SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES 2014
Differences

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OPENING REMARKS

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28 January 2014

Exactly 195 years ago today, Stamford Raffles first stepped foot on Singapore. In the two centuries since, we have had quite a few disturbances, most recently the riot in Little India. But if I were to ask you, which was the worst riot in modern Singapore's history, what would be your answer?

The 1964 Chinese-Malay riot? How about the Hock Lee Bus Strike in 1955 or the Maria Hertogh riot of 1950?

Eighteen people were killed in the Maria Hertogh riot, four in the Hock Lee Bus Strike, and 36 people in 1964.

In terms of casualties, the worst riot in Singapore's history occurred just 35 years after the founding of modern Singapore in 1854, 160 years ago. More than 400 people were killed in that riot which lasted for 10 to 12 days. And who were the combatants in that riot? Malays and Chinese? No. Indians and Chinese? No again. Foreign guest workers who had too much to drink? Definitely not. Apart from a few thousands of Malays, everyone here then was by definition a "foreign worker".

The combatants were Teochews and Hokkiens. Yes, there was a time when they did not like each other. According to the account in Charles Burton Buckley's

invaluable *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, the background to the conflict was the refusal of the Hokkiens "to join in a subscription to assist the rebels who had been driven from Amoy by the Imperial China Troops". But astonishingly enough, the match that lit the conflagration was a dispute between a Hokkien and a Teochew "about the weight of a catty of rice which the one was selling the other". One fellow tried to cheat another, and 10 to 12 days later, more than 400 people were dead.

I recall this history both for its intrinsic interest — there was indeed a time in Singapore when Teochews and Hokkiens considered themselves different "countrymen" — as well as to illustrate how very mobile *difference* (the title of this conference) is. There are always differences. We are human, therefore we are different. We are human, therefore we judge and make distinctions among people, and we categorise, divide and slot them. But the differences that we choose to emphasise at any one time are never stable. Differences differ over time and space.

Take colour, for instance. For centuries in Europe and the Mediterranean world, from the Hellenic period to the early Middle Ages, there was hardly any colour prejudice. And then you got a whole slew of figural associations drawing sharp distinctions between white and black: White meant "saved", black meant "damned". And so on. Today, colour prejudice is regarded as stupid in most advanced economies, and few if any among the educated — in this audience, for instance — would openly admit to having colour prejudices.

Or take the question of slavery: for centuries, for thousands of years actually, slavery was taken for granted in almost every civilisation known to us. Pericles and Plato, Cicero and Caesar — very different individuals with very different world-views — all took it for granted that the Hellenic and Roman civilisations could not be sustained without a large slave population. The slave trade was abolished in Britain only in 1807, and slavery itself was not abolished in the British Empire till 1833. It ended in the United States only in 1865 after a bloody civil war. Today, we not only find slavery abhorrent; we are also uncomfortable with sharp disparities of income and wealth.

Consider the differences that have racked humanity: slavery and colour prejudice, racial and religious prejudices, the pogroms and Holocausts to which Jews were subjected, the genocides of native populations in the Americas, the horrifying religious wars of Europe, the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, the deprivation of Palestinians of a homeland, to mention just a few examples. When you consider these examples of difference, including from our own history, we understand what

moved James Joyce, the great Irish writer, to observe: “history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”. The operative phrase is “*trying* to awake”, for the persistence of “difference” implies we will forever be awaking. Even in Singapore, we have always been plagued with questions of identity and difference. Who are we? Where might we go? Who is “not us”?

I myself was born a British subject, became a Malaysian briefly and then a Singaporean at the age of 10. My father was born a British subject, was subjected to Japanese rule for three years, became a Malaysian for six years and then became a Singaporean at the age of 46. He obtained his IC very late in life, like everyone else in his generation.

