

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City Forum 1: Keynote Speech by Minister Ong Ye Kung — Cities, Countries and Resilience

By Eddie Choo



Caption for photo: Minister Ong Ye Kung giving his opening remarks

The opening keynote of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, held with an online audience, featured Mr Ong Ye Kung, Singapore's Minister for Health. The question-and-answer segment was moderated by Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Three Kinds of Cities

Minister Ong Ye Kung described three kinds of cities at different times and places, and what they represented. He shared about Jericho, one of the oldest human settlements dating back to 9,000 BC. Jericho represented how hunter-gatherers congregated in a close-knit way to build a city. He then described a next category of cities — political capitals that often combined the attributes of economic prosperity, that were defensible and the centre of political activity. The third category of cities includes the global cities of today, which form the key nodes in a globalised world.

For Minister Ong, Singapore has the qualities of each of the three cities. Singapore is a global city; without a natural hinterland, being connected to the world is the strategy for viability. Minister Ong likened Singapore to a smartphone, with several apps and essential services, making it hard to turn away from such appealing offerings.

From the examples of political capitals, Minister Ong pointed to the importance of governance. Singapore has developed good governance and public institutions. Governments today are concerned about issues of growth, inequality, redistribution and resource exploitation. A strong state is needed to reconcile the contradictions in these issues. Singapore also cannot afford the divisive politics seen in other countries, he added.

For him, the most crucial aspect of the ancient cities would be the example of Jericho — to have a sense sharing “a common fate and destiny.” Minister Ong pointed out that nation-building is an ongoing process and the “one united people” in the national pledge is an ideal to work towards. As people went through difficult circumstances together, a sense of togetherness might emerge and transcend social divisions.

Minister Ong ended his speech with how, at the Bicentennial Commemoration in 2019, people had chosen “self-determination” as the best descriptor of the “Singapore DNA”. He shared his thoughts about why Singapore exists and what makes a Singaporean: Singapore is an important node in a globalised world, connecting the East, the West, and across different parts of Asia, creating opportunities that transcend physical borders for Singaporeans for many generations to come. Singapore should continue to have public institutions to ensure justice, fairness, meritocracy, and transcend social divides, he said. People who call Singapore home would feel a sense of ownership towards Singapore, getting along with one another despite social differences.

Question & Answer

Dr Woo Jun Jie asked about the lessons that Singapore could learn from COVID-19 and the financial crises, and what might allow cities to rebound from them. Minister Ong noted that there would always be external shocks. Singapore is particularly vulnerable as a city-state. On the other hand, Singapore did have buffers from having a diverse economic base. Even if pandemics destabilise cities, cities are likely to endure if they can remain the hub of opportunities. The pandemic represents a rich learning experience, from which Singapore and many other cities are sure to learn.

A participant asked about balancing the needs of different groups of people and across different sectors. Minister Ong replied that as a global city and being subject to various external influences, effort would be needed for everyone to work and live together in harmony. The challenge is for people to feel confident and have a sense of ownership in Singapore. For Minister Ong, social integration and harmony are crucial, in which the state has a key role.

A participant asked about what Singapore’s competitive advantage might be going forward. For Minister Ong, Singapore does have a natural advantage being positioned in Southeast Asia between Northeast Asia and South Asia. On top of this geographical advantage, Singapore has been able to connect different cultures.

A participant asked about how might Singapore balance between the competing logic of being a global city and a country at the same time. Minister Ong said there were several principles to follow: rule of law, education, taxation, infrastructure, minimising corruption, and be plugged into global trade. There were also three major challenges to address — protectionism, inequality and climate change, that require a strong state. Minister Ong reiterated the point about being a close-knit people of strong mutual trust was important in managing these issues.



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

A participant asked about national identity and the government's role in identity formation. Minister Ong pointed out that Singapore is still "young", having achieved independence for just 56 years. Governance is crucial in enacting effective policies, sometimes forcing people to live together and go through common experiences together. He cited how the policies in addressing COVID-19 have to make sense. There was a similar question on identity, on how to engage major countries such as China and India without diminishing the Singapore identity. Minister Ong noted that in diplomacy, Singapore does not wish to choose sides between US and China. He noted that Singapore appreciates both systems. Dr Woo asked about the possible advantages of interacting as a city-state, based on the minister's experiences. Minister Ong described about how he was able to toggle between different cultures, from serving as a negotiator in the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, and while working on the Guangzhou Knowledge City project. He pointed out that bilingual policy and exposure to different languages in preschool are important.

A participant asked about the need to have a strong state and the necessity of a strong opposition. Minister Ong replied that due to Singapore's small size, it is not likely for very different political views to appear. There are various mechanisms for checks and balances; the public service was non-political, the judiciary system takes rule of law seriously, and other statutory bodies maintain the integrity of the system, with the political opposition being another factor.

The last question was about taking care of marginalised members in society. Minister Ong replied that inequality and social mobility are a priority for the government. Resources have been invested to uplift people and future generations as well. On the issue of migrant workers, the focus is on reforming industries and improving living conditions. Part of this is also about moving with society in terms of their social attitudes because different generations have different perspectives.

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