

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Summary

By Ysien LAU

The 2021 Singapore Perspectives Conference, titled “Reset”, explored various challenges brought on by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as pre-existing trends and issues in different domains: political, social, economic, technological, ethical and environmental. This iteration of the Singapore Perspectives conference formed a key element of the ongoing scenario-planning project, [Reimagining Singapore](#) which seeks to explore how Singapore and the world might change in the next decade, the challenges that might exist, and the strategies can and should be taken to build a better future.



Caption for photo: The hybrid final day conference was conducted in accordance with Singapore’s safe-distancing regulations.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic led to most of the conference proceedings being conducted online. However, this shift also provided new opportunities, such as the ability to invite international thought leaders to participate in forum discussions, to reach out to wider

audiences beyond physical boundaries, and to host more forum sessions than in previous iterations of the conference.

This year's conference comprised nine live interactive online forums, along with a final hybrid conference day event featuring in-person plenary sessions that was attended by a small live audience and cast to a live online audience.



Caption for photo: IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan [opens the final day](#) of the conference.

Online Forums

Divided across three days, the nine online forums were framed around the key values articulated in the Singapore pledge. The online sessions featured a wide range of local and global thought leaders, academics, policymakers and community leaders, who drew from their unique backgrounds and perspectives to produce engaging and robust discussions. Conference participants watched the forums live, asked questions and participated in discussions on the online conference platform.

The first day of the online sessions centred on the **economy**, exploring Singapore's goals of prosperity and progress. The sessions for the first day were "Jobs and Skills", "Environment and Sustainability", and "Global Economy".

The second day of the conference focused on **society**, keeping in mind the idea of achieving happiness and having a society based on justice and equality. This sparked discussions on the impact of COVID-19 on society, as well as ongoing social developments and trends that had already been set in motion before the pandemic. The topics for the second day of online forums were "Identities and Cohesion", "Technology and Liveability", and "Soul of the Nation".

The third day of online sessions took a closer look at **politics and governance**, inspired by the ambition of building a democratic society that was articulated in the Singapore pledge. The sessions for the third day included "Multilateralism and Global Cooperation", "The Values and Qualities of Leadership", and "Global Trends, Social Movements and Democracy".

The themes that arose throughout these online sessions were carried over to the final day of the conference, where business leaders and political representatives discussed trends and potential pathways for Singapore's development.

Summary of Themes from Online Forums



Caption for photo: Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at IPS, giving a summary of the conference proceedings

On the final day of the conference, Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at IPS, [presented a summary](#) of the different themes that arose during the online forums. He highlighted three broad themes that he observed during the online forums, and which he believed are key to resolving future challenges: equality, diversity and leadership.

On equality, he noted how panellists in every session had discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing global trends, leading to sharper disparities in various domains, including employment opportunities, socio-economic status, and digital access. He described how education was repeatedly seen as a solution for inequalities in society and observed the call among many panellists for more skills development outside traditional classroom settings, such as critical thinking, digital and media literacy, and greater awareness of the region.

Moving to the theme of diversity, Mr Gee highlighted the topic of intersectionality that arose throughout the conference, identifying how having such a diversity of characteristics and identities in Singapore led to greater complexity. He raised the importance of not retreating into specific unique identities and becoming more atomised as a society, but instead promoting dialogue, referring to Ambassador Alami Musa's call for a "dialogical society" during the fourth forum. Tying the need for dialogue with the theme of inclusivity, Mr Gee also pointed to panellists, such as Mr Aaron Maniam from the ninth forum, who stressed the importance of

having inclusive politics, in which everyone would have the ability to actively participate and share their perspectives.

Finally, on leadership, Mr Gee identified how many panellists had discussed Singapore's role in the region, calling for Singapore to take on a greater leadership role, and perhaps even an "origin hub", for efforts in economic development, environmental sustainability, multilateralism and technological innovation. Mr Gee also described how the importance of trust appeared consistently throughout the forum discussions. He pointed to Minister Audrey Tang's presentation on Taiwan's open-source platforms for crowdsourcing information, which demonstrated the need for a culture of cooperation and trust among citizens and between citizens and institutions, as well as other speakers who emphasised the need for a culture of collaboration and discussion in order to foster trust. Describing the different characteristics of leaders brought up during the forum discussions, Mr Gee argued that leadership should be for all, not just for a select few, and described the importance of a communal form of leadership that involves collaboration, discussion and constantly learning from one another.

In-Person Plenary Sessions

The final day of the conference featured three in-person plenary sessions, which drew from the deliberations and emergent themes from the nine online sessions prior to discuss current trends and future developments in Singapore.

The first session was **business in Singapore**, which was moderated by Mr Christopher Gee, and featured Ms Aw Kah Peng, Chairman of Shell Companies (Singapore); Mr Louis Lim, current Chief Operating Officer and incoming Chief Executive Officer of Keppel Land; and Mr Ang Yuit, Vice President of Strategies, Development and Digitalisation at the Association of Small & Medium Enterprises.

The second session of the day was **politics in Singapore**, moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. On the panel were representatives from three of Singapore's political parties: Dr Janil Puthuchery from the People's Action Party; Mr Gerald Giam from the Workers' Party; and Ms Hazel Poa from the Progress Singapore Party.

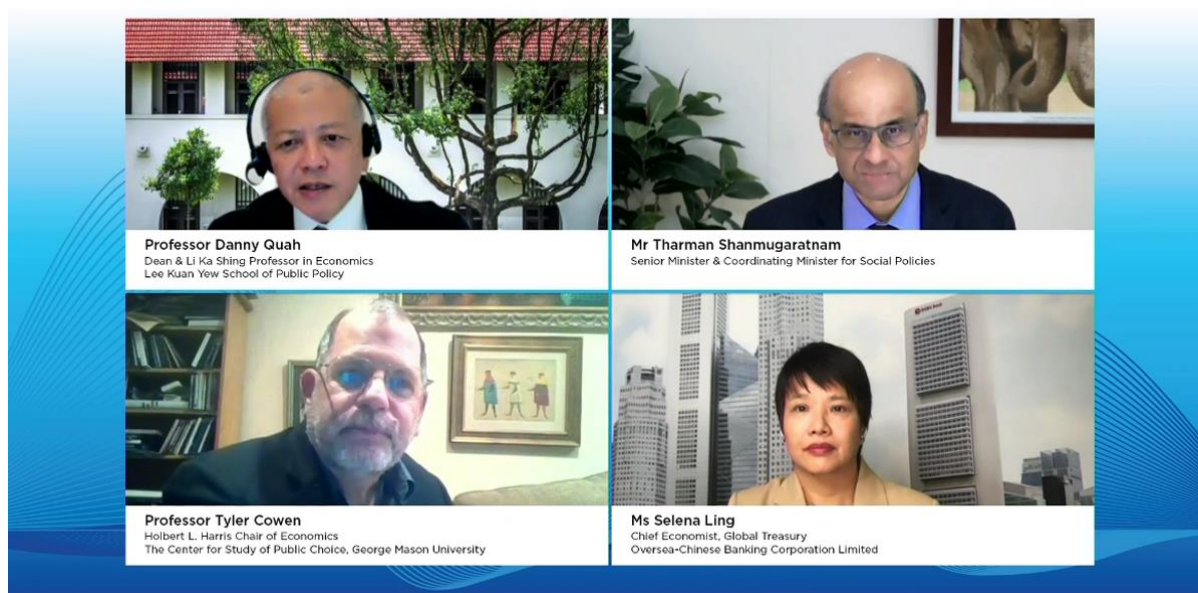
The conference rounded off with a dialogue session with Minister Lawrence Wong, Singapore's Minister for Education and Second Minister for Finance, which was moderated by Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief for *The Straits Times*.

Ysien Lau is a Research Assistant at the IPS Governance and Economy Department.

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Jobs and Skills

By Damien HUANG

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Caption for photo: Professor Danny Quah (top, left) opened the session on “Jobs and Skills”

The Singapore Perspectives opening forum on [“Jobs and Skills”](#), moderated by Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the LKY School of Public Policy, featured Singapore’s Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Professor Tyler Cowen of the George Mason University as speakers, and Ms Selina Ling of OCBC as a discussant.

Opening Remarks

Senior Minister Tharman began his remarks by focusing on the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not only for the short term but also what is being done for COVID-19 has to outlast the pandemic. In recovering from the crisis, he argued for the need to go beyond individuals to communities, anticipate changes brought about by the pandemic, and coordinate better to help those affected. The government’s support schemes have gone beyond supporting employment in weaker firms to those at risk of shutting down in a prolonged crisis. These are businesses that may never recover even when the pandemic is over. Supporting continued employment together with the skills training grants and SGUnited traineeships would help keep people employed and their skills current.

However, the Senior Minister also cautioned against the risk of neglecting specific groups like those in the lower income group, who saw higher real income grow at 40 per cent in the last decade, as compared to the middle income group who saw a 65 per cent increase in the past two decades. The Progressive Wage Model (PWM) and the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme are two key policies that help those in the bottom quintile. Senior Minister Tharman argued that the PWM acted as a “minimum wage plus”, providing a job ladder that workers could aspire towards, while Workfare acted as a negative income tax to supplement lower incomes. He was also wary of calls for broad-based minimum wages, saying that the academic consensus on the impact on unemployment was not conclusive, and the design of policies had to be tailored to country specific contexts.

Looking forward, he urged people to stay optimistic and keep building human capital. He said that the economic shock from COVID-19 will pass but constant upskilling is an imperative even when the pandemic is over. There is a need to do this with private-public partnership, as imperfect information in the labour markets makes any one party blind to certain information. He emphasised that the group most at risk are blue-collar workers in the Merdeka and Pioneer Generations who, out of need, had entered the labour force with less education. He closed by saying that the government has put in place many policies to help these workers and reskill the workforce; developed broader economic strategies to create ecosystems where a mix of high- and low-skilled labour working in tandem; and focused on Singapore’s advantage as a logistics hub to prevent companies from moving to other countries. He added that competition is regional for low-skilled labour and global for higher-skilled workers, and that creating externalities for firms to stay in Singapore is key to our continued success.

Professor Cowen started by sharing an anecdote about how his university colleagues were more effective when the COVID-19 pandemic began, being able to work from home and save time from commuting and other miscellaneous activities. He called these types of workers who have benefitted from the pandemic “self-organisers”, workers whose jobs can be broken down and work schedules are flexible. Such jobs tended to be white-collar jobs, which the Singapore education system is already geared for. Describing how the world is split into those who self-organise and those who do not, he believed Singapore’s workforce is already made up of self-organisers. He argued that the recipe of Singapore’s success is not that we need to produce an Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg to be successful, but that our success comes from developing teams who can work together for the greater purpose.

Professor Cowen commented on the recent developments in the US, expressing how he felt more bullish about Singapore and bearish about the US situation. He believed that the protestors who stormed the Capitol in Washington D.C. were not unintelligent, but had lost a sense of belonging as the middle class has been stagnating, which echoed an earlier point made by Senior Minister Tharman about growing the middle class for prosperity.

Ms Selina Ling, discussant for the session, noted that lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic showed the disparity between the haves and have-nots. Even as fiscal support from the government mitigated the fallout, and non-PMETs were cushioned by “on-call” food delivery jobs, there were still a need to deal with feelings of insecurity relating to the ongoing pandemic. She agreed with Senior Minister Tharman that the challenge going forward would be to prepare for “hard” ground thinking and soft skills. She highlighted a report by the World Economic Forum, which listed hard and soft skills, complex problem-solving, analytical

thinking, attention to detail, flexibility and social influence. Ms Ling also raised some areas that had unanswered questions, including the impact of AI on jobs; aspirations of youths; raising labour productivity; maintaining workforce productivity in an ageing population; how fiscal and monetary policies would evolve into the future; whether it was the government's role continue supporting businesses; and how the typical man on the street would be able to practically translate lifelong learning. She ended by suggesting the creation of a skills roadmap — similar to the industry transformation maps for businesses — to help workers navigate different career pathways.

Questions and Answers

Professor Quah opened the Q&A session with a conceptual question on the role of interventionist policies in the labour markets and skills training against what was proposed by Professor Cowen as “self-organising”, where people worked in teams and took control of their own training and career moves. Senior Minister Tharman used the example of the PWM in Singapore to illustrate how we now place emphasis on career and skills coaching. He described how this sectoral PWM approach to improving low wages is the solution to imperfect information in labour markets. For example, monopolistic markets in some industries mean that there is only one employer who is able to set wages, leading to some workers being under-valued. Professor Cowen, when describing separate processes for high- and low-skilled workers, focused on the role of mentors and on the job training in the workplace for the former and having in place proper career structures and ladders for progression for the latter. This was the case in US manufacturing, which for a long time provided many lower- to middle-class workers with job security. He also believed that gig economy jobs were not sustainable in the long term, as they did not offer proper career paths.

In discussing the age divide in the labour market, one of the identified problems that some countries faced was high youth unemployment. Singapore, on the other hand, appeared to have the problem of skills mismatch for older workers, who were generally less educated. The panel largely agreed that there was a skills gap for older workers, but that employers also had to take up responsibility of training their workers through the government's skills training programmes. The younger generations had to get more job experience through internships while older workers needed to show how their experiences could be adapted into different contexts and different jobs. Notably, this was where Professor Cowen raised the concept of “group exceptionalism” for Singapore, in contrast to individual “unicorns” like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg from the US. He cited immigration in the US as the driver of success of these entrepreneurs. For example, Elon Musk originated from South Africa. Professor Cowen argued that Singapore, in comparison, has an efficient civil service, and that startups should be focused on effective teams working together to achieve greater goals instead of individual unicorns.