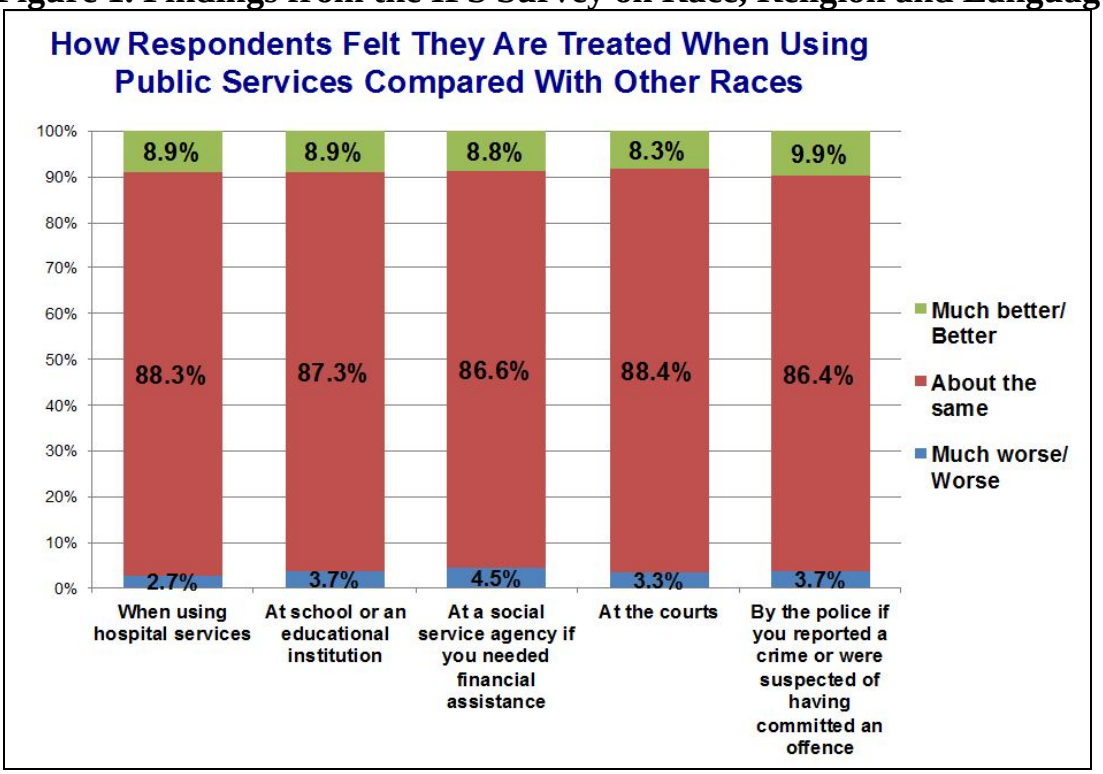
I remember singing *God Save the Queen* in kindergarten, then *Majulah Singapura* in primary one, then *Negaru Ku* from primary three to five, and then back to just *Majulah Singapura* in primary six.

Perhaps inevitably, given these memories, I have a greater sense of the incompleteness of identity, of having to exist amongst incommensurable pluralities, than someone born after 1965.

Indeed I am surprised at the speed, the thoroughness even, with which we have overcome primordial differences of race, religion and language. History in this regard is a nightmare from which we have substantially — not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially — awoken.

Take a look at Figure 1, which is a finding from the IPS “Survey of Singaporeans’ Attitudes on Race, Religion and Language”.

Figure 1. Findings from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language



More than 85 per cent of the 4,000 odd respondents we interviewed said they did not think they were treated differently on account of their race in hospitals, schools, at public counters, in courts or by the police. Significantly, this figure did not differ when we looked at the responses of minorities to this question, compared to the Chinese. Some might say it is to be expected that Chinese Singaporeans would not think they were treated differently on account of their race when using public services. But we found that Malay and Indian Singaporeans too felt the same way. The public sphere in Singapore, what we sometimes refer to as the "common space", is remarkably free of racial or religious prejudice. We are "one people, regardless of race, language or religion".

Ponder for a moment how extraordinary this is: Take the police, a target of suspicion among minorities in many countries, including the United States and Britain. Los Angeles erupted in riots in 1992 after LAPD officers were caught on video beating up a black man, Rodney King. But in Singapore, more than 85 per cent of our minorities believe as a matter of course the police would treat them the same way as they would treat the majority. This is something we can take immense pride in. But remember, it did not happen by accident. We cannot take this for granted.

As Figure 2 shows, we are not always "one people, regardless of race, language or religion" in the private sphere.

Figure 2. Findings from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language

How Comfortable Respondents Are With Different Racial Groups (In the Private Sphere)

