



**YOUNG
SINGAPOREANS
CONFERENCE**

Welcome Remarks

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I don't believe in the title of this conference "Are Young Singaporeans Happy?" I think they're not and they never will be. Even when you are older you won't be happy. Happiness is a rarity, that's the truth. Prof Lily Kong suggested some time ago that we should have a happiness index, to capture the happiness and wellbeing of Singaporeans – I think it is a pipe dream. Most of you would know the United States Declaration of Independence, which says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". I think the word "pursuit of happiness" is important – it is the pursuit, not the guarantee, not the possibility or even the reality of happiness. If you asked yourself: "How many people do you really know who are happy?", I think you would conclude the same.

Governments cannot make you happy. Almost everything you do in your life – getting an education, a house, nice clothes – are not going to make you happy. You can pursue happiness all you like, but attaining it is a very different matter. Happiness is quite different from being cheerful. I'm quite a cheerful person and I think lots of you are too, it's easy to be – you just need two drinks. But what is happiness? And why, as a general human condition, is it a rarity?

I happened to have written about this some years ago when I had a brain, so now I am going to plagiarise myself. "You've never had it so good" – This was a famous statement by former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and he told this to the British electorate in the late 1950s. They believed him at the time and they voted for him, resoundingly – he won a landslide victory in 1959. The second world war had just ended barely fifteen years before then, and people could still remember bombed out London. London in '57 and '45 was so obviously different, in living memory, so Macmillan was telling the truth, people realised it and he won. But if Harold Wilson had said the same in 1970 or if Mr Cameron did so now, few would have believed them, though both would have been telling the truth.

Progress is measurable and quantifiable. The statistics prove beyond a doubt that people in the industrialised world, which includes much of Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and Newly Industrialised Economies like Singapore and Taiwan are far better off than they were, not only

five or ten years ago, but better off than human beings have ever been in history. This is a fact. And yet why are so few of us happy? Why do so many of us go through life, fervently believing that if only things were a little better, the car a tad more posh, the house just a trifle bigger, the sofa just a little deeper and so on and so forth, we would really truly promise to be happy? And of course, when the car is more posh, the house and the sofa a little bigger, we will persist in our dissatisfactions. Each shiny and alluring material ceiling of existence, once it is attained, almost instantly turns into a tawdry carpet underfoot. You can get rid of the carpet and replace it with marble, but the marble too will in due course seem to turn into cheap linoleum. The cycle repeats itself endlessly and we will always end up where we began – in disappointment.

It is actually amazing to reflect, but I actually remember Singapore's political leaders, telling the young – when I was young – not to forget how much better off they were than their parents as far back as 1970, only five years after independence. Thirty years later, the politicians who were young then are telling you the same thing and meeting the same incomprehension: "Of course I'm not better off, of course I'll be satisfied if you politicians made my life a little better and of course I won't be when you do."

I think part of the reason none of us feels we are better off is because progress may be measurable, but it cannot be directly experienced. You cannot experience progress. It is possible of course, with the application of just a modicum of imagination to recall what it was like to live in a three-room HDB flat when one is now living in a five-room flat or a private condo but it takes effort. The past is always a passing experience. And what occupies the foreground of one's mind now is almost invariably the altogether imperious present and the bungalow I just saw in Queen Astrid Park. Imagining progress over a longer time frame, say a hundred or five hundred years is virtually impossible.

You can tell a Londoner for example, "Look, five hundred years ago, your sewage system consisted of pigs (dedicated to St Anthony, I don't know why), but they roamed the streets and chomped the mud." He might thank you for the information, but it wouldn't make an ounce of difference to his appreciation of the present. Just 150 years ago, all urban dwellers were dumping feces, rotting vegetables, dead cats, not to mention the foul and gory liquids from slaughterhouses into stagnant pools that stood in between houses. It was not till the end of Victoria's reign – just a hundred years ago – that all of London, rich and poor, got a sewage system. It is as recent as that. In 1905, one contemporary writer called it the greatest achievement of our time – the sewage system – that which we take for granted. It really was. The custom of women walking on the inside of pavements for instance, and men walking on the outside was because you risked something falling on your head and splashing on your clothes while walking on the outside. You didn't have a sewage system, or drainage, or dustbins – you simply dumped everything out of a window.

But would this achievement of the late 19th century strike a contemporary Londoner as great? Unless he is a sewage engineer, he wouldn't have given more than a moment's notice in his entire life to where his shit would go after he flushes. Where it didn't go a hundred years ago would be a matter of profound indifference. You could flush now, it disappears, end of story. For all intents and purposes, that describes our experience of progress – time flushes it from our

memories both personal and historical. Is it any wonder then that progress, especially over long stretches of time, has made nobody happy? It is altogether real – historians and economists can prove its existence –but we can't experience it. We can't taste it or feel it or see it, so obviously it has no power to move us.

Let me quote Greg Easterbrook, a writer of science who produced a book called "The Progress Paradox: How life gets better while people feel worse" a few years ago. He notes: "All told, except for the clamour and speed of society, our great grandfathers might say that the contemporary United States, Britain, Europe, France" – and Singapore for that matter – "is the realisation of utopia." The present that we are living in is indeed utopia, yet virtually nobody in these countries will feel that to be the case. The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as happy has not budged since the 1950s, though the typical person's real income has more than doubled during that period. Happiness has not increased in Japan or in Western Europe in the past half century either, though daily life in these two places has grown fantastically better. Mr Easterbrook cites numerous studies that the most efficacious way to gain happiness today is for people to actually focus on the present. Citing what he calls the emerging science of positive psychology, he presents evidence that people who make an effort to be optimistic, grateful, forgiving, public-spirited, self-sacrificing and kind are more likely to be happy.

It is astonishing that after all the progress we have achieved over the centuries, all of wisdom should boil down to something so simple even a child can understand it: Just try to be a little kinder to each other. You'll probably be much happier as a result than owning a Lexus or a nicer house. Recent research does show that people who spend their time serving others or working in communities or charities are actually happier than most other people. Happiness does not depend on what happens to you, but what you do for others.