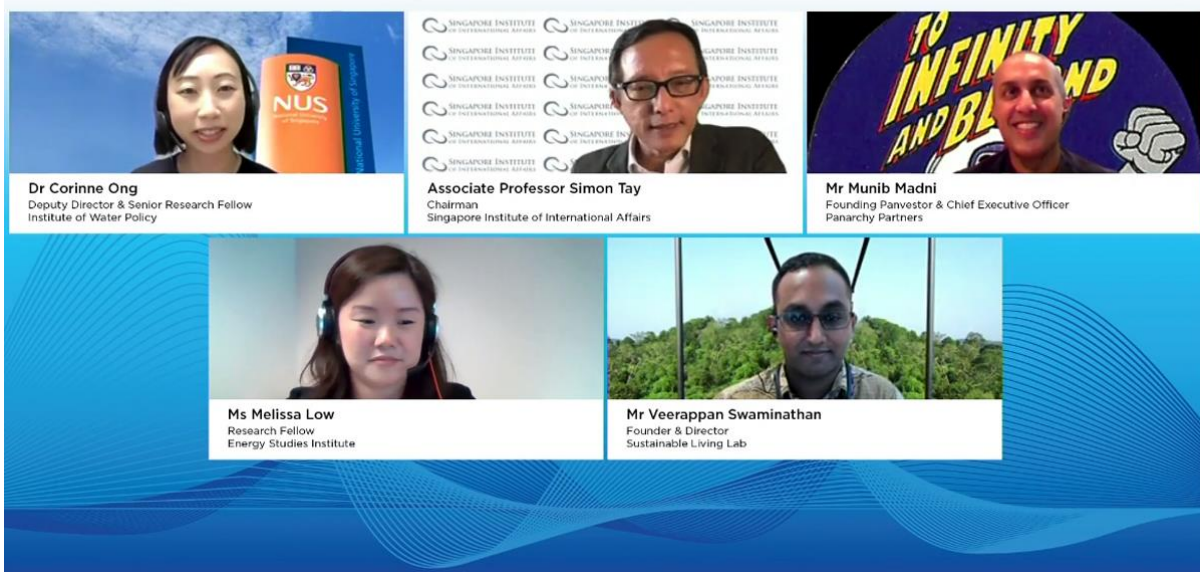
Summing up, the panel expressed hope in Singapore's future, given that we are not beginning at a zero-starting point. Prosperity was rooted in the political economy of supporting middle-class growth and making sure the bottom quintile of workers did not fall behind. Both economic and social strategies are key to this success, including that of changing mindsets against age and other discrimination.

Damien Huang is a Research Associate at the IPS Governance and Economy Department.

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Environment and Sustainability

By Ysien LAU

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Caption for photo: Dr Corinne Ong introduces the panellists for the session on “Environment and Sustainability”

The second forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 focused on the topic of [“Environment and Sustainability”](#). The session was moderated by Dr Corinne Ong, Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Water Policy, and the speakers were Associate Professor Simon Tay, Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, and Professor Alex Edmans, Professor of Finance at the London Business School. Discussants included Ms Melissa Low, Research Fellow at the Energy Studies Institute; Mr Munib Madni, Founder and CEO of Panarchy Partners; and Mr Veerappan Swaminathan, Founder and Director of the Sustainable Living Lab. Drawing from a variety of perspectives, the panel discussion brought forward important ideas on how different stakeholders can work towards sustainability goals and a green economy after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opening Remarks by Associate Professor Simon Tay

In his presentation, Associate Professor Simon Tay discussed the global, national and regional developments in environmental and sustainability efforts. Globally, he observed that the UN Sustainable Development Goals and climate change efforts had increased over the years, and that countries were increasingly committing to make changes. On a national level, he

described how the younger generation had expectations for governments to not only move more quickly to mitigate the climate crisis, but also to be more inclusive in their actions. He expressed his belief that Singapore's government was interested in putting effort into this cause, stating that the emphasis on climate action in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2019 National Day Rally speech was the result of many years of effort. However, he noted that while Singapore increased its commitments as part of the Paris Agreement, it had yet to make a pledge to work towards carbon neutrality.

Looking to the region, Professor Tay described how transboundary haze was making the region a big contributor to greenhouse gases. However, he emphasised that this region could present many opportunities and challenges, with good momentum for environmental, science and government (ESG) and climate action. In order to take advantage of this, he believed that Singapore and the region had to move towards green finance and a green recovery, which focuses not only on the economy, but also the environment and people. He also noted that while Singapore only accounted for 0.11 per cent of global emissions, the country could make an outsized contribution to global climate change efforts by serving as a financial, technological and innovation hub. Overall, Professor Tay expressed his belief that there were opportunities available in the space of environment and sustainability, and that there had to be a combined effort from citizens, the government and the private sector to make progress.

Opening Remarks by Professor Alex Edmans

During his presentation, Professor Alex Edmans focused on the power of sustainable business. He began by emphasising the need to shift our perspective on sustainability, arguing that taking into consideration the scale of the challenges the world faces today, companies have to go beyond “doing no harm”, and “do good”. He argued that rather than the conventional view of sustainable business — splitting profits of the business between stakeholders and investors fairly — businesses should instead “grow the pie” and actively create value for society. He asserted that if businesses focus on creating value for society, they would become more profitable. Professor Edmans also spoke about how this philosophy could be put into practice, drawing examples from organisations in Singapore to demonstrate how companies should be driven by purpose. Ultimately, he expressed his belief that sustainability was fundamental to commercial success, and that purpose would support rather than being at the expense of profit.

Questions and Answers

During the Q&A session, a participant asked if environmental sustainability was something that could be pursued by the financially able, as there had been a focus on big multinational corporations. Mr Madni pointed out that while companies of different sizes could not be expected to have the same impact, it is important for each company to identify what they can do, and act on that. Professor Tay stated that it was easier for big companies to make such changes, and that these impacts will trickle down over time. However, he cautioned against having big companies making these changes too quickly, as it could cut off the development of SMEs.

During the discussion, Ms Low also raised concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on efforts in environment and sustainability, noting that the pandemic could have an impact on investment in renewable energy, and that many models currently use pre-COVID-19 data,

meaning that targets might be too ambitious. She also described how COVID-19 has caused people in the environmental movement to be less vocal and to adjust their narratives, considering the direct impact of the pandemic on people's lives. However, Professor Tay and Mr Madni had more optimistic perspectives. While Professor Tay highlighted the potential in nature-based solutions, Mr Madni predicted there would be new innovations and technologies in the decades to come, observing a strong momentum in favour of decarbonisation policies and processes.

When asked how the government could play a role in promoting sustainable businesses, Mr Swaminathan highlighted the government's key role in establishing the necessary frameworks, and that many SMEs would benefit from sustainability grants. Professor Tay identified the need to avoid greenwashing, to ensure that companies were not simply meeting ESG reporting standards but making them key elements of business development. He also pointed out that as a large landowner, the government should also roll out green efforts in their own holdings to lead the effort. Professor Tay also described the importance of rewarding companies that act sustainably in order to create behavioural change and shape market values.

In describing Singapore's role in Southeast Asia, Mr Swaminathan described how many companies view Singapore as a stepping-stone into the region, and that Singapore had to take its role as a leader in the region more seriously. Meanwhile, Professor Tay and Mr Madni agreed that to contribute to the region's efforts, Singapore should focus on building partnerships to support its neighbours and bring in new innovations, focusing on the 17th Sustainable Development Goal — that of partnerships. Mr Madni also emphasised that if another country in the region would be better suited as a hub for certain innovations, Singapore should actively support this rather than trying to accomplish everything by itself.

Ms Low also raised concerns about the cost of green growth, expressing her worry that environmental actions are becoming overly politicised. In her view, this should not become a bipartisan issue in Singapore, as everyone should work together to come up with solutions.

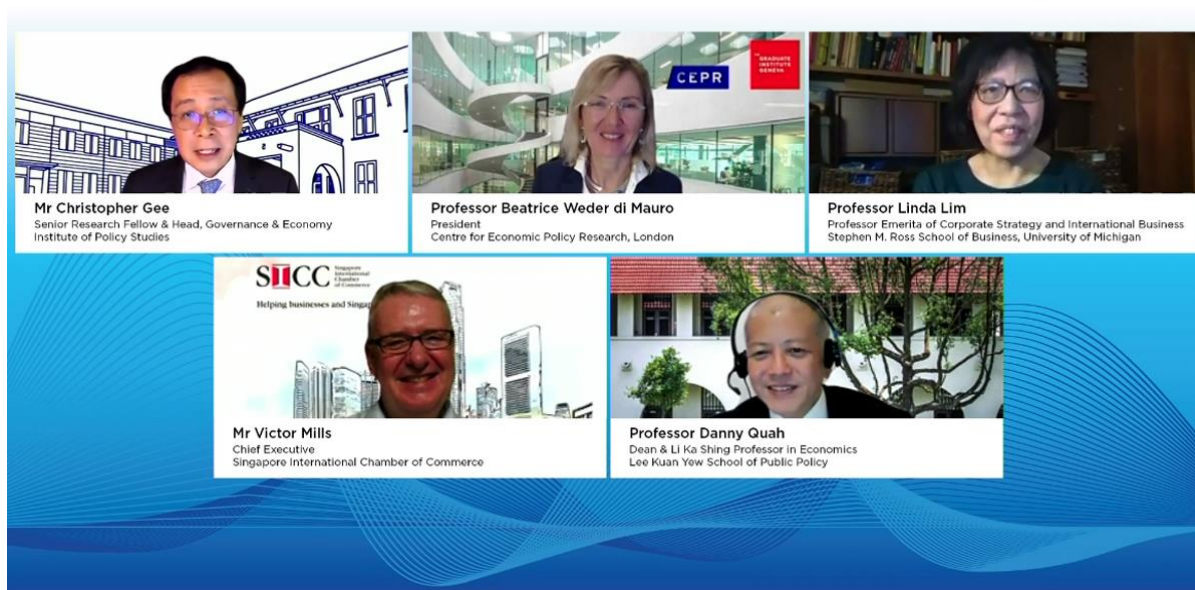
The session concluded with the panellists highlighting the importance of education and awareness, redefining one's purpose, and taking action and responsibility in environmental efforts. Overall, the forum produced a fruitful discussion that brought forward interesting and important ideas on how different stakeholders can work towards sustainability goals and a green economy after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Global Economy

By Kunal PAWA

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Caption for photo: Mr Christopher Gee opening the third forum on Global Economy.

The third forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 focused on the [“Global Economy”](#) and how the changes in the global economic landscape would affect Singapore. Speakers included Professor Beatrice Weder Di Mauro, president of Centre of Economic Policy Research, and Professor Linda Lim, Professor Emerita at the University of Michigan. The session was moderated by Mr Christopher Gee, and discussants included Mr Victor Mills, President of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce and Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Opening Remarks by Professor Weder Di Mauro

Professor Weder Di Mauro commenced the session by providing her views on the global macroeconomic outlook post the pandemic and delineated her views into the legacy of the pandemic and the longer-term macroeconomic outlook.

For the legacy of the pandemic, the professor observed certain themes that had emerged in the global economy. She believed that the pandemic was creating a poorer and more unequal world than before. The IMF world economic outlook indicated negative growth in almost all countries except for a select few in Asia that have handled the pandemic well. She also noted

that the World Bank had estimated a further 100–150 million people will be living in poverty as a result of the pandemic. The inequality is not felt only across countries but also within countries. In the US, she noted that Black or Hispanic women were twice as likely to have lost their jobs as compared with white males. Unlike the Global Financial Crisis, this economic crisis has caused unemployment across all ages, but the less educated populations within economies have suffered more.

For the short-term macroeconomic outlook, Professor Weder Di Mauro noted that there had been a difference in the ability of countries to replace incomes during this crisis. Most advanced countries had been able to sustain incomes either through aggressive fiscal or monetary policies. As a result, countries were coming out of this economic crisis with debt levels which had not been seen before historically. Central banks' purchases of government-issued securities averaged about 50–70 per cent in advanced economies, and even some emerging economies had taken such quantitative easing measures. This has led to an increase in household savings rates, in the advanced economies at least. Therefore, in the short run, there will be a catch-up in terms of consumption and willingness to spend — and the IMF predicts there to be growth between 4–6 per cent globally.

The longer-term macroeconomic outlook was of more concern, she added. First, while digitalisation would have some positive economic impact in the long term, there was no clarity on how much productivity would have been impacted by the crisis. Second, there was a clear trend of deglobalisation since the pandemic, of which the economic consequences had not been determined yet either. Regional integration helped Europe through the crisis but it was uncertain whether that would help other regions in the world. Lastly, since the growth of economies going forward would not be as strong, there were likely to be distributional issues for countries to manage.

Professor Weder di Mauro felt that the challenges for Singapore specifically were how Singapore could maintain its global hub status and remain a safe haven for capital and human capital, while also managing the inevitable demands of more protectionism. Singapore would also have to continue to balance policies according to the familiar trade-off of efficiency and equality. Lastly, Singapore's status as a bridging hub between the West and the East might need to be reconfigured in light of a changing geopolitical landscape.

Opening Remarks by Professor Linda Lim

Professor Lim's presentation focus was on how long-term structural trends that existed before the pandemic would impact Singapore, and how Singapore should respond to these trends. She identified five trends: technological advances, deglobalisation, climate change mitigation, geopolitical tensions, and domestic inequality.

Technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI) and digitalisation were likely to impact both services and manufacturing and decrease dependence on labour. Deglobalisation would reduce growth in business travel, tourism and global supply chains. Climate change mitigation results in a decrease in energy intensive industries and less tolerance for free riders on the environment. Geopolitical tensions between the US and China would increase the pressure on third countries to make a choice. Lastly, domestic inequality means that there is more scrutiny paid to ESG (environmental, sustainability and government) criteria as opposed to strictly financial criteria. These trends would have varying effects on Singapore.

Technological advances would help Singapore's ageing population by reducing the dependence on foreign labour. However, Singapore also faces challenges to its tourism, oil and gas, marine and aviation sectors due to deglobalisation and climate change mitigation. Despite these challenges, opportunities remained for Singapore in the development of carbon tax markets and ageing healthcare.

Professor Lim believed that the geopolitical landscape would necessitate a change in Singapore's established model of being a global business and investment hub. First, she noted that globally, government support for industry through tax breaks or investment incentives were either being objected to, for political reasons, or emulated by strategic policies. If global competition emerges for industrial investment, countries with larger economies and stronger fiscal positions will likely win. Singapore therefore needs to devise more ways to spur private sector growth, especially in sectors which are dominated by MNCs and GLCs, she said. Second, she argued that Singapore should reconfigure its macroeconomic focus to be less dependent on manufacturing and global supply chains and shift its attention towards being a service provider to the geographically closer region of Southeast Asia.

In summary, Professor Lim was keen to promote a greater focus towards developing Singapore's domestic capabilities and comparative advantages given the change in geopolitical considerations and technological advances. These pose a significant threat to Singapore's status as a hub, and Singapore should instead try to develop more indigenous capabilities to reduce its dependence on the manufacturing sector, foreign labour and state and monopoly power. She noted however, that what will emerge from the pandemic will be the outcomes of the participation of the private sector and market forces based on foundations built by the state and society.

