

Framing small issues within the big picture

Govt should accept that people have different perspectives and roles

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Last week, as part of an Institute of Policy Studies conference on civil society, Foreign Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam held a dialogue with an audience of veteran activists and thinkers.

In his first answer, he expressed dismay at the “navel-gazing” that was going on on issues of “secondary importance”.

In contrast, topics of fundamental, primary significance – such as Singapore’s looming demographic crisis of an ageing population and low fertility – were not being adequately dealt with in the public discourse, he said.

The ageing problem throws up a whole series of huge challenges for Singapore, he added, like where manpower for the armed forces would come from, or how public housing would have to be redesigned for a grey population.

But these, he lamented, are not “sexy” topics that people at conferences like to talk about.

This answer came almost apropos of nothing; it had little to do with the question which had been put to him, which was on civil society’s room to manoeuvre.

When he finished talking, there was something of a stunned silence from an audience that had just been abruptly told that they had spent their day discussing matters of lesser importance.

But the unexpected dressing-down did not come from nowhere. It emerged from a perennial worry among Singapore’s political leadership that Singaporeans are, quite simply, losing sight of the big picture. They do not vocalise it so starkly that often, because it is a scolding exhortation of the sort that former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew used to specialise in, which now does not go down well with an irritable and newly assertive electorate.

But it is always there. In September, asked what attitude of Singaporeans’ he wished to change, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said he wished Singaporeans were not always so “preoccupied with their own problems”.

As an example, he cited how the collapse of a ceiling at a neighbourhood mall in Jurong made the front pages on the same day that 67 people were killed by terrorists in a mall in Nairobi, Kenya.

This showed how vulnerable countries still are, including Singapore, to acts of terrorism, he said.

To them, some of the issues that people moan and fret about are frivolous ones where neither lives nor livelihoods are at stake.

In prizing these topics over ones of long-term and international significance, Singaporeans are being parochial and inward-looking, they believe – the very qualities that make other cities and countries mediocre.

The key message here is that Singapore's success has been built on the understanding, if not support, of citizens for the strategic thinking and sacrifices necessary to prop up a little red dot. The weakening of this might spell the beginning of the end of the country's exceptionalism, they fear.

The Government is not alone in thinking this. It is de rigueur to hear from foreign expatriates that Singaporeans do not know how good they have it – it bewilders them to see a near national crisis erupt over train delays in which, as SMRT tried to remind everyone last year, no one died.

When I cover dialogues that politicians conduct in their constituencies, it is also common to hear people ask the Prime Minister to do something about the pigeons that linger outside their flats, or the broken ATM down the block.

It comes down to that constant existential tug-of-war between Global City and Small Country. Our leaders want us to be the driven, forward-looking, strategic thinkers that populate an ever-changing, fast-paced global city. But we are also just the ordinary folk who want to live comfortable lives in a caring community – and yes, worry about the neighbourhood mall ceiling caving in, the pigeons and the broken ATM.

To some extent, our politicians are taking aim at the wrong targets when they lament the navel-gazing and self-absorption that all Singaporeans engage in from time to time.

It is not the role of civil society activists, or the ordinary Singaporean, to think about over-arching policy problems like the ageing demographic, and what sort of whole-of-government policy solutions need to be put in place. They do not have the resources to scenario-plan, nor the inclination to – what fires up activists is single issues of passion that affect Singaporeans' lives here and now, issues such as poverty, gay rights, or the way the law circumscribes the space they can operate in.

It would be a bonus if activists dwelled on issues that the Government considers fundamental, but it is no failing if they do not. To fault them for it is to prize a strategic lens over an empathetic one, and to want doers to be thinkers instead. This is a hierarchy that reflects the People's Action Party's own value judgment.

Calling something “unimportant” is also a catch-all way to avoid conversations one does not want to have.

It may be a collective First World Problem, but it is only human for Singaporeans to care more about their own mishaps and inconveniences – dwarfed they may be by the world's.

To suggest that Singaporeans pipe down about their trivial problems, or go overseas to gain perspective, an oft-heard argument, is to deny people the right to experience their own reality on their own terms.

Sure, Singaporeans could be more resilient, but it is worth asking if they can reasonably be expected to be more resilient than they have been called upon to be.

My generation has experienced no war and little want. We could, in theory, be more aware of the vulnerability of the country and feel more keenly the competition at our doorstep. But there is perhaps an unbridgeable difference between knowing something in theory, and knowing it viscerally, and acting accordingly.

Still, this does not mean that the big picture cannot be kept in mind, even while fully immersed in one's own smaller life.

Here, we can all try a bit harder to see things the Government's way. For one of the crucial things that policymakers wished more Singaporeans would appreciate is how lucky they are that there is the luxury of navel-gazing, and the worst that has happened is a collapsed mall ceiling.

The bottom line is that Singapore faces its challenges from a position of strength thanks to geographic fortune that shields it from natural disasters, and more importantly, a legacy of forward-thinking and uncorrupt governance.

Despite the fever pitch that political debate can reach, that is the big picture that should frame everything else. Perhaps then our politicians will not feel so aggrieved that Singaporeans take their good fortune, including their Government, for granted.