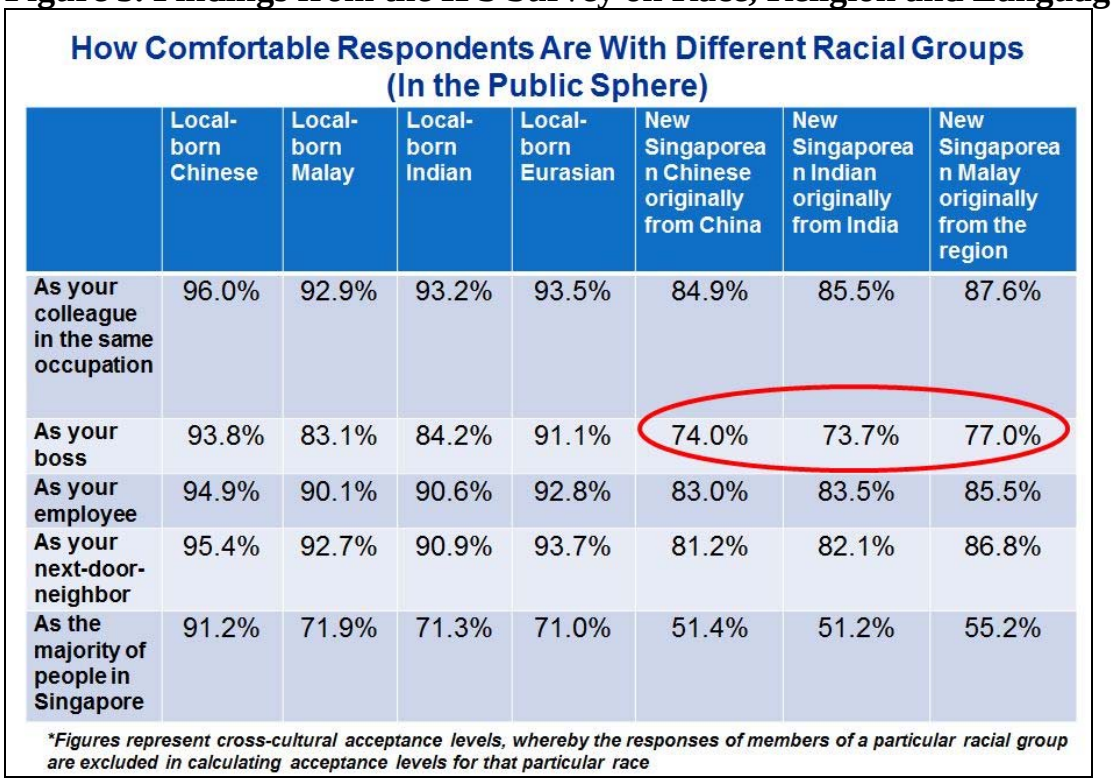
	Local-born Chinese	Local-born Malay	Local-born Indian	Local-born Eurasian	New Singa-porean Chinese originally from China	New Singa-porean Indian originally from India	New Singa-porean Malay originally from the region
Spouse	61.0%	35.1%	36.6%	55.5%	47.6%	32.9%	36.0%
Brother/sister-in-law	71.0%	55.1%	55.7%	69.2%	58.4%	48.7%	53.8%
Close friend	91.5%	84.7%	83.0%	85.5%	77.4%	74.6%	78.1%

**Figures represent cross-cultural acceptance levels, whereby the responses of members of a particular racial group are excluded in calculating acceptance levels for that particular race*

The first column shows non-Chinese who would be comfortable with a local-born Chinese as spouse, brother- or sister-in-law, close friend; second column, the non-Malays who would be comfortable with a local-born Malay for a spouse, brother- or sister-in-law. And so on. As you can see, all things are not equal. And as you can see, the proportions drop further for new Singaporeans from China or India. This is true even for friends.

Which brings me to my next point. As a result of immigration, especially among Chinese and Indians, the divisions *within* each race are now greater than the differences *between* the races. Local-born Chinese feel far more in common with local-born Malays and Indians than they do with ethnic Chinese from elsewhere. Even if they are ethnically the same, *they* are not *us*. This is a point underlined in Figure 3, which shows comfort levels with new Singaporeans from China and India as one's boss, neighbour or employee. There is a lower comfort level for new Singaporeans than for local-born Singaporeans of whatever race in those relationships.

Figure 3. Findings from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language



How Comfortable Respondents Are With Different Racial Groups (In the Public Sphere)

	Local-born Chinese	Local-born Malay	Local-born Indian	Local-born Eurasian	New Singaporean Chinese originally from China	New Singaporean Indian originally from India	New Singaporean Malay originally from the region
As your colleague in the same occupation	96.0%	92.9%	93.2%	93.5%	84.9%	85.5%	87.6%
As your boss	93.8%	83.1%	84.2%	91.1%	74.0%	73.7%	77.0%
As your employee	94.9%	90.1%	90.6%	92.8%	83.0%	83.5%	85.5%
As your next-door-neighbor	95.4%	92.7%	90.9%	93.7%	81.2%	82.1%	86.8%
As the majority of people in Singapore	91.2%	71.9%	71.3%	71.0%	51.4%	51.2%	55.2%