Discussion and Q&A Session

Following the introductory presentations by the two speakers, Mr Victor Mills and Professor Danny Quah shared their responses. Mr Mills primarily agreed with Professor Lim's views about Singapore needing to change its model in response to the pandemic. Given its modern, advanced status, Singapore need not rely as much on FDI anymore and instead should look to spur SME growth and focus on the ASEAN growth story. Second, Mr Mills felt that an opportunity was available for Singapore to develop itself as a climate change mitigation hub since Singapore had the necessary human capital and financing abilities. Professor Quah instead focused more on the global macroeconomic situation and seemed to stress the impact the pandemic had both on governance and economic recovery. He felt also that the pandemic had only exacerbated fundamentals of the global economy that were already under threat such as the rules-based international system, globalisation and inclusive growth for all pockets of societies. In response Professor Quah suggested Singapore strive not for maximum efficiency but instead build on resilience. He also suggested that Singapore should encourage gains in productivity in high-performing sectors that raise demand for labour, and not productivity gains that displace workers.

The panellists then debated on both the global situation and Singapore's status as a hub moving forward. They first discussed rising global debt in response to the pandemic. Both Professor Weder Di Mauro and Professor Quah noted that global debt levels were concerning, but that the more immediate concern was to make sure economies continued the recovery

process and that governments provided the necessary fiscal support for this. Professor Lim concurred that since interest rates were low, governments, including Singapore's, had the opportunity to borrow so as to finance public expenditures, and that the risk of inflation was low. The panellists also discussed the strong performance of equity markets since the pandemic, which they said was a result of abundant liquidity chasing good investments which were in limited supply. Because equity markets had responded strongly to the pandemic, inequalities between those who have capital and those that do not have been exacerbated. The US would likely respond with higher taxes on capital gains, and it was discussed whether Singapore should start taxing capital gains as well.

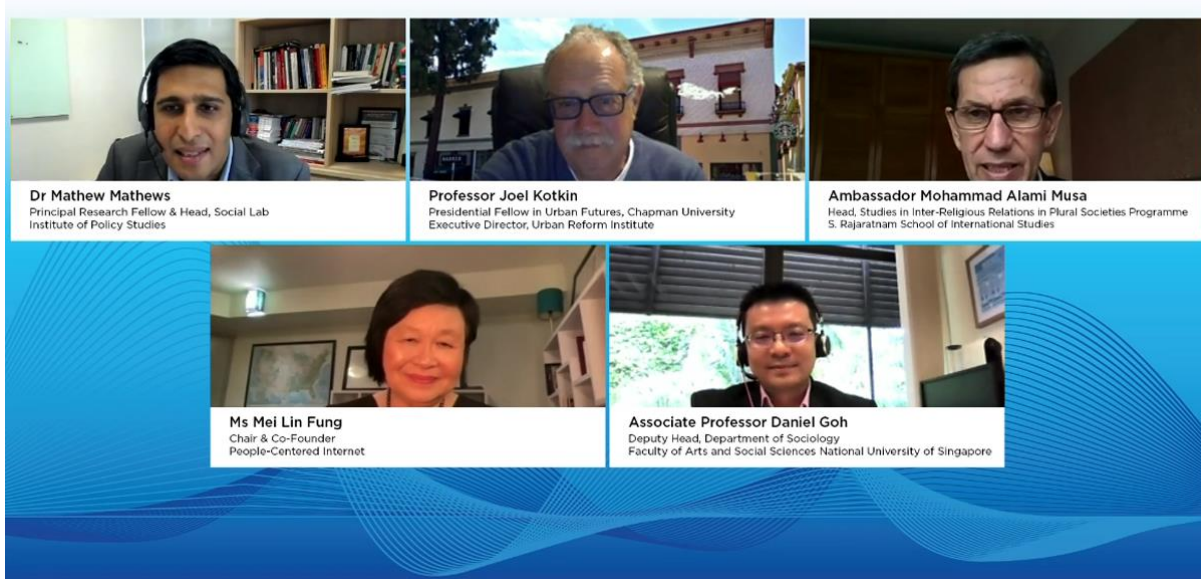
The debate on Singapore's status as a regional and global hub also sparked lively debate among the panellists. Professor Weder Di Mauro felt that Singapore, like Switzerland, had established itself as a safe haven hub for investment, and that this economic comparative advantage should continue. Professor Lim was more critical, noting that it was not clear if Singapore should be a safe haven for capital given the increase in global capital flows of illegal activities and money laundering. She contested that Singapore should not focus on being a "connecting hub" but an "origin hub". She believed this could be done by spurring domestic private sector growth and having a recalibrated focus to ASEAN. Professor Quah instead argued that if Singapore were to continue to be a hub, a key question would be what services the world and the region would demand, for which Singapore could be a hub. He suggested the idea of Singapore being a regional disease control hub that spread Singapore's knowledge and human capital in this domain to the region. Mr Mills noted that Singapore must continue to be an open economy promoting foreign talent and labour, and that the opportunity for Singapore to take the lead in ASEAN for climate change mitigation should not be overlooked.

Kunal Pawa is a Research Associate at the IPS Governance and Economy Department.

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Identities and Cohesion

By Amanina HIDAYAH

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Caption for photo: Dr Mathew Mathews introducing the panellists for the fourth forum on Identities and Cohesion.

The fourth forum, on [“Identities and Cohesion”](#), was moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow and Head of the Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. The session began with speakers Professor Joel Kotkin, Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University, and Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, Head of Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in the Plural Societies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. The panel featured discussants Ms Mei Lin Fung, Chair and Co-Founder of People-Centered Internet, and Associate Professor Daniel Goh, Deputy Head of the Department of Sociology and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. Dr Mathews opened the forum by questioning how Singaporeans, who generally enjoyed social cohesion now, would see this cohesion and harmony in Singapore play out in the next decade amidst shifting identities and increasing diversity. Speakers and discussants considered the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration patterns, and international movements on the Singapore society.

Opening Remarks by Professor Joel Kotkin

Professor Joel Kotkin presented the development of identity formation in the West. He spoke on the difference in migration patterns and the way identities are expressed in Europe and the US. He directed the audience's attention towards the changes in attitudes towards race and ethnicity in America, citing the increasing rate of acceptance of interracial marriages, along with greater diversity in the workplace and at social gatherings, describing the phenomenon as "multiculturalism of the streets". Professor Kotkin also observed the effects of immigration across American states and noted class issues that had arisen over time.

Opening Remarks by Ambassador Alami Musa

Speaking on Singapore's national identity formation, Ambassador Alami Musa presented the silent threats undermining cohesion in Singapore. For example, international movements can breed sentiments of exclusivism and intolerance within the state. He showed conflicting opinions among people who felt that religion contributed to public reason and morality and those leaning towards non-religious sentiments. He offered three areas that the state can work towards forming a cohesive nation: building a dialogical society; having a negotiated and mediated secularism; and having an enriched *modus vivendi* that would equip people with psychological reflexes and a new frame of mind to face the unknown.

Discussion and Q&A

Discussants Associate Professor Daniel Goh and Ms Mei Lin Fung built on the points presented by Professor Joel Kotkin and Ambassador Alami Musa. Intersectionality, importation of ideas and identities, and the integration of immigrants into the Singapore society were issues that Professor Goh deemed to be prevalent in the near future regarding cohesion. Ms Fung invited the audience to consider the structural changes, namely, the digital revolution that could affect identity formations in Singapore. She noted how the "digital tsunami" would change all manner of communication and present new ideas to the public.

The issue of racial harmony being affected in the pandemic was surfaced by the audience, given reports of groups of immigrants being negatively affected. For Professor Kotkin, this issue should be seen through the lens of class rather than race as one's economic standing will determine how one is affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic. He explained that the "digital tsunami" caused the issue's racial aspect to be highlighted over the class issue.

The participants also posed questions on the usefulness of importing ideas, such as ideas of White and Chinese privilege, into the local space. According to Professor Goh, borrowing ideas imported from the US, for example, and applying them to the local context, might result in harmful effects. He suggested looking towards the indigenous intellectual traditions relevant to society as an alternative to importing concepts. Ms Fung advocated for a more dialogic society, which she asserted could bypass the importation of ideas.

Other participants raised queries on the appropriate models relevant to the Singapore society to balance tolerance between groups of people and assimilation. For the speakers, technology has allowed people to enjoy access to inputs from around the globe, who may therefore feel less pressured to adopt the identity of their immediate surroundings. The speakers asserted that people should have the freedom to choose their respective identities and the extent to

which they assimilate into their society. Ambassador Alami Musa and Professor Goh spoke on the fact that people on the island have enjoyed the idea of multiculturalism for centuries, even before colonialism, and warned against having one specific identity into which Singaporeans should assimilate. Professor Goh noted that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model is evolving to consider the demands of people who want a nuanced approach to their cultural identities. Ms Fung and Professor Kotkin also outlined the benefits of understanding and appreciating one's cultural roots and origins. Professor Kotkin said that the internet cannot substitute the values, morality, and experiences of one's cultural roots.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Technology and Liveability

By NEO Yee Win

Held on 14 January 2021, the fifth forum of Singapore Perspectives covered issues relating to [technology and liveability](#). Moderated by Dr Cheong Koon Hean, Chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities, the panel consisted of Ms Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan; Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, CEO and co-founder of Basis AI; Professor Ang Peng Hwa, Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication, Nanyang Technological University; and Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. When opening the session, Dr Cheong said there exists three aspects of “liveability”. The “physical” aspect refers to the “hardware” of cities, such as the transport systems and physical buildings; the “social” aspect encompasses social inclusion, as built by social capital and cohesion; and the “cultural” aspect reflects the values and meanings people attach to their natural environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technological innovation has enabled people to remain connected in all facets of life despite the restrictions placed on physical mobility. However, there is an increasing need to address the flipside of technological innovation, such as the generation of e-waste and the widening digital divide. Having set the context for discussion, Dr Cheong tasked the panel to share their future aspirations for technology.

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Caption for photo: Dr Cheong Koon Hean opening the fifth panel on Technology and Liveability.

Opening Remarks by Minister Audrey Tang

Ms Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan, kicked off the presentations by sharing how technology has already improved living standards in Taiwan, in particular, the national response to the pandemic. Their response was scaffolded by three pillars: fast, fair and fun.

The first pillar — fast — refers to the rapid exchange of data and intelligence between the government and the citizen's collective. On 31 December 2019, the warnings of an impending SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan were circulated on PTT, a not-for-profit Reddit-like forum created by Taiwanese university students. This allowed the government to swiftly set up temperature checks and even a call centre to handle citizens' queries, amongst other measures.

The second pillar — fair — refers to the government's assurance of equal access to healthcare, facilitated by data crowdsourcing on health services. Due to the shortage of masks at the beginning of the pandemic, the government rationed the distribution of masks while directing efforts towards mask production. To facilitate orderliness in the queues outside retail stores, the government and the civic sector jointly collaborated to publicise the availability of masks online in real time. Updated every 30 seconds by citizens themselves, the portal was an example of participatory accountability by both government and its citizens — the former on ensuring a continuous supply of masks and the latter for ensuring the credibility of mask data.

The last pillar — fun — refers to the government response to online misinformation, or in Ms Tang's words, "humour over rumour". To curb online misinformation, the government incorporated humorous elements into their official broadcasts that would resonate with the public and go viral. For example, official public announcements about social-distancing measures and hand-washing basics were accompanied by pictures of an adorable shiba inu dog. The strategy turned out to be a huge success, with government messages also becoming viral enough to debunk online falsehoods.

Opening Remarks by Mr Liu Feng-Yuan

Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, CEO and co-founder of Basis AI, raised two broad questions: How does data affect the physical design of cities, and how does digital technology affect governance?

Drawing from his past experience at Singapore's Land Transport Authority, Mr Liu said data was used to re-think physical spaces. Data allowed people to forecast crowding situations on train and bus lines, which in turn informed decisions about public transport routes and frequencies. Similarly, data collected by Grab allowed the company to optimise what would be a long commute on public transport. In fact, it was the likes of transport apps like Grab that prompted Mr Liu to toy with the idea of "un-fixing" roads and public transport routes, as a way of adapting physical space to data. He believed that data was the key to enhance liveability by way of allowing us to think of physical space as malleable rather than fixed.

To understand the relationship between digital technology and governance, Mr Liu said it was necessary to first understand the two purposes of governance. First, the government must provide for the public. Second, the government must build trust between itself and the people it serves. Thus far, technology has certainly proven successful in enhancing the liveability of people, such as through the streamlining of bureaucratic processes like tax filings. However,

the same technology has also facilitated the development of online polarisation and echo chambers. The key to building genuine connections, according to Mr Liu, may perhaps lie in the integration of the physical and digital world, such as the adoption of a Facebook group among neighbours in the same apartment block. Simply relying on technology as a tool for connection is not enough.

Discussion and Q&A

Picking up on the presentations were Professor Ang Peng Hwa, from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, and Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at IPS. While Professor Ang sought Ms Tang's views on the factors of data sharing and mutual trust in Taiwan, Dr Woo raised several questions on issues of privacy and digital inclusion in the use of technology in cities. These examples, in his opinion, reinforced the fact that technology use did not always translate into enhanced liveability.

Mutual trust between government and citizens key to democratic participation

During the panel discussion, Dr Cheong remarked on the differences between Singapore's and Taiwan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with Taiwan's response being more ground-up and citizen-led than Singapore's top-down, government-led approach. In response to Dr Cheong's observation, Ms Tang reaffirmed the agency of Taiwanese citizens in public deliberation. Having experienced the horrors of martial law during the SARS crisis, people were more eager to explore other alternatives. The government capitalised on this opportunity to channel online anti-social sentiments into pro-social behaviours, such as the translation of official messages to over 20 national languages for digital chatbots. Ms Tang also demonstrated the use of POLIS, a platform designed to identify consensus between different opinions towards the same political question posed by the government. Linking the two successful deployments of technology is the mutual trust between the government and citizens, that along with democratic participation had not been suspended even during a crisis.

Technology for "right use"

Both Mr Liu and Dr Cheong raised the need to use technology for "right use", notably, in addressing citizens' needs and demands. Mr Liu said that while it was easy to be enamoured by technology, it would not bring about tangible improvements to people's lives if the purpose of technology is unclear. Dr Cheong agreed, saying that technology should be seen as an "enabler", and not simply a panacea to all technical problems.

