

A red dot can and must shape its future

In his fourth and final lecture on governance in a complex world, Institute of Policy Studies S R Nathan Fellow Peter Ho set out on Wednesday the reasons for his hope that Singapore can continue to rise above its size. Below is an excerpt of his speech.

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It was Singapore's great fortune to have had two remarkable visionaries in its short history of two centuries - Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, and Lee Kuan Yew, the father of independent Singapore.

The question is whether Singapore should tempt fate, and leave it to luck that another great man will emerge to lead the nation to even greater glory. Or whether we should create the conditions that will allow Singapore to extend its exceptionalism for as long as possible into the future.

I am of course inclined to the latter, not just because I believe that passivity opens us to greater turbulence, and increases the likelihood of strategic shock. It is also because I believe that action creates hope. Hope is the fuel that energises society, but hope also needs action to become reality. As Bill Willingham wrote in the Fables series, "Hope isn't destiny. Left passive, it's nothing more than disappointment deferred."

Our founding fathers' grand vision and great hopes for Singapore were always accompanied by action. This is the difference between hope and paranoia - the latter has a crippling capacity to cause all action to be for naught, while the former propels reasonable, thought-out action with measured optimism.

The central question that is posed in this evening's lecture is whether Singapore is merely a price-taker, or whether it has the ability to influence and alter the factors that shape the future?

A thread running through all these four lectures - and this evening's in particular - is a hopeful view that even small city-states can influence, shape, and even create, not just markets, but also their operating environment. It is a belief in this view that hope can be redeemed for even a little red dot like Singapore.

As a parting shot, let me outline two reasons for this belief. First, I do not want to trivialise Singapore's very real constraints. But these very constraints are our opportunities.

Singapore's constraints are its opportunities

Resource constraints matter more to us because we are small. We also have less room for systematic policy error in a world that is increasingly Vuca (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). But it is precisely our smallness that gives us agility, the ability to course-correct, and to iterate with more freedom and dexterity, than much larger entities. We have greater ease of coordination, to actualise the Whole-of-Nation approaches that I mentioned in my first lecture,

since we can actually galvanise society within our small space. We have greater ease of implementation, and great ability to test, iterate, experiment and prototype, because we do so within limited geographical bounds. And as a small state, we have greater ability to course-correct if we happen to embark on policy at scale that turns out to have been wrong or misguided.

Second, we should remember that responding to complexity, uncertainty and accelerating change are not alien to us. It is in our very DNA as a country, and rooted in our origins both as a sea port founded by Raffles and as a nation led by Lee Kuan Yew and the other founding fathers.

No one expected us to survive but we did. We defied rules, expectations, stereotypes and existing categorisations when we eschewed import substitution, courted multinational corporations and embarked on multicultural meritocracy when most of our neighbours were mercantilist and communalist. Both Goh Keng Swee's vision of a thriving open economy and S. Rajaratnam's vision of being "Singaporean by choice and by conviction" were audacious, reflecting a unique brand of gung-ho political entrepreneurship. My belief in the redemption of hope should not be seen as something new to Singapore. It is within each of us, and with a little effort, we can reclaim it.

Of course, there are conditions attached. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong alluded to one of them when he spoke of his wish for a sense of "divine discontent", which I take to mean never being satisfied, never being complacent, that we have arrived.

Of course, it is hard to change the identities that we are familiar with - who we are, where we are, and what is within influence. Yet changing identities is part of what it means to grow.

You are not the same person that you were a decade ago, and hopefully you are the better for it. The winds of change provide an opportunity for us to reinvent ourselves.

We need courage and imagination. Courage to change the identities with which we have grown comfortable with, to rewrite the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves, and imagination to come up with different identities. We should not feel that our success in future is derived from what we are today. If we can achieve such courage and imagination, then there is a basis to hope for a better future that is yet to exist.

This courage and confidence to embrace changes and opportunities together as a nation rest on our sense of shared agency, values and destiny - a shared future. A key source of Singapore's strength has always been our people's trust in fair competition and just reward for effort and achievements, compassion for the unfortunate, and a restless yearning for continuous progress. The points on trust and compassion bear emphasising. These have to be carefully fostered by the leadership because, without them, it would have been impossible for our leaders to forge consensus on far-reaching policies and tough trade-offs between different priorities, interests and groups.

From this interplay between internal hope and external forces of change, combined with vision and good governance, the future - our future - will emerge. As the 13th century Persian poet

and scholar, Rumi, memorably wrote, "The garden of the world has no limits, except in your mind."