**Figures represent cross-cultural acceptance levels, whereby the responses of members of a particular racial group are excluded in calculating acceptance levels for that particular race*

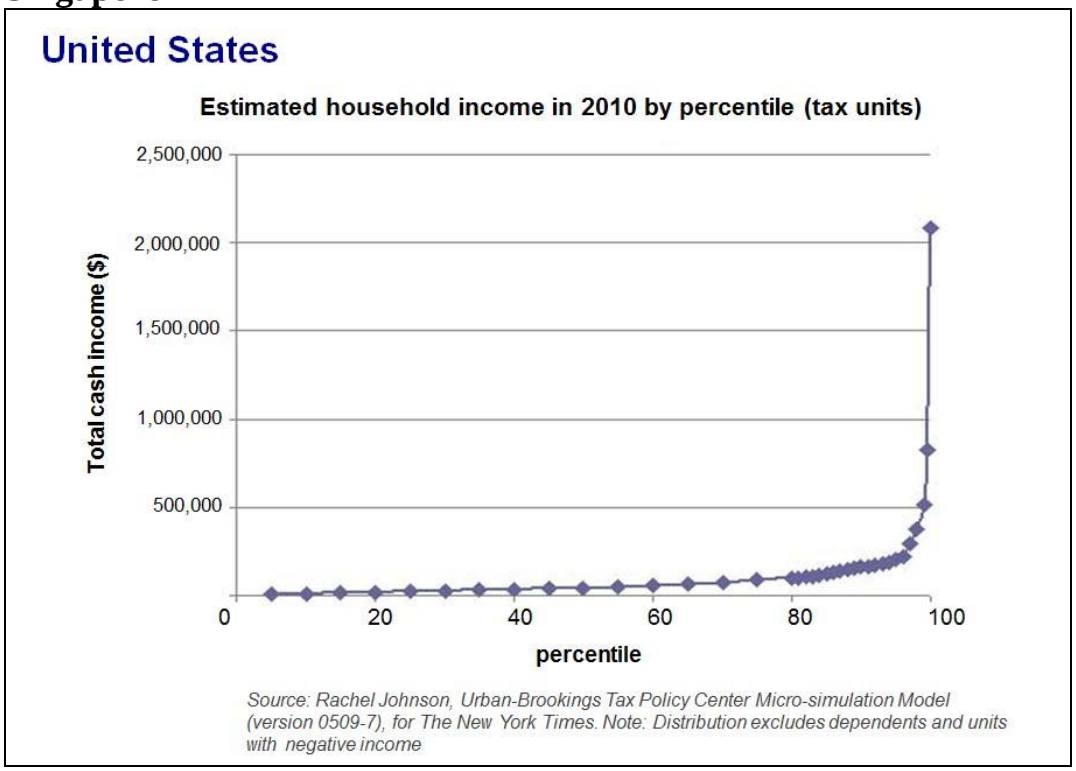
I will not speak much of this now, but I would be remiss if I did not sound a warning. The levels of hatred that incidents like the Anton Casey affair have unearthed are frightful. His remarks were certainly oafish, but whatever the instigation we should not countenance the violent expressions, including death threats, that were directed at him and his family. Hatred of the foreigner or xenophobia is re-shaping the politics of many developed countries, including in Europe where we are seeing the growth of extreme right, sometimes neo-fascist, parties. Do not assume this cannot happen here.

Singapore has long been filled with "foreigners". Our population grew mostly as a result of immigration from 1819. As you can see from Figure 4 below, the majority of people here were foreign-born before 1940 or so, when World War II made immigration difficult. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 further shut-off the immigration of ethnic Chinese to Nanyang.

The foreign-born in Singapore today includes non-resident foreigners – that is, work permit holders, domestic maids, employment pass holders, etc. We have to