"Vaccine for the mind"

A member of the public sought elaboration from Ms Tang on her earlier mention of a "vaccine for the mind" and its potential in curbing an infodemic. For Ms Tang, the "vaccine for the mind" would include the right to digital access (broadband is treated as a basic human right in Taiwan) and public education about media. Examples of media curriculum would include fact-checking, journalistic standards, media literacy, as well as participation in data governance coalitions.

Tradeoff or ethical dilemma — privacy and liveability

Lastly, the panel discussed whether privacy and liveability are mutually exclusive. Dr Woo pointed out that awareness of privacy issues had not deterred social media consumption.

Continuing in the same vein, Professor Ang said that users' recent move to Signal and Telegram after WhatsApp's privacy policy update reflected a lack of understanding on Singapore's laws on personal data protection. He suggested that perhaps it was not so much a "tradeoff", but an ethical dilemma, between the right to protect one's privacy and the right to use data for crime control and liveability. Meanwhile, Mr Liu suggested educating oneself on technology and privacy such that discussions could move beyond broad discussions of privacy to specific solutions.

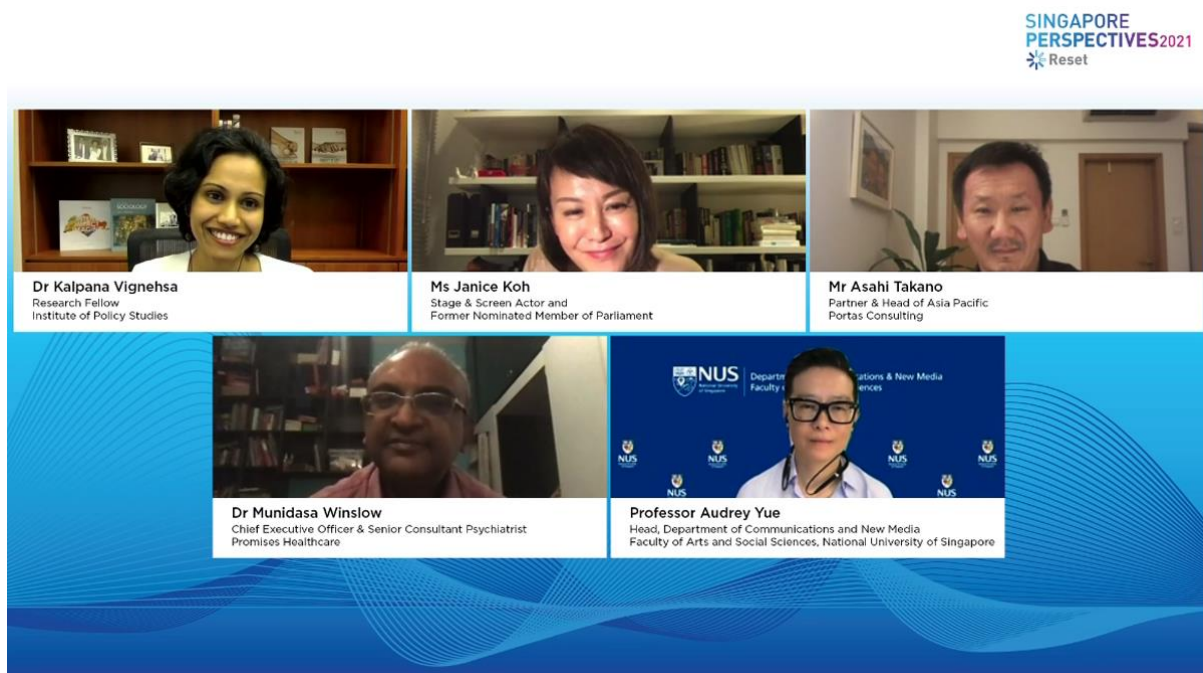
Here, Ms Tang reiterated the need for mutual trust between the government and its citizens; while the government should keep additional data collection during a crisis to a minimum, they should also grant the citizens time to develop creative solutions of their own. For example, nightlife operators in Taiwan managed to come up with a contact-tracing method involving the use of a throwaway SIM card, which would allow their customers to be traced without expense of their privacy. On this, Dr Cheong said the Singapore government would be more likely to swiftly take matters into their own hands, even if it causes unhappiness.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Soul of the Nation

By Tasha TAN

The sixth forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021, titled [“Soul of the Nation”](#), was moderated by Dr Kalpana Vignehsa, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. It featured speakers Ms Janice Koh, Stage & Screen Actor and Former Nominated Member of Parliament; Mr Asahi Takano, Partner & Head of Asia Pacific Portas Consulting; Dr Munidasa Winslow, Chief Executive Officer & Senior Consultant Psychiatrist Promises Healthcare; and Professor Audrey Yue, Head at the Department of Communications and New Media at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.



Caption for photo: The sixth forum of the Singapore Perspectives Conference focused on the “Soul of the Nation”, in which speakers discussed topics such as the arts, sports, communication and mental health.

Defining the “Soul of the Nation”

Dr Vignehsa asked the panellists what the soul of the nation meant to them. Each speaker shared their own views on the soul of the nation.

Professor Yue described the soul of the nation as the emotional and intellectual energy that binds people together as a community — in other words, culture. Culture includes both the traditional concept of culture such as customs and traditions, as well as new forms of culture like everyday culture, which includes all the ways people find common meaning in the way of life.

Mr Takano shared that the soul of the nation was something that people are reluctant to let go off under duress. He used the UK as an example, where in spite of the pandemic, professional football matches are still being held because football is such an important part of the people's lives and culture. Singapore has its own culture of solidarity and looking out for one another, which ties in with values of multiculturalism, equality, and well-being. For Singapore, sports might not be held on to as strongly during a crisis, but in future, it may change to become as important to the soul of the nation as the definition of sports and participation changes.

Dr Winslow described the soul as the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capacity people have. The soul of the nation includes many things that cause people to want to come back to Singapore: food, material things, spiritual things, being part of a community with similar values, and individual resilience and community resilience. All these contribute to the *gotong royong* spirit as we get through crises together as a community.

Ms Koh saw the soul as the self, which includes the voices, desires, feelings, perceptions and memories. So the soul of a nation would be the commonality that underlies all the individual perceptions of the people; how the group of people make sense of the world. She agreed with the other speakers on their views on culture, food, sport and the arts as a way of bringing people together. Art is a way to bring to existence what currently exists as potential. Art is also a way to share perceptions and connect people.

Overall, there was no single thing that defined the soul of the nation. However, a common underlying theme was the idea of bringing people together, whether through culture, sport, shared experiences, values, or art.

Opening Remarks

Ms Koh highlighted a challenge brought by COVID-19 — the loss of community due to the restrictions on the number of people allowed in galleries and theatres, and restrictions on talking. Second, there is also a chance that we are losing artistic platforms that give comfort to people and promotes constructive criticism on tough topics. Third, there is a shrinking of the talent pool for the arts and it is not clear if people will come back to the arts scene post-pandemic. In terms of opportunities, she noted that performances could now be streamed online, allowing shows to reach a wider audience. Artists have also become more daring in breaking boundaries and are trying different media for their work. She also noted that the current season was a chance for Singapore to build new artistic narratives.

Professor Yue shared that the pandemic has accelerated the fourth industrial revolution. Opportunities include the high uptake of digital technology and boom in e-commerce. However, the pandemic has accentuated the digital divide, where seniors, those from a low social economic status, and persons with disabilities would find it harder to adopt digitalisation. Digital inclusion is important to help people remain connected as a society and is important to the soul of the nation. Professor Yue also noted the need to promote digital literacy and digital

well-being in the age of misinformation and infodemics. Large bouts of information and misinformation have resulted in echo chambers and polarisation which erode public trust in institutions.

Dr Winslow pointed out that the pandemic has brought a lot of stress as more people work and study from home, and as physical services go online. People have tried to cope using healthy ways like jogging, and unhealthy ways like consuming alcohol. However, the pandemic has also brought a shift in people's priorities where more have realised that mental health is as important as physical health, and that relationships with people are important. COVID-19 has given people the chance to say that they are not okay, which can allow for healing. He hopes that as Singapore progresses, mental health services can be considered as important as physical health.

Mr Takano said sports are an important part of society because it teaches skills to the young. There are many benefits to physical and mental health and social benefits if one is in a club or team. First, he argued that the pandemic has helped people personally recognise the value of physical activity. Second, with the rise of technology, there is a lower barrier of entry for sports participation. The change in mindset on the value of exercise and the lower barrier of entry has resulted in a shift from traditional team sports to individual activity, which has resulted in a loss in the sense of community that is vital for the soul of the nation.

Mr Takano said there is a need to find a way to bring people together, regardless of the new way of doing sports. For example, in the UK, people can turn up at their local park and run as a group activity. Another example he gave was e-sports, where a person is engaged in communities online through gaming; here, however, the individual loses out on the benefits of physical activity. Therefore, he said that it is important to manage the good while mitigating some of the downsides of the changing sports culture.

Discussion and Q&A

Participants asked if the soul of the nation was something that was crafted and managed by the government or something that was more organic and ground up in nature. The speakers believed that it is not a dichotomy where organic does not mean that everything is free while controlled does not mean that everything is micromanaged. Rather, it is about enabling people to do what they want to do. Examples include the provision of cycling lanes if a large enough population wants to cycle or providing people with access to online fitness instructors if they desire to exercise at home.

A participant asked to what extent does our surrounding environment serve as a carrier of memories for our collective identity, and what this means in the context of Singapore's constant transformation and perpetual redevelopment. The speakers agreed that Singapore's soul is constantly developing and changing. Reinvention is part of Singapore's nature and transformation often happens during adversity. It also leads to innovation and discovery of new things. However, the speakers also expressed the need for preservation of the old for future generations, and the need to find a balance this with redevelopment.

A participant asked how engagement with science could be a soulful experience. The speakers shared that the sciences can be soulful as scientists find joy in the work they do. The scientific method may not be as emotional as other activities, nor necessarily embraced

as warmly as the arts, but inventions and discoveries of science are part of the soul of the nation.

A participant noted that people are more open to seeking mental help, and asked how society and government could further encourage healthy mental health habits and decrease barriers to those seeking help. The speakers shared that people are generally hesitant to share about their issues as Singapore has a culture of “saving face”. Therefore, there is a need to teach resilience and soft skills in school, on top of the hard skills of math and science. It is also important to give people permission from an early age that it is okay to not be okay, that it is not okay to say that nothing is a problem.

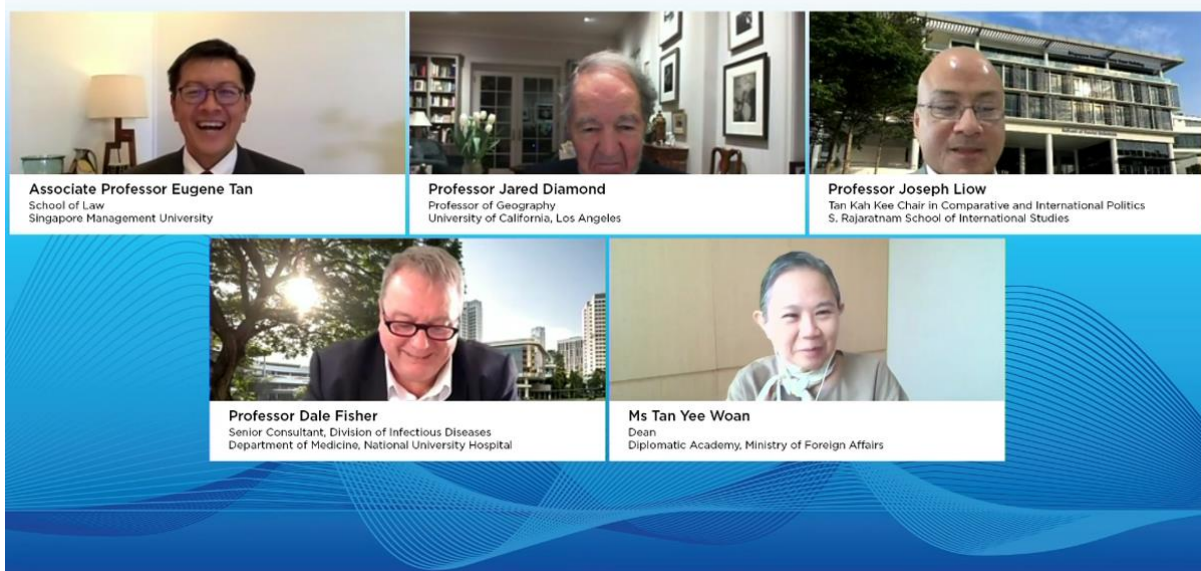
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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Multilateralism and Global Cooperation

By Shazly ZAIN

The seventh forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 focused on “[Multilateralism and Global Cooperation](#)”. Moderated by Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University’s School of Law, the panel consisted of Professor Jared Diamond who is a Professor of Geography at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA); Professor Joseph Liow, Tan Kah Kee Chair in Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University; Professor Dale Fisher, Professor at the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and Senior Consultant at the Division of Infectious Diseases at the National University Hospital Singapore; and Ms Tan Yee Woan, Dean of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy.

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Caption for photo: Panellists from the seventh forum discuss issues relating to multilateralism and global cooperation

Opening Remarks by Professor Jared Diamond

Professor Diamond opened his remarks with a reflection of COVID-19, commenting that the virus is something old and new at the same time. Pandemics are nothing new in history, with the Black Death of the Middle Ages being a notable example. Compared with past pandemics,

COVID-19 is a mild disease with approximately 2 per cent of those infected dying from the disease. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is new in the sense that it has spread quickly worldwide through the same channels that have enabled globalisation, trade, and global transportation networks. COVID-19 is also a very transmissible disease.

The current virus has many lessons to teach the global community. One direct lesson is that COVID-19 is a disease that originated from animals. In fact, all the diseases that have emerged recently have originated from animals. As humans continue to remain in constant contact with wild animals, COVID-19 will not be the last such disease that plagues the world.

