature former Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir bin Mohamad, and Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, next.



Prof Plate provided insights to his approach on writing the book, its content as well as the subject of the book, MM Lee. He had spent as much time as possible with MM Lee in order to write the book and believed that MM Lee had answered his questions the best he could, he said. His hope is that through reading his book people would understand Asia and MM Lee better. The book would also allow Singaporeans to see a different side of the famous leader, he said.

Prof Plate said that the 216-page book was written in the style of a screenplay, and presented in episodic form to make it accessible to the general reader. The writing style was inspired by movies such as *Frost Nixon*, *Hurt Locker*, and *Guards and Monsters*, which emphasise the dialogue and relationships of their characters. According to Prof Plate, reading the book would be like being present during the interview session, where the reader could “witness” MM Lee’s responses and mannerisms. The chapters are named after actual movies



For Prof Plate, the episodes captured in the book substantiated his view that MM Lee was a “hedgehog”, that is, one who viewed the world through a single defining lens or knew “one big thing”. British philosopher Isaiah Berlin had written a famous essay saying that writers and thinkers could be classified into two categories: “hedgehogs” and “foxes”. “Foxes” are those who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to

a single idea. In the book, MM Lee said he was a “fox” but Prof Plate said he believed that MM Lee was a “hedgehog”.

The book also includes the views of MM Lee on a wide range of topics such as the relationship of Singapore and China, social control, American presidents and former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.

During the discussion, Prof Plate said MM Lee is a person with foresight, and engaged with the world. A participant asked if there was any difference in the views MM Lee expressed in the interviews for the book and Prof Plate’s earlier interviews with him. Prof Plate said that he believed MM Lee is now as concerned with the United States as he is with China. He also believed MM Lee recognised that the world is now a different era from the past, and that Singapore would always be changing with the times.



Another participant asked if Singapore would survive without MM Lee. Prof Plate said that if the culture of meritocracy in Singapore is sustainable, Singapore would continue to have well-educated individuals making decisions for the country, ensuring its survivability.

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Notes taken by Chua Chun Ser, IPS Research Assistant.