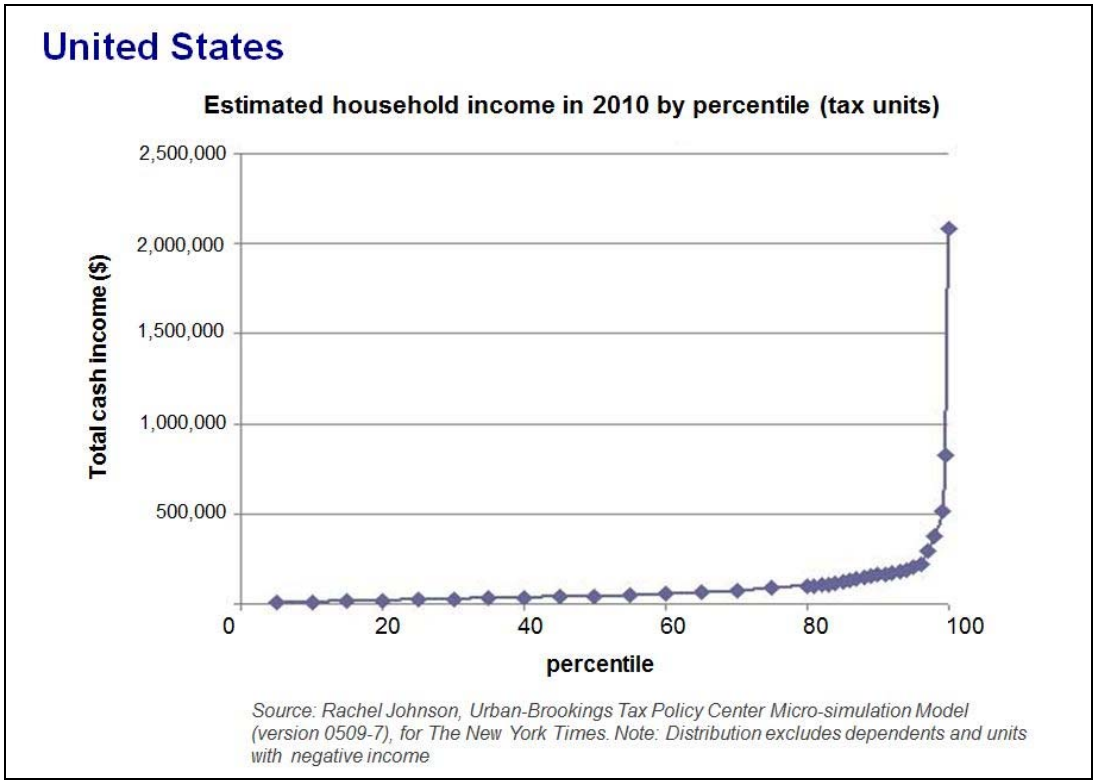
do a better job integrating them into society while maintaining our core identity as Singaporeans.

Figure 4. Proportion of local-born residents amongst overall population in Singapore



Finally, a word about income inequality and slowing social mobility. In my view, this is perhaps our most serious challenge now, and it is likely to worsen. Figure 5 shows the household income distribution in the United States.

Figure 5. Estimated household income distribution in the United States (2010)



The rest of the developed world is not as bad, but we are getting there. From the 5th to 90th percentile, there is a gentle slope upwards. From 90th to 95th percentile, you get a sharp 45-degree angle. And then from 95th to 100th, a straight line shooting up. This means that the percentage difference of income between 99th and say 95th percentile can be greater than the difference between the 90th and 50th. The inequality has become so pronounced, there is even income inequality within the top 1 per cent in the US. Those earning above US$300,000 are among the top 1 per cent in the US. But the average income of the top 1 per cent is US$717,000. And the average income of the top 1 per cent of that top 1 per cent -- that is, 0.001 per cent of households -- is US$27 million. At the very, very top, there are always a couple of people each year who earn in excess of US$1 billion.

The wealth gap is worse than the income gap. The top 1 per cent of Americans control 43 per cent of America's wealth. The next 4 per cent controls an additional 29 per cent. So you have the top 5 per cent of the country sitting on 72 per cent of the country's wealth.

You might wonder: why did we choose the theme of "Differences"? Because our society is changing. Singapore has become more diverse, and in ways with which

we are not as yet familiar or comfortable. To talk about difference is to talk about ourselves. It is the most important conversation we can have among ourselves. For how else can we understand each other, appreciate each other, or learn what binds us? *E pluribus unum* — "from many, one". And "one" precisely because we are many. One, yet many; many, yet one.

Becoming a Singaporean, being a Singaporean, is not easy. It is hard work. As S Rajaratnam famously put it: "Being a Singaporean is not a matter of ancestry. It is (a matter of) conviction and choice". You have got to want this bad. You have got to believe that there is something more than what we each brings to the table: our particular racial identities, our separate cultures and nationalities, our differences. And you have got to believe that *more* encompassing our *different* identities is not a matter of subtraction, but addition; enlargement not contraction; more not less.

We became independent because we believed that was possible. We chose this more difficult, nobler path. If we could have been satisfied with less, there need not have been Separation. We wanted a more perfect society, a fairer and more just nation. We have come this far. We can go further.