Another lesson is the need for cooperation. COVID-19 is a global risk that demands global cooperation, as no country will be safe from COVID-19 until it is contained or eliminated everywhere. But COVID-19 is not the only global issue today, let alone the most serious issue. The worst that COVID-19 could do is kill 2 per cent of the global population, while there are threats to the world that endanger everyone such as climate change, resource depletion (of global fisheries, forests, topsoil, etc.), and the rising inequality occurring around the world. Despite these other threats, COVID-19 has mustered a greater response for global cooperation. Professor Diamond suggested that the pandemic's success in capturing global attention is due to the more visible and direct impact as compared to other global issues like climate change. He expressed hope that this pandemic will galvanise the global community to take the other global risks more seriously.

A final lesson from COVID-19 is to "be prepared." There have been emerging diseases in the past. The mechanism in which SARS came about (i.e., animal-human contact) is the same mechanism that brought about COVID-19, yet the world was caught off-guard again. Professor Diamond shared the example of Finland, which has made preparedness a central theme in its national identity due to historical reasons (Soviet occupation, etc.) As such, the Finnish government convenes a monthly commission to consider potential threats to Finland. This commission had also planned for an epidemic several years ago and had taken steps to be prepared, developing supply lines for face masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), and survival items such as fuel, electricity and food.

Singapore thrives on global cooperation, trade and global connections. Singapore is also a small state with a small population. The city-state lies in between larger, powerful countries, and gets its climate, water, food, and other resources including diseases from its neighbours. Professor Diamond described how Singapore has a leadership role in Southeast Asia, and how it already leads the region in science and government efficiency. He described how Singapore, with its robust public healthcare system, could also be a role model to its neighbours in tackling issues such as the pandemic.

Like other global problems, tackling COVID-19 requires a global effort, which paves the way for multilateralism and its associated organisations. There is no way Singapore can solve the COVID-19 crisis in Singapore by itself. Even if Singapore successfully eliminates the virus within its borders, it is only a matter of time before it would re-enter the country. He argued that multilateralism has successfully battled pandemics before; the World Health Organization (WHO) eliminated smallpox, a deadly disease, 40 to 50 years ago through global efforts and coordination. Regional cooperation has also eliminated some diseases among livestock.

Today, the WHO is leading the way in eliminating polio. These successes should provide a sense of hope in the global community as the world continues to fight against COVID-19.

Opening Remarks by Professor Liow

Professor Liow's discussion took a step back from the immediate COVID-19 crisis, and examined multilateralism and global cooperation in general. He shared that the number of multilateral or intergovernmental organisations had ballooned from just 37 at the beginning of the 20th century to more than 7,000 at the end of the same century, and that the figure is likely to be much larger today. Since the end of the Cold War, multilateralism has been an important feature and pillar of the world order, especially in fostering much-needed global cooperation.

Professor Liow shared three points. First, multilateralism has enhanced security cooperation, especially during the Cold War, which involved small satellite wars and the proliferation of nuclear weaponry. Many of these wars were focused on national liberation, even if there were overtones of superpower rivalries. The United Nations (UN), despite being far from perfect, played an important role in managing some of these conflicts. Multilateralism also played a role in curbing the proliferation of nuclear weaponry while encouraging nuclear disarmament.

Second, multilateralism has deepened and strengthened economic cooperation and governance. Not without its flaws, the Bretton Woods system and modern organisations like the International Monetary Foundation and the World Trade Organization have provided the fundamentals for a liberal global economic system with rules for financial, commercial and economic activities.

Third, multilateralism has also facilitated the growth of transnationalism in the sense that national and regional governments have been awakened to the idea of cross-national cooperation. Sister cities served as examples of attempts to foster deeper commercial and cultural cooperation between different groups. These bilateral efforts eventually became multilateral efforts, and the ASEAN Smart Cities Network is a good example of this. Other examples of similar cooperation can be seen between the central banks of the G10 countries, which work together to coordinate monetary policy.

In terms of the value of multilateralism to global cooperation, there are three principles that underpin these efforts. The first of these principles is inclusivity. Inclusivity does not mean including every country in every international organisation, but rather refers to enabling countries with direct interests in certain issues to participate in addressing them with the relevant organisations. As the world becomes increasingly closer, issues are increasingly becoming complex and transnational. By that logic, states will have to cooperate to ward off those dangers.

The second principle is the importance of having a rules-based order. While power remains the key instrument and currency of foreign policy, especially for larger states, it cannot be the sole tool for stability to prevail. The sharpening of raw power can be mitigated in two ways, having a balance of power and a rules-based order. These rules would underpin and govern national relations, and states would need to commit to abiding by these rules. Many of these rules and commitments are expressed and encapsulated by the multilateral institutions.

The final principle is the notion that multilateralism is based on the idea of global cooperation, rather than conflict. The risks of applying raw power, resulting in many conflicts, highlight the importance of cooperation.

The world today is amid various transformations that are bringing about societal change and political dislocation, creating complex situations for the global community to overcome. The first and most frequently discussed transformation or issue is the shift in global power, illustrated profoundly by the relative decline of the United States and the relative rise of China. The US has long been accepted as the dominant power in global affairs, and this has been eroded due to numerous events that have undermined the leadership role of the US. This occurred at a time of China's rise and assertion regionally and globally. China's recent efforts in mitigating COVID-19 and developing a vaccine serves as examples of this rise. China's rise signals a challenge to the US-European centric global system, to which most of the world has become accustomed.

The second transformation is the changes to modes of production caused by a technological revolution. The technologies defining the 4th Industrial Revolution are quickly permeating daily life and their consequences are not yet fully known. Some concerns include job displacement, exacerbated inequality, the consequences of free and unregulated use of technology that undermine ethics and privacy, national security risks, and the growing importance of Big Tech.

A third transformation would be that of information. The digital revolution has meant that information is no longer the domain of those with power. However, this comes with the risk of fake news and misuse of information. Professor Liow highlighted how data was misused in the lead-up to the Brexit vote. This threat of misinformation and disinformation threatens to undermine trust between, among people and governments, and the international community has yet to develop systems to regulate these issues.

Professor Liow also described barriers to multilateral cooperation. One key barrier was the reality that multilateral organisations exist to further the interests of states and not vice versa. Another barrier is the gap between rhetoric and reality. After the SARS and Ebola outbreaks, numerous multilateral agreements were made to combat future medical emergencies. However, the immediate response of most countries to COVID-19 was to shut borders and reduce global cooperation.

Singapore's foreign policy and success has been rooted in multilateralism. Professor Liow suggested three areas of focus: enforcing the importance of international laws and organisations in its foreign policy; stressing the importance of an open economy and an open economic system; and building and nourishing strategic partnerships to compensate for Singapore's size and limited resources.

Discussion and Q&A

Professor Dale Fisher noted that COVID-19 exposed many failures of countries and societies. The lockdowns in many countries have resulted in some good outcomes such as reduced pollution levels and recovery for wildlife and nature in general. Many experts have also called COVID-19 the "Great Revealer", as the virus has exposed overcrowded accommodations in shelters, prisons, nursing homes and other locations. Many of these locations have become

high transmission points. COVID-19 has also given unforgiving reminders to society about the unequal effects the pandemic has on different groups.

Professor Fisher expressed disappointment towards the coordination failures between governments and even between governments and its people. There were many instances of countries blaming one another and even state or regional governments blaming other states or the federal government. Self-interest has also arisen as countries begin buying up vaccine supplies, leaving poorer nations in a more vulnerable position. He agreed with Professor Diamond on the importance of preparedness, especially in the immunology world. He described how readiness was an important factor and how in the months leading up to a pandemic, and how Western countries failed to take adequate steps to ready themselves for the inevitable COVID-19 outbreak. Without proper policies in place, repeated lockdowns caused many to lose trust in governments.

Professor Fisher also shared that examining multilateralism and populism or nationalism as binary choices may be inadequate because most countries would end up in between the two. He also shared similar concerns with Professor Liow over the transformation of information. Community buying of conspiracy theories and misinformation based on said information being more interesting than the truth will inhibit attempts at combating COVID-19 and other present or future issues. There is a need to ensure that science and policies are in sync with the community through constant engagement. Extrapolating the example, Professor Fisher questioned how countries could promote global responsibilities over national interests if people still faced the conflict of community responsibilities and individual rights within countries.

Despite the challenges, Professor Fisher expressed optimism for the future. Through global cooperation, the WHO has managed to set up Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) with three arms: tests, therapeutics, and vaccines (commonly known as COVAX). It is an unprecedented effort to ensure vaccines are safe and available for all countries globally. Other efforts such as gene sequencing and the sharing of information have also been made possible due to global cooperation on a scientific level. However, geopolitics have prevented better global cooperation.

The need for global cooperation will only increase overtime, according to Ms Tan, who expressed concern that states are being forced to choose sides in geopolitical rivalries. She cited Professor Diamond's earlier example of the smallpox and how its eradication came at the height of the Cold War. The Soviet Union, the US, and the WHO and other multilateral organisations had figured out a way to cooperate to achieve a common goal despite their rivalries. Strategic competitors can cooperate to achieve a common goal if they choose to do so.

Multilateralism had always not been plain sailing; it has had to contend with ideologies such as populism, protectionism, and nationalism. While the effectiveness of many international organisations could be better, many have important mandates that continue to be relevant.

In Ms Tan's opinion, today's geopolitical climate will not allow the creation of new international organisations to succeed. Hence, reformation of existing organisations is necessary. Singapore also needs to be attuned to forums where the city-state lacks representation, in case they result in adverse outcomes for Singapore.

Multilateralism cannot operate transactionally, and for such efforts to work, credible leadership is needed. For a long time, this role has belonged to the US. Ms Tan believes in the near term, no other state or group of states can fully reprise this role.

Q&A

An audience member asked about the drivers for businesses, organisations, and nations to cooperate to tackle the current COVID-19 issue. Professor Diamond said his cynical view was that strong cooperation to eradicate COVID-19 globally would only come after such players suffer reinfection due to the actions of others. This was echoed by Ms Tan, who shared that most people would only act if they were directly affected. She added that for smaller states like Singapore, it is important to do what is feasible and influence other countries with good leadership and experience and results, or work with like-minded countries. Domestic audiences should be geared towards multilateralism by fostering cooperation at home, in order to allow global cooperation to flourish.

Professor Liow raised the issue of public interest in global cooperation and how public interests can transcend boundaries. Political leaders are responsible and obligated to those who have empowered them to advance and defend national interests. The public also needs to realise that their interests are increasingly intimately intertwined with the interests of others. Professor Liow shared concerns over the lack of trust in data and within and between countries, arguing that a trust deficit is hampering global cooperation efforts. Politicisation of issues where many politicians and individuals are attempting to take advantage of crisis to advance their personal agendas also inhibits global cooperation.

Professor Fisher raised a contrarian view on vaccine nationalism and how countries were approaching inoculation in a nationalist manner. Wealthier countries were buying up most of the vaccines available. Many of the countries with high infection levels are wealthier countries with more resources to fight the pandemic. Professor Fisher also remarked that many Asian and African countries were doing much better at combating COVID-19 than wealthier nations.

Audience members were curious about how Finland maintained the political will and domestic interest to constantly be prepared. Professor Diamond shared that most people view Finland's state of preparedness as a costly exercise. However, recent events have demonstrated that it is surprisingly cheap to be prepared and extremely costly not to be. Financially, Finland's stockpiling of resources is funded by a trivial tax on petrol. Professor Diamond also cited cultural and historical influences in Finland and many other countries' success in combating COVID-19. Asian countries in general tended to be more cooperative as compared with European countries or the US, which historically value individualism.

Singapore's role in the Southeast Asia and ways to help younger Singaporeans better connect to region were also discussed. Professor Liow lamented over the lack of attention given to the Southeast Asia when educating Singapore's youth. While he believed there is nothing wrong in Singaporeans having an interest in other parts of the world, they should not lose sight of their immediate neighbours. Professor Liow also questioned the removal of the Malay language from the curriculum. He described how Malay is often cited as the lingua franca of Singapore's immediate neighbours, and that it should be reintroduced in the education system.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset The Values and Qualities of Leadership

By Ruby THIAGARAJAN

The eighth forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 was on the [“Values and Qualities of Leadership”](#). It was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute of Policy Studies. The panel’s speakers were Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Professor Margaret Heffernan, Professor of Practice at the University of Bath. Discussants on the panel were Mr Han Fook Kwang, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, and Madam Zuraidah Abdullah, Chief Executive Officer of Yayasan MENDAKI. Dr Koh introduced the session by posing questions about the types and qualities of leaders that will be needed to navigate the challenges of the next decade.

Opening Remarks by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee

Ambassador Chan began her opening remarks by inviting the audience to think back to the events of the last decade and how the world has been preparing for a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) moment. COVID-19 has been that VUCA moment and has served as a global wake-up call. She emphasised that the most successful states during the COVID-19 crisis have had good leaders with competent policies and the ability to communicate them. In her view, good leadership qualities include responsiveness and an appetite for risk. A vital trait of good leadership for Singapore is the ability to be bold and seek to instil a culture of daring to try. Some degree of risk taking is a necessary quality to be innovative and relevant and to be ready for the political landscape of the future.

Ambassador Chan dedicated significant time outlining the issue of diversity in leadership. Leadership circles should reflect the diversity of the population and should also strive to understand the evolving diversity of this population, she said. This might include gender diversity, sexual diversity as in the LGBTQ community, and ethnic diversity. Future leadership circles should also reflect a diversity of age and be intergenerational.

Opening Remarks by Professor Margaret Heffernan

Professor Heffernan began by giving the example of a consensus-building exercise undertaken by the government of Ireland when considering a referendum on the issue of abortion. The government assembled a group of people who were representative of the population and involved them in a long process of sharing and deliberation, resulting in recommendations to government. The eventual referendum results ended up being very similar to the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly. According to Professor Heffernan, it was remarkable that even those who did not like the outcome of the decision accepted its legitimacy because of the transparency of the exercise. This approach had not been an abnegation of leadership but rather the essence of it, because it expressed trust in citizens

and embraced a capacity for change. She explained that essential qualities for leadership in the coming years include the capacity for humility and the ability to think long-term by understanding that decisions made have effects for future generations.

Open strategy values a plurality of voices, but the broadening of participation is not a substitute for decision making, which is the essential work of leaders. Good decisions can be both explained and understood, and this solidifies their legitimacy. Professor Heffernan also said there is a need globally to develop leaders who treat citizens not as passive children but as mature adults that participate in the making of their future.

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Caption for photo: Madam Zuraidah Abdullah responds to the speakers' opening remarks.

