



Living and Breathing Singapore: Closing Remarks at the IPS Singapore Perspectives Conference, 17 January 2011

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A range of important issues and a diverse set of perspectives on each of them have been discussed by both the speakers and participants at this conference focused on fostering a more inclusive society in Singapore.

As it has been said, 'where you stand, will depend on where you sit'. What resonates with you will be shaped by what you do, the sector you are from, and who you are. The best that I can do in trying to draw out some key conclusions at this conference is to share with you what I take away from it.

Let me begin with the context for today's conference. First, we find ourselves in a global city, and the speakers accepted that as the starting point of the discussion. Nobody disputed that. However, as one speaker, Mr T. Sasitharan as well as keynote speaker Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng have suggested, the challenge is – how do we make a global city a home? How do we make it a place with a soul? If it were a place without a soul, nobody would want to be here, and nobody would want to stay. Mr Sasitharan said that something to the order of a thousand people a year leave our shores. These may be the young, the talented and others we know less about.

What makes this such a challenge? First, Mr Janadas Devan talked about how our unnatural birth as an unintended nation makes this difficult. Second, the destruction of historical markers also makes it difficult to have a sense of place and identity. As one participant put it, his father could no longer recognise Singapore as he was being driven around; he did not know what the father was going on about whereas his son's life revolved around the Apple iPad. We do not

have enough to root us to the geography and the historical legacy of this place, and we do not have enough to string one generation of citizens to the next. Third, we have the problem of economic globalisation and with it, the negative effect of wage disparities where we see wage levels being driven down at the bottom level of the labour market. Of course, we have heard of the many policies that have been devised to mitigate that but it is truly not an easy problem to deal with. These are the reasons why it is particularly difficult to make Singapore an endearing home.

What do we do then? If there was the time, I would ask you to close your eyes and imagine that you were not where you are today or who you are today, but a parent of a special needs child, a resident of a one-room flat, someone who is an older worker, struggling to make ends meet. If you went through that thought exercise and imagined yourself in one of these positions, would you feel that society is a just and fair one; that it is one that has included you into, not a global city, but a home? This process of introspection or reflection that Kok Heng Leun talked so profoundly about, is not something that you have to wait to get to the theatre to do. It is something that you can do every day. And I think Mr Yam Ah Mee has highlighted to us how an organisation like the People's Association is constantly trying to expose us to or enable us to interact with who we think is 'the other'. But, it is not 'the other'. It is our neighbour. It is our neighbour living in close geographical proximity since Singapore is so small. Therefore, do we have any excuse for not understanding? Do we have any excuse for not 'closing our eyes' to ask ourselves: what if the shoe were on the other foot?

In addition to that introspection, I was deeply impressed by Dr Woffles Wu's catalogue of the creative talent that Singapore is built on. What it means is that we are not alone. Many others have struggled before us. His stories spoke to me about the spirit of self-belief on the ground. One thing we can do apart from more abstract thought exercises is to write the stories not just about say, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, who is about to launch yet another book about his thoughts on Singapore, but complement that with much more effort to compile the personal stories of the people who have moved out of a one-room flat; the beneficiaries of Pathlight School for autistic children run by speaker Ms Denise Phua, of which I am one; the croupier who has now doubled her pay by working at the casino cited by Mr Ong Ye Kung, who closed the first session at today's conference.

With that, we will better understand what makes Singapore different and special. Even if one were to be born in a one-room flat today, you will have a reason to hope, a basis for self-belief. Accompanying that, you will find that there are state policies, business people with that sense of corporate social responsibility and civil society activists who will provide that extra help so you can achieve a decent livelihood and even social mobility. So these are deep personal processes that we need to take the time for...we just need to look at who our neighbour is.

When we do that, we might find the answers to some of the questions that have not yet been fully addressed today: first, looking at our poor, the people who are squeezed in the middle (people who are not poor enough to be helped by current social assistance schemes and yet not rich enough to have sustainable livelihoods) as cited by Mr Raja Segar, or the people who are disadvantaged. Do they have enough help from us today whether at the government level, from civil society, or the businessmen who pay their daily wages? These were issues raised by Ms Sylvia Lim, Dr Lai Ah Eng, and many participants. Have we done enough to make Singapore an inclusive society for them?

Second, do we or do we not have a soul? If we have the stories, I am certain that the sense of soul will start to arise. I leave it to the Heritage Board, the journalists, the artists, and literally, the grandchildren of the people who have built Singapore brick-by-brick to write and share them.

Another question we do not yet have a good answer for: Is there space for political diversity, and even political dissidents in Singapore? Mr Sasitharan told us that he has remained in Singapore, not because he believes that the country has a soul but because he is fighting to forge a soul. He said that the starting point cannot just be about what he has done or is doing, but that it must include the stories of the late opposition politician Mr J. B. Jeyaratnam, the ex-ISA detainee Ms Teo Soh Lung, and the late playwright Mr Kuo Pao Kun. That may be the frontier of how far we have to go to develop an inclusive society by Mr Sasitharan's reckoning.

When we do that, we will also begin to understand the place of foreigners in Singapore today. According to the 2010 Census, 64% of the total population in Singapore is made up of citizens, but even that does not account for how many within this group are people who are local-born, or how many of them are like Dr Ori Sasson - new immigrants. If we develop our sense of soul we may better understand the human spirit that drives foreigners here...that drove our ancestors here. It also means that we will be humble and we will find our common humanity. As Dr Wu

pointed out, as we move from Third world to First, we must remind ourselves to resist the temptation to become arrogant, condescending and 'kiasu'.

So those are the tough questions that remain unanswered because they need to be answered by you, the individuals at this conference. This needs to be done through your own personal process of introspection. Society will be informed and shaped by the choices you make.

Finally, what can we do? First, I would say that we should begin to invite everyone to share their 'grandfather stories', the 'Tan Ah Teck' stories. Many of them deserve to be recorded and circulated. In this Internet Age, we can create many portals where these can be shared and discussed. We can also include the stories that Mr Hassan Ahmad of Mercy Relief has shared with us to illustrate the generosity of the Singapore Spirit.

Second, as we arrive at the point where we understand the Singapore Spirit and celebrate it, a sense of service will follow. If we experience that change in the 'chambers of our hearts' as Ms Phua put it, that desire to serve will flow. As one minister said in Parliament recently, it is very difficult to mandate a love for one's parents and yet, this government tries. We know that that is not the solution. It begins in the heart.

When do we arrive? There is a lot of talk about the relevant 'key performance indicators' for volunteerism, philanthropy, a caring community and the acknowledgement, for some, that we do have a soul. Well, the only thing I can say is that 'what can be counted is not always valuable; what is valuable cannot always be counted'. So if we have arrived, we will only be able to feel it, share it and spread it. With that, hopefully, we will become a great little nation.



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