Discussion and Q&A

Mr Han said both speakers framed the leadership issues well and agreed with Ambassador Chan's points about developing a culture of daring to try. He also affirmed Prof. Heffernan's comments about the relationship between leaders and the people and how important it is to build this trust. He said the question about leadership has a special place in Singapore because of the constant refrain since 1965 about the country being highly dependent on strong leadership. He said the early leaders were value-driven — the values of meritocracy, rule of law, no tolerance for corruption — and that was what made them successful. People understand values more than they understand policies, he added. Leaders stand out from the crowd if they are seen as real people. They need to have feelings, convictions, keep their word, and be one with the people. Leadership is not about the message but the person behind the message, and it is less about competence than character and morality. While competence is important, it can also be delivered by a professionally run civil service and paid professionals. Moral leadership is about shaping values and shared future, he added.

Ms Zuraidah shared Mr Han's and Ambassador Chan's views on the importance of daring to try. She emphasised the need to relook failures and to think about them instead as learning

experiences. Singapore needs a society that allows a new brand of leaders to thrive — and should not be quick to condemn leaders when they make mistakes. She also echoed Ambassador Chan's views on diversity and said that a diversity of profiles needs to be valued during the recruitment stage. Ms Zuraidah argued that failure should be valued as it makes individuals more resilient and adept at facing setbacks, and that success is not the path to learning. She also underscored the importance of mentoring in inspiring future leaders and developing their value systems.

In the question-and-answer section, the panellists were asked about how Singapore's leaders should strike the balance between engagement (and listening to the population) and making difficult decisions that may not please everyone. They were also asked about how Singapore could create space for oppressed voices and to engage in deliberative democracy. Professor Heffernan responded that it is important to include all voices, including oppressed voices, in conversations. It is not just about who is speaking but who is listening. She returned to the example of the Irish Citizens' Assembly and described how it was very detailed and meticulous with a great commitment to transparency. This transparency was a crucial part of its success. Difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions must be arrived at legitimately, in order to be accepted.

Ambassador Chan said Singaporean society expects its leaders to be able to make difficult decisions, but this trait cannot be the only measure of leadership. Dr Koh asked her about the issue of LGBTQ+ rights and whether or not the leadership should take the lead or take cues from society. Ambassador Chan responded that she would lean on the side of leading the issue but admitted that it was a difficult choice for the government to make. She also suggested that should a vote be made on this issue, the LGBTQ+ community might not see the outcome that they want.

Mr Han said that the government is listening more than it had in the 1960s but that it tends to be defensive because the ruling party has been in power for so long. He recommended that the government expand its pool of thought leaders. Ms Zuraidah affirmed this and also suggested that the government be open to listening to opinions on topics that are not of their choosing.

The panellists were also asked about involving the millennial generation in leadership. Ms Zuraidah emphasised the importance of intergenerational leadership and participation and said that in MENDAKI has been opening the floor to younger leaders more and listening to their opinions. They might not agree on issues, but it is important to open that channel of communication. Prof. Heffernan brought up the example of shadow boards that organisations assemble to include more diversity in voices and suggested that more organisations try that option.

Finally, the panellists gave their opinions about global leadership. Ambassador Chan stated that leaders could not gain prominence on a global stage unless they have done well by their own citizens. The panel also agreed on the issue of sacrifice, stating that it should be a value for both leaders and society to inculcate. As strong leadership cannot be guaranteed, sacrifice and collaboration are both important pillars of a more resilient society.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Global Trends, Social Movements and Democracy

By Jun Jie WOO

[This session](#), moderated by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, focused on the political dimensions of global trends on Singapore. The panel speakers included Dr Terence Chong, Deputy Director and Senior Fellow of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and Dr Roberto Foa, Co-Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy. The discussants on the panel were Mr Aaron Maniam, Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Communications and Information, and Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim, Deputy Executive Editor of the *South China Morning Post*.

Opening Remarks by Dr Roberto Foa

Dr Roberto Foa's presentation cited data from the Global Satisfaction with Democracy dataset, the World Values Survey, the YouGov Globalism Survey, and the YouGov Singapore polls. Based on this data, he observed that there has been rising dissatisfaction with political institutions across the world. Singapore broadly tracks these trends, with a slight decline in levels of satisfaction with democracy. However, YouGov Singapore data shows that citizen satisfaction with government rose with pandemic management success in 2020.

Across the world, political polarisation and "demonisation" has been on the rise, with an emerging intergenerational divide. Younger people are more likely to demonise political opponents than older people. However, there has been very little partisan division in Singapore. Singapore has also experienced little increase in exclusionary identity politics. Few respondents in Singapore would reject people of different religions or ethnicities. Subjectively perceived sexual harassment has also been low in Singapore. However, there is a slight generational divide in perceptions of sexual harassment, with younger people more likely to perceive sexual harassment in the workplace.

As part of the anti-globalisation backlash, there have been high anti-immigration sentiments across the world. More respondents believe that immigration is costly rather than beneficial. Singapore is not entirely immune to this trend, although these sentiments are driven by economics and not identity politics, he said. Significant number of respondents supported strong limits to reduce immigration. Large numbers of respondents believe that globalisation benefits the wealthy, and that employers should support locals. However, few respondents in Singapore believe that immigration increases social conflict. A large number of Singaporean respondents seem to be open to emigration, being willing to live overseas, and much of this is driven by cost of living and income considerations.

In sum, confidence in political institutions appears to be on the decline, although overall satisfaction with government remains high in Singapore. There has been little evidence of

political polarisation and exclusionary identity politics in Singapore, although there are some anti-immigrant sentiments, driven by economic concerns such as cost of living and inequality.

Opening Remarks by Dr Terence Chong

Dr Chong argued that democracy was on the decline across the world. Much of this could be attributed to widespread anger with the political establishment as well as the economic elite. Anti-establishment movements have emerged across the right and left of the spectrum, challenging political norms.

While there is only one form of accepted democracy: liberal democracy, there are also different forms of democracy, with institutions such as the media and trade unions playing different roles in different forms of democracies. Regardless of the form of democracy, populism appears to be on the rise.

Dr Chong described two types of populism: populism that attempts to paint elite groups as uncaring; and populism as demand for economic goods, such as free education and healthcare. The second populism comes as a backlash against perceived socio-cultural change. This invokes the conservative majority responding to liberalism and perceived threats to their ways of life, such as the cultural and economic changes brought about by globalism. A consequence of this is a cultural war.

As an open economy, Singapore cannot help but be affected by these changes. As a meritocratic and increasingly class-stratified society, Singapore is at risk of the first form of populism. Citing IPS surveys, Dr Chong argued that class divide was increasingly entrenched across Singaporean society. Hot topics of the General Election in 2011 include anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments, overcrowding and strains to public transport and housing supply, and the perception that political elite is out of touch.

As Singapore becomes a more deeply stratified society, resentment against political establishment and elites will also lurk beneath the surface. While meritocracy rewards hard work, children from upper- and middle-class families enjoy an unfair advantage. Therefore, social situation and economic standing become a measure of social standing and value, which can give rise to new fault lines.

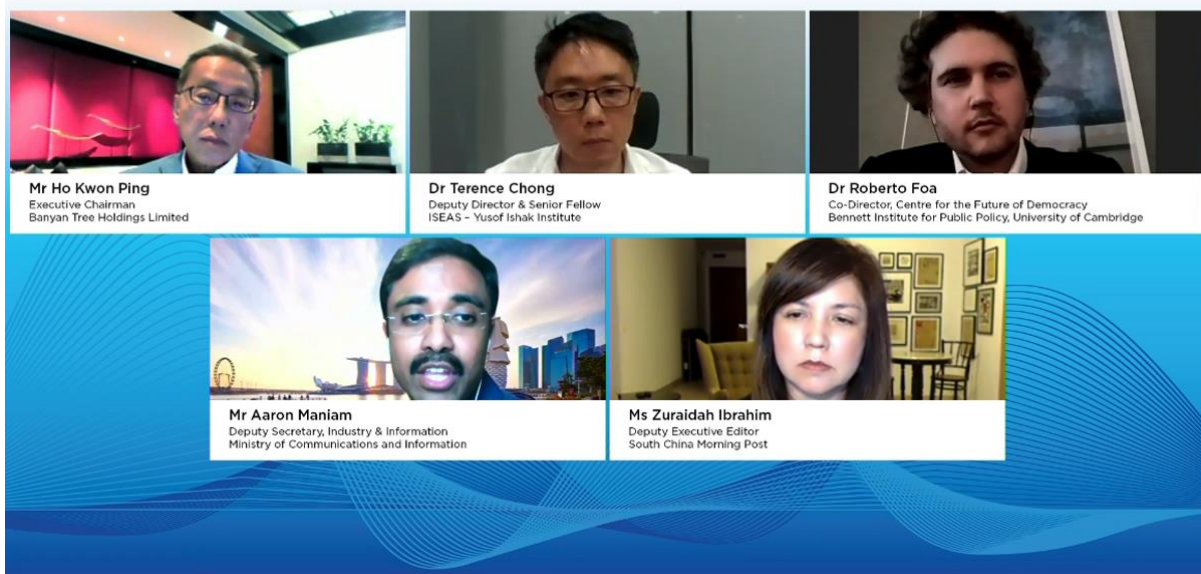
Another fault line described was the clash of values. This is associated with the second form of populism, although this is less evident in Singapore, which manifests in a backlash among older populations against liberal norms and post-material values that have emerged with global economic liberalism. More frequent examples of clash of values in Singapore include the parliamentary debate to abolish 377A in 2007, the AWARE saga in 2009, and religious and conservative opposition to the opening of the casinos in 2010.

Dr Chong also noted the new wave of liberal values, such as woke culture and cancel culture. He also pointed out that there had been more public discussion of race and ethnicity, citing examples such as actor Dennis Chew's "brownface" incident, and the Facebook post by Raeesah Khan that resurfaced during the 2020 General Election. He described how tolerance for perceived racial discrimination has declined among younger Singaporeans. However, cultural backlash has not fully materialised in Singapore politics, despite fault lines deepening.

Discussion

Mr Aaron Maniam noted the gradual shift in Singapore towards political division and polarisation, but that there are causes for hope. He agreed with Dr Chong that there are different forms of democracy, and that there is a need to define Singapore's form of democracy. Can Singapore's democracy be defined as a communitarian democracy, based on a multitude of different values? At the heart of communitarian democracy is a system where individuals participate in political life at regular intervals, but there is also a need for individuals to participate in political life at an everyday level, for example, in deliberative or participative democracy. This will help bring different ideas together and provide nuance, as Singapore faces more challenges ahead, he added. Participation also allows for the formation of multiple identities as people interact and engage with each other, he said, as well as collective learning about the complexity of issues that Singapore faces. Deliberative space can allow the different views and arguments to co-exist. There is a need to ensure that politics is inclusive, especially in terms of ability to participate in political life. This includes having the language and technology to participate in an increasingly online political life. There is a need for common infrastructure of truth.

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Caption for photo: Mr Aaron Maniam responding to the speakers' opening remarks.

Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim posed several questions for discussion. The questions directed at Dr Foa involved interpretations of data. She asked whether the questions posed to respondents in the surveys meant the same thing in different countries. For instance, the 20 per cent of Singapore respondents who expressed dissatisfaction with the government may argue that there is not enough democracy. Data on Singaporeans' confidence with pandemic handling is also open to interpretation. The low confidence point was in July 2020, which coincided with the General Election. This could be due to opposition parties questioning the government during election, rather than an objective appraisal of government's pandemic response measures. She pointed out that data on people's attitude towards immigration is difficult to

interpret, that anti-immigration sentiments themselves could be driven by political forces, and the intensity of anti-immigrant feelings are also important, not just the number of people who are anti-immigrant. A small minority of anti-immigrant sentiments can also cause disproportionate levels of violence and hate. Ms Ibrahim then asked Dr Chong if there were other forms of democracy to be found to be thriving in Southeast Asia. She also asked if the unhappiness in the 2011 General Election was a sign of populism or a reasonable reaction to policy failures.

Dr Foa agreed that survey data is a starting point for discussion, rather than an ending point. Dr Chong said different forms of democracies have different expectations of institutions within these democracies. The kinds of depression that the West is experiencing are not found in Southeast Asia. He also argued that populism did not emerge in a vacuum, and that there were real reasons that politicians and activists could be whipped into a frenzy.

Questions and Answers

One participant asked if, given the tide of anti-establishment sentiments, the panellists had ideas on how to “reset” the rules of engagement with citizens. Dr Chong identified how trust is important, and that the breakdown of political trust is stark in Western countries. He added that once trust was broken, misinformation could make it difficult for democracy to function. Meanwhile, Dr Foa described how the other side of trust was trustworthiness. In Western societies with rising inequality or malfeasance, elites had to be trustworthy and willing to respond to populist concerns.

A participant asked how opposing values could co-exist in the democratic ideal described by Mr Maniam. Mr Maniam said politics is something people *choose* to participate in, and that there is a sense of agency among citizens. He argued that initial opposition had to be dealt with through interpersonal encounters and interactions, rather than waiting for the system to act, as this would allow people to relate to each other through their multiple identities.

Questions were also raised on how the concept of meritocracy in Singapore might be changed, and how it plays a role when choosing leaders. Mr Maniam expressed the need to define merit in more diverse ways, beyond wealth and paper qualifications. He argued that there are multiple forms of excellence that need to be recognised. Dr Chong commented that as the largest employer, the state needed to take the lead in recognising different forms of talent and merit. He also pointed to changes in educational banding structures for students. He asked what could be done for the generations that missed out, and if the government could move fast enough when implementing these changes.

Ms Ibrahim argued that Singapore’s leadership does not show enough internal diversity, and instead shows more uniformity, which differs from the first and second generations of leadership. She expressed her hope that the government is conscious of this and is working hard to address this issue. Otherwise, she believed that Singapore was headed towards the dangerous territory of groupthink and perhaps the eventual decline of the People’s Action Party.

Questions were raised about how governments could strike a balance between the strident voices of social activists online and traditional offline constituents, and how people could interact across the digital divide. Mr Maniam described how governments around the world

had to cater to both digital and analogue sets of constituents, pointing to the example of online and offline modes of communication to deliver information about the COVID-19 pandemic. He argued that there is a need to calibrate policy communications to include both online and analogue constituents, and that efforts to include more people in the digital sphere, such as Singapore's digital ambassadors, should be increased. Mr Ho noted that Singapore was ahead of the curve in regulation of online dialogue. Meanwhile, Dr Chong asserted that online activism was different from activism found in "real-life", as it could happen faster and take more liberties. Ms Ibrahim said there should not be any contention between digital and offline communications, and that policy communications need to apply across the board. However, she noted that human interaction could not be replaced by digital media. For example, she pointed to how the PAP's inability to conduct house-to-house visits during the GE2020 campaign likely affected their vote share.

Dr Foa raised a contrarian idea: rather than bridging the digital divide, to widen it instead. He argued that the problem of online space is that people are more aware of one another's opinions, which triggers frustrations and conflict. In his view, a communitarian democracy, would allow interactions to take place with more space among participants.

When asked what democracy would look like in the age of social media and influencers, with specific reference to some politicians becoming social media stars during the election, Ms Ibrahim said social media was here to stay, and the question was how to harness its positive benefits. She argued that politicians need self-discipline in knowing what to share and when to share it. She also noted that political leaders in Singapore have become more "human" to voters as a result of social media. Mr Maniam argued that social media could give rise to network effects for political life, enabling people to be reached with greater speed, scale and scope. However, there is also the risk of rumours and distortions spreading like wildfire. He asserted that a healthy democracy in the world of social media is one that has producers and users of social media who are more literate. Dr Chong said people are now looking for a certain sense of authenticity, and that they can assess whether it is genuine or contrived and manufactured. Meanwhile, Dr Foa described social media as fairly undemocratic, and not reflective of public opinion. He argued that politicians who responded to social media might be doing things that were not aligned with public opinion. He added that social media spaces were not egalitarian, as there were power differences, such as the one between influencers and those who did not use social media.

A participant asked how important it is for those in public service to strike a more non-partisan note. Mr Maniam said Singapore's public service operates in a Westminster democracy, and that its fundamental role is to serve the government of the day, regardless of the Party in power. From his own experience, he observed no examples of polarisation in the civil service. He emphasised how it is the role of the civil service to put out a diverse set of views and options and debate them vigorously, with implementation done in a way that represents fidelity to the public. A politicised public service is unhealthy for society, he noted.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Business in Singapore

By Shazly ZAIN

The tenth forum of the Singapore Perspectives 2021 explored the theme of [“Business in Singapore 2030”](#). This forum took place on the final day of the conference, which had both an in-person and online audience. The panel consisted of Mr Ang Yuit, founder and Managing Director of Inginim Pte Ltd. and Vice President of Strategies, Development and Digitalisation at the Association of Small & Medium Enterprises; Ms Aw Kah Peng, Chairman of Shell Companies in Singapore; and Mr Louis Lim, Chief Operating Officer and incoming Chief Executive Officer of Keppel Land. The session was moderated by Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Economy Department at IPS. The panel covered key themes such as leadership, collaboration, sustainability and cost management, considering how these may develop over the coming decade.



Caption for photo: Mr Christopher Gee (left) opens the session on “Business in Singapore 2030”.

Leadership

The session opened with a discussion on leadership in Singapore. In the preceding forums, Singapore had been described as a good and fast follower but not a first mover. Questions arose about the ability and necessity of Singaporean businesses to bear the responsibility of being a first mover.

Ms Aw started the discussion by recognising the temptation to characterise formulas for success. Fast followers and first movers both have advantages and varied paths to success. Ms Aw also shared how the energy sector, with decades of development in its systems and operations, was now being disrupted with issues such as climate change. Major energy giants face questions regarding the means to not only be a part of the disruption process but to also thrive in this process. Ms Aw pointed out that while we recognise the disruptions occurring in systems and industries today, it is difficult to comprehend the potential changes and developments in new systems and industries of tomorrow. She shared the example of Greenlots, an energy company founded in Singapore that focused on renewable energy and electric vehicles and charging infrastructure. Greenlots originated in Singapore, but the company quickly went to California to tap opportunities there at the time. Businesses need to seek such opportunities, she said — be it in Singapore or elsewhere — to scale up their businesses. Therefore, the question should not be about being a fast follower or first mover, but rather to recognise the disruption and how businesses can find opportunities in those disruptions. Businesses will need to be agile and focus not just on the “what” of business activities but also the “why”, she added.

Next, Mr Lim challenged the notion that Singaporean businesses have not been leaders or first movers. Keppel, for example, represented Singapore’s leadership in the offshore and marine sector in the 1980s. During the same period, Keppel moved into China and Vietnam as they saw opportunities there. Today, these two countries along with several other Asian countries contribute greatly to Keppel’s revenue. Mr Lim said the first mover mentality has been a part of the Singapore business DNA but wondered if this mentality has been sustained. There are still good ideas, he said, but it is a question of the available talent pool and systems in place to allow these ideas to take off. He believed Singapore still has a culture of entrepreneurship, referring to businesses like Grab (originally from Malaysia) which have come to Singapore and become very successful. He also shared concerns about the reinvention of long-standing corporations to find new opportunities in today’s landscape. Mr Lim highlighted three topics relating to business leadership: digitalisation, sustainability, and platforms. He suggested that businesses had to deepen themselves in these three spaces.

From a small & medium enterprise (SME) perspective, Mr Ang shared the reality that very few SMEs could make it big. Most SMEs are focused on making a living, innovating and performing well within Singapore. Mr Ang also shared that while ecosystems are important, views should not be focused on “how to make businesses big”. There are companies that are engineered for eventual expansion, but by and large SMEs are geared towards stability and decent income, he said. Therefore, ecosystems should provide opportunities for SMEs to both be stable and grow if they want to. Mr Ang also considered the role of the government in providing grants and initiatives such as the Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs). As a leader, the government seeks to promote innovation among SMEs, and Mr Ang described this as a noble endeavour. However, while SMEs are the recipients of such policies, they may not receive the full benefits of such initiatives. Additionally, Mr Ang described how policies and policy implementation are two different concepts. As grants and initiatives involve taxpayer’s dollars, caution is necessary. However, over-caution and bureaucracy may inhibit SMEs’ abilities to innovate and dampen the effectiveness of policies. Mr Ang noted the need to better translate goals set out by leadership into effective policies and implementation on the ground level.

Partnerships

Ms Aw stated the need for cooperation between governments and businesses, especially during this time of economic uncertainty and disruption. She described how COVID-19 impacted everyone, and that there is immediate feedback from the action or inaction when tackling the pandemic. She contrasted the pandemic with climate change, a global challenge that is equally complex but where feedback is not immediate. As such, governments such as the one in Singapore need to think about the long term. Ms Aw suggested that conversations and eventually, partnerships between institutions including people in general that can think about the future, are important in achieving this. Ms Aw also suggested that the identity of “change makers”, those who initiate and lead these conversations, is moot. Businesses and governments are heterogeneous with differing views and capacities in their respective industries. Multinational corporations such as Shell are in the position to have these conversations, and she stressed that they want and are ready to do so. Ms Aw believed that Singapore’s government was also ready for these conversations.

Mr Lim spoke about the importance of all stakeholders in the business ecosystem. Governments should not be expected to lead all conversations or initiatives; businesses need to have a role in lobbying the government where necessary. He shared the successes of Keppel’s collaboration with the Singapore government. Through this partnership, projects such as Singapore-Suzhou Industrial Park gave greater access to the Chinese market for Keppel. These projects were platforms Keppel used for new developments, including urban solutions and city infrastructure.

Mr Ang shared that in conversations with various SMEs, many felt that the challenges they face are beyond their control. He said SMEs were fully capable of innovating and collaborating more deeply with one another. He observed that in Singaporean businesses, the nature of collaborative spirit was not very strong. This may have been an unintended consequence of competitiveness in schools, which has translated into post-education life. Mr Ang raised the need for Singaporean businesses to venture overseas and “hunt in packs”. Collaborating with other SMEs, larger enterprises, and government-linked companies (GLCs) would create better opportunities for Singaporean businesses to grow. Interestingly, conversations with younger Singaporeans have raised concerns over being too comfortable in Singapore. Mr Ang hoped that the spirit of enterprise and venturing abroad would be instilled among Singaporeans and businesses again.

On the topic of the relationship between Singaporean businesses and foreign labour, Mr Ang shared that the challenge for SMEs and foreign labour began in 2011 with the tightening of the foreign worker quotas and levies. SMEs have since been trying to adapt, increasing productivity and upskilling existing labour. Some of the challenges faced by SMEs include upskilling or reskilling and, more importantly, the retention of these newly trained workers. While retraining was designed to improve productivity, some SMEs get stuck with the cost of training, as work pass renewals are not guaranteed. The constant need to retrain new workers can cause training costs to balloon. Mr Ang suggested the need for the economy to find an equilibrium of having the right amount of foreign labour and the right amount of automation and productivity.

COVID-19 also caused many SMEs to transform, at times overnight. Some SMEs are still dealing with this restructuring process. Mr Ang shared that retail SMEs were not expecting good performance in 2021 despite the F&B sector's recovery. There was an opportunity to examine the deployment of local labour versus foreign labour, to orientate and transform the business and have a more optimal usage of manpower in a way that is sustainable for Singapore. Mr Ang also shared that many SMEs were outsourcing and offshoring business activities because of the pandemic.

Mr Lim raised the question of reducing reliance on foreign labour. He stated the reality that roles filled by foreign labour would not be done so by locals. However, the pandemic has raised awareness of the living conditions faced by many migrant workers. He expected costs to go up especially if there was to be greater demand for better living conditions for migrant workers.

According to Ms Aw, COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to examine what has and has not worked in the system. She shared that while most Shell employees were locals, the company was heavily dependent on a set of contractors and supporting industries that hired many foreign workers. Over the last few decades, Shell has realised that the supporting industries which MNCs in Singapore depend on are not at the right level of skill and productivity as compared with similar supporting industries found elsewhere. To better understand the system that supporting industries utilise in hiring foreign workers and better care for them, Shell had begun to examine issues pertaining to migrant workers. Issues such as transportation, housing and recruitment have caused Shell to adjust and create a supporting industry in the future that is both economically viable and fair to workers.

Ms Aw also described the need for co-leadership on these issues. It is tempting to ask governments to lead the issue, but large companies are also major users of foreign workers. Stakeholders need to be in the same room and have a clear desire to not only deliberate but also have concrete and actionable steps to adjust the ecosystems in which businesses, workers and government operate.

Cost Management

Mr Ang noted the importance of cost management in Singapore in ensuring businesses continue to thrive here. Cost is an innovation dampener. With Singapore being one of the most expensive locations to do business, SMEs are struggling to manage costs and, at the same time, innovate. Many SMEs face the cyclical prospect of living hand to mouth. Mr Ang suggested that the business ecosystem examine cost structures to create a system, which manages costs fairly and at the same time allows businesses to innovate.

Ms Aw agreed with the sentiments of cost management and asked who was in the best position to understand system costs and impact. Speaking about Singapore's Industry Transformation Maps, she also asked who would be best placed to understand externalities such as inequalities and actions that will be faced in the future. In her opinion, governments are in a better place to understand these issues rather than companies. It is important to understand the outcomes of industry transformation and the consequences of not successfully doing so.

Discussion and Q&A

Mr Lim described innovation as a buzzword that has been going around for a while. Internally, Keppel has avenues to generate and develop new ideas, with its innovation philosophy of looking at existing business activities and how new ideas can add on to Keppel's strengths. For example, Keppel's recent foray into sustainability has allowed the company to develop zero energy buildings, which tap its existing capabilities in building management. There is potential for Keppel to use their newfound expertise and expand further overseas. Mr Lim also raised concerns about the "not invented here" syndrome and for businesses to not limit themselves geographically and pursue opportunities wherever they are present. Mr Ang believes innovation needs to be accompanied by hard skills. Dreaming is possible but execution is necessary. He expressed concerns that upskilling or reskilling in Singapore was very regimental and siloed. SkillsFuture and WSG for example are good initiatives but are often inflexible, locked into vertical silos. The thing about innovation when paired with skills is that it helps cross boundaries. He called for a spirit of adaptability among Singaporeans. Mr Ang also shared experiences faced by SMEs when pursuing training programmes and its strict requirements and utilisation. These create situations where individual SMEs must navigate and figure out how to best utilise training initiatives, instead of a more organic and efficient relationship between business needs and training solutions.

A question was also posed regarding businesses' reaction to Singapore not being as "low tax" as it previously was, considering COVID-19 and the various fiscal policies being implemented. Ms Aw dispelled the notion that it is only low tax that attracts businesses. Singapore's tax regime is well regarded due to its certainty and the interaction between businesses and authorities. Both businesses and governments are committed to delivering on their promises and have meaningful conversations on relevant issues. Two years ago, Shell began publishing a transparency report on the company's tax payables. The Singapore government reacted well to the reports and have embraced such transparency.

Questions were raised about Singapore's ability to have a mindset shift away from being a good follower towards being a leader. Ms Aw believes Singapore can be a leader, but many changes will be needed, with respect to reaction to failures, leadership styles and philosophy. She hopes that Singaporeans will have the confidence to take their ideas and make actionable steps to realise their ideas. It is also important for Singapore to be honest with itself regarding the changes needed, to talk about these changes, and to change. Adding on, Mr Lim described Keppel's ventures into Israel and the latter's appeal. Governments, universities, venture capital and corporates were all involved in creating the Israeli ecosystem that harnesses talent and promotes innovation. Mr Lim also noted that many in Singapore do not want to step outside their "boxes", some because of comfort but many out of fear of repercussions. Mr Ang suggested deepening existing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are used to regulate some of Singapore's initiatives, to organically creating an innovative ecosystem.

On the theme of prosperity and progress in 2030, Mr Ang shared that Singapore has shifted from a foreign investment-oriented economy in the 1960s to an economy that values innovation, entrepreneurship and SMEs. Going forward, he hopes to see a great partnership between GLCs and SMEs as both co-create and hunt as a pack. There are valuable lessons to be learnt by both parties from each other. To support this partnership, government procurement policies that facilitate the vibrancy and growth of local enterprises are needed.

He also hoped for a deepening of KPIs to focus on measuring the real effects of policies and initiatives with outcomes in mind. Mr Lim, meanwhile, hoped that Singapore would move towards a liveable city that can attract the best talent and companies, with the ecosystem to enable this vision. Agility and innovation will be needed over the next 10 years to actualise this future. There was collective agreement that future developments, be it energy transition, sustainability, or digitalisation, would facilitate focused investments and efforts. Ms Aw expressed excitement over the potential seen today, sharing her belief that Singapore would thrive in the energy transition. Singapore has all the reasons to be successful and, in some way, COVID-19 has opened Singaporeans' mind to new opportunities and thinking.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Politics in Singapore

By Ysien LAU

The eleventh forum, "[Politics in Singapore 2030](#)", took place on the final day of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, in front of both a live and an online audience. Drawing on the deliberations from the first nine online forums of the conference, representatives from three political parties discussed how Singapore's political landscape might develop in the next decade. The panel's speakers included Dr Janil Puthucheary, the Whip of the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Chairman of Young PAP; Mr Gerald Giam, treasurer of the Workers' Party (WP) and a member of Singapore's 14th Parliament, and Ms Hazel Poa, founding member of the Progress Singapore Party and a Non-Constituency Member of Singapore's 14th Parliament. The panel was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.



Caption for photo: Mr Gerald Giam of the Workers' Party (second from right) shares his opening remarks.

Opening Statement by Dr Janil Puthucheary

During his opening remarks, Dr Janil Puthucheary highlighted what he saw as key themes looking forward: identity, technology, COVID-19 and the economy, and politics.

With regard to identity, specifically race and religion, he observed that the conversations on these topics were becoming increasingly productive and open, and that there was a growing

diversity of opinions. He described how in Singapore, there was an incentive to discuss topics relating to identity, as discourse on it had not led to negative consequences, unlike other countries where such topics had been exploited and weaponised for political reasons. Dr Puthuchearry expressed his belief that it was important to think carefully about these topics and how they would be approached, in order to better understand what it meant to Singapore and the country's sense of identity.

On the theme of technology, Dr Puthuchearry described how Singapore differed from other countries in that the government had played a key role in creating and defining its own tools, creating relevant infrastructure for technological development, rather than relying primarily on the private sector for technological innovation and development. Thus, he argued that the government's role was to ensure that no one was left behind, and that problems and divisions created by technology required solutions with a humanistic perspective.

Dr Puthuchearry said the way Singaporeans came together during the COVID-19 crisis gave him hope for the next decade, seeing the country's response as a demonstration of the country's cohesion and adaptability. He argued that the sense of unity, adaptability and resolve would be important when dealing with larger issues in the coming decade, such as climate change. However, he expressed his belief that some things would remain the same, that Singapore would remain a globally connected city, that the country's sense of self would be stronger and core values be passed down to successive generations, and that Singapore would be able to learn lessons from around the world and situate them in a local context.

At the end of his remarks, Dr Puthuchearry described how adaptability was at the core of the PAP, and that the party's strength was in their resolve to do what was right for Singaporeans. Dr Koh asked how values could be passed on to successive generations within the PAP, and whether adaptability meant some things needed to be cast out. Dr Puthuchearry replied that having new members step in at every election was one way of refreshing the party's world view and tools, and that having systems like understudying and working in groups helped to transmit values and a sense of purpose to new generations of members. He also argued that the internal workings within the party, in relation to policy, would gradually evolve to adapt to present societal values.

Opening Statement by Mr Gerald Giam

Mr Gerald Giam described the vision of the WP and what would be needed to reach these goals. This included helping Singaporeans achieve their dreams, creating a dynamic economy with competitive homegrown firms, and to have Singaporeans working together to build their ideal home. He also emphasised the party's desire for an accountable democracy.

He noted that many Singaporeans now enjoyed a good life, but that some still faced difficulties, despite their best efforts to improve their situations. He argued for a need to understand them without judgement and find ways to help. In his view, the collective happiness, prosperity and progress of the nation depends on all Singaporeans having a share in the country's success.

Mr Giam went on to observe that meritocracy was often seen as a guiding principle for Singapore, despite not being in the national pledge or anthem. While he acknowledged that meritocracy was a good concept for combating issues like corruption and nepotism, he argued that it would lead to sub-optimal outcomes if everyone was only seen through the lens of ability

and achievements. He elaborated on how we should not be content with only providing equal opportunities, as not everyone might be able to take advantage of such opportunities due to various complex factors working against them. He emphasised how Singapore is a nation, not a corporation, and that “we are each our brother’s keeper”, needing to work together and help each other to reach our goals.

Additionally, he argued that when addressing complex issues, solutions require contributions from all stakeholders, not just the government, academia, civil society or political parties. He described how all stakeholders, including the government, would need to listen, explain their points of view, and adjust their positions when necessary.

When asked by Dr Koh how an accountable democracy could be achieved, Mr Giam stated how each actor, be it political party or individual, must have a sense of responsibility and a desire for what is best for the country — and that if everyone shares this mindset, there will be no limit to what can be achieved in having an accountable democracy and progress for Singapore.

Opening Statement by Ms Hazel Poa

Ms Poa spoke about how politics also contribute to shaping Singapore’s soul, the direction in which she believed Singapore’s politics is headed, and her hopes for the future of Singapore’s political landscape.

She argued that politics cut across all sectors of the community, require collective action, and form the face that is represented to the world. Ms Poa described how choices made as a nation define the country’s soul and help to show its values to the rest of the world.

On the development of Singapore’s politics, Ms Poa noted that there have been changes in how politics are discussed. For example, from her experiences campaigning in two general elections, she observed that the fear of the potential consequences of voting for opposition parties has decreased significantly. However, she noted that the fear of running for opposition parties, such as the fear of impact on job prospects and job security, are still very much alive. People should not have to be worried about being open about their stance and speaking openly about their views, she said, as being unable to do so impacts the soul of the nation.

Ms Poa also described how the voters have been the drivers of political change, pointing to the 2020 General Election, where voters expressed their interest in having a greater diversity of viewpoints in parliament, voting 10 opposition candidates as members of parliament. She argued that the desire for change expressed through people’s votes have caused other developments to be set into motion, such a new position of Leader of the Opposition and more events inviting opposition members to speak and share their perspectives.

Concluding, Ms Poa stated her dream that powers will be more evenly distributed someday, and that future generations will be able to participate actively without fear in all discussions relating to their lives.

Discussion and Q&A

During the Q&A portion of the session, the speakers discussed a range of topics, including meritocracy, where the government should play a larger or smaller role, the idea of a multi-party system, and whether Singapore was ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

Meritocracy

There was general consensus that meritocracy was not a perfect tool, and that it, like other tools, was in need of continual refinement to reach the most ideal outcomes. The speakers also agreed there had to be a shift away from a focus on excellence in the form of grades and paper qualifications.

Mr Giam described how meritocracy was important as a guiding principle, especially for tackling issues such as corruption, but that it should not be taken to the extreme. He noted efforts from the government to move away from a sole focus on academic excellence, but that it was still a work-in-progress. There was a need to work together as a nation to determine what is very important. He identified the need to track outcomes to ensure that people were given opportunities, that hurdles were cleared in their paths to pursue their dreams, and that everyone, political parties and individuals, worked together to find the best way forward.

Ms Poa agreed that there was a need to place less emphasis on grades and paper qualifications, recognising achievements in skills as well. Meanwhile, Dr Puthucheariy emphasised that it was never the intention to have an absolute meritocracy, and agreed that like many tools, there was a need for continual refinement.

Potential for a non-Chinese prime minister

The speakers were also asked whether they believed Singapore could have a non-Chinese Prime Minister. Dr Puthucheariy noted that, despite wishing it were not the case, race still matters in Singapore, and expressed his hope that racial harmony will progress to the point where discussions about having a non-Chinese Prime Minister will be more about finding a high-quality candidate than having an icon for a “reset”. Meanwhile, Ms Poa commented that one view would be that Singapore was in fact ready for a non-Chinese prime minister, and that it was the PAP that might not be ready. Mr Giam described how, based on conversations with many Singaporeans, he did not really see any view expressing they were not ready for a candidate who is capable and honest. He noted that the choice in prime minister is really the decision of the political party, and that a party choosing a non-Chinese member, as its leader would depend on that party’s own internal calculations.

Government intervention

On the role of the government in different domains, the speakers all agreed that there were some clear areas in which the state should take a greater role, such as healthcare, economy, defence, and that there were areas where there could be more ground-up participation. Dr Puthucheariy noted that for all areas, there was a need for partnership between government and citizens, and that the government was doing this through grants, talks and challenges. Meanwhile, Mr Giam and Ms Poa argued that there were also areas in which the government should take a step back more and let the people resolve issues and make decisions independently.

Potential of a multi-party system

The speakers were also asked about the potential of a multi-party system, whether it would cause more division, and whether there was enough talent in Singapore for two parties. Dr Puthuchery responded by saying that the equilibrium of parties would be determined by the people. However, he said there was still a need for each party and candidate to remain competitive and work to be the best, rather than intentionally trying to weaken their own offering to force a balance of representation from different parties.

To Mr Giam, whether or not there would be division in a multi-party system would depend on each political party and political candidate. Mr Giam also noted that having representation from multiple parties did not necessarily mean that things would balance out, as there were good and bad parties. He described the need for citizens to have all the information required to best determine which parties would help take the country forward in a united manner.

Ms Poa said the nature of politics in Singapore would be defined by the people. She noted how in spite of the increased representation in parliament, there had been no increase in divisiveness, so people should keep an open mind and continue to evolve this model. She also noted that in the past, when the path forward was clearer, having a one-party system was more efficient, allowing for quicker progress, decision-making and implementation. However, when faced with choices that are more complex, she argued that it might be risky to continue the one-party system.

Overall, the discussion produced an engaging conversation about the developments in Singapore's political landscape, with each of the three political party representatives sharing their unique insights and perspectives. Despite some differences in outlook, the conversation saw a sense of shared purpose, a willingness to collaborate for the best outcomes, and a focus on the needs of all Singaporeans.

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Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Closing Dialogue

By Tasha TAN

The [closing dialogue](#) of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, held in front of both an in-person and online audience, featured Minister Lawrence Wong, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Finance. The question-and-answer portion of the session was moderated by Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief for *The Straits Times*.



Caption for photo: Minister Lawrence Wong giving his opening remarks.

Three Resets

Minister Wong urged the audience to be prepared to live in a changed world of mask-wearing and social-distancing. There is still uncertainty on how long the pandemic will last, possibly four to five years, he said. There is also uncertainty over how much time is needed before global travel can restart, how long the development and distribution of vaccines will take, and how much immunity those vaccines provide. In reference to past pandemics, he said societies

had shown themselves to be able to adapt and adjust to new situations, and to bounce back from adversity. This pandemic is a way for Singapore to have a reset, he added.

He listed three forms of resets: social compact, managing climate change, and strengthening the sense of social solidarity.

The first reset relates to a social compact. COVID-19 has widened the gap between the low- and high-income groups, showing the need to create a fairer and more equal society. Minister Wong said there was a need for some state intervention for the economic market, and for schemes to help ease inequality. He also said that meritocracy in Singapore must not ossify into a hereditary system where the condition of your birth determines the outcome of your life. Hence, the state was intervening by providing education and early intervention, especially for disadvantaged students. The state was also changing the mindset towards education, from frontloading learning to lifelong learning. He shared that merit had previously been narrowly defined by cognitive abilities, and the pandemic has shown how essential other types of work are.

The second reset was about managing climate change. When most of human activity stalled due to lockdowns, carbon emissions dropped, and the earth started to heal. This shows that we have to find new and green ways to generate energy in a sustainable way for the economy. He pointed to the phasing out of engines with internal combustion, and the goals of achieving net zero emissions and being a carbon-trading and services hub. Sustainability is important for the future generations, he said.

The third reset was to strengthen the sense of social solidarity. In the present age of misinformation, some think that the pandemic is a hoax, and polarisation of views has also intensified. Experts are also seen as being out of touch with the ground, perpetuating ideologies of the elite. On the other hand, the pandemic will also form a shared memory that can strengthen social solidarity. He raised the question about which path Singapore might take moving forward. He also argued for the need to co-create with the public for the creation of policies, and that Singapore should have the gumption to move forward together.

Discussion and Q&A

Mr Fernandez raised the question of what 2021 would look like and if it would be different from 2020. How would Singapore reset? Minister Wong said that a major difference was the arrival of vaccines to help tackle the virus. On resetting, the pandemic accelerated existing trends of digitalisation, geopolitical tensions, and rising inequality. It was pointed out that there would be a change in working, to more remote working. There may be fears of Singapore being less relevant as a hub, he added.

A participant asked about finding a balance between keeping an open economy and controlling in the number of COVID-19 cases, referring to the recent surge in imported cases. Minister Wong said that rates have gone up due to the increased prevalence rate around the world. There were safeguards in place to prevent a spread of cases in the community, such as pre-departure tests before travellers enter Singapore.

Participants asked questions about diversifying the education system in Singapore to include other streams like commerce, or to also teach other soft skills beyond the hard skills of math

and science. Currently, there were only an arts or science streams in junior colleges with limited space for other interests like commerce. A comment was made that junior colleges were for gaining knowledge while polytechnics were for more applied skills and preparation for the job market. He repeated the point that education did not need to be front-loaded and other skills and knowledge could be learned later in life, on the job or through further education. He also emphasised the need to lift every child. Currently, schools do not have subjects explicitly on soft skills and critical thinking, but such skills are taught indirectly through assignments and other school activities.



Caption for photo: Minister Wong responding to a question during the Q&A session.

A participant asked about inequality in Singapore, describing how the pandemic has raised awareness of vulnerable groups such as foreign workers. Minister Wong commented that the state was already conducting reviews on strengthening social safety nets, building new dormitories and improving the living conditions of workers. He noted that it was also about changing people's mindsets towards foreign workers.

Another question was raised on increasing salaries and adding value to jobs. Minister Wong described how more time was needed for perceptions of jobs and stereotypes of certain professions to change. There was also a need to redesign jobs and upskill workers to help them remain relevant and earn higher salaries.

A participant asked if being multi-racial and multi-religious was an issue for Singapore and if we are equipped to handle the changes to come in the future. While racism still exists in Singapore, Minister Wong said the situation was better than it was 20 years ago. We still need to work to improve on existing policies to bring a stronger union of people, he said. Policies

should not be regarded as sacred cows that cannot be changed. It is also important to ensure identity politics does not take root, he added.

Tasha Tan is a Research Assistant at the IPS Governance and Economy Department.

**IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of
IPS and Singapore Perspectives 2021:**



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