

Intangibles underpin Singapore's success, says pioneer public servant Lim Siong Guan

Elgin Toh

The Straits Times, 13 September 2017

Singapore's success is built on intangibles such as honour and a drive to overcome its smallness, former head of the civil service Lim Siong Guan said in a lecture yesterday.

A continued emphasis on these same intangibles is the country's best hope in avoiding the decline as seen in many nations, he added.

On honour, he noted that Singapore's reputation for being trustworthy is crucial in its dealings with the world: "We are a country and a people who honour our word."

Internally, honour has also been critical, he said. "It is about Singaporeans honouring each other, appreciating our social differences, our diversity, and at the same time seeking strongly to maintain social harmony as a common good for all."

These two aspects of honour form a big part of the Singapore brand name, he added, noting that the London consultancy Brand Finance ranked Singapore as the top nation brand in 2016, ahead of Switzerland and Japan.

Mr Lim was giving the first of three lectures as the Institute of Policy Study's (IPS) fourth S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. Former S R Nathan Fellows include Mr Peter Ho, also a former head of the civil service, ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan and Banyan Tree executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping.

In his introduction of Mr Lim, IPS director Janadas Devan said he belonged to a "very select" group of pioneer public servants who are not as well-known as political leaders like Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Goh Keng Swee, but whose "contributions to Singapore are as great as those of the political leadership".

Mr Lim was permanent secretary in the defence, education and finance ministries. He had also been group president of sovereign wealth fund GIC.

Yesterday, he noted that when Mr Lee died in 2015, some associated the founding prime minister's legacy with the physical transformation of Singapore.

Mr Lim, a former principal private secretary to Mr Lee, felt the physical was not as important as the intangible, like a determination to overcome Singapore's smallness. This included refusing to be weak.

He recounted what Mr Lee taught him about dealing with foreigners: "Always look the foreigner in the eyes. Never look down... Conduct yourself as his equal."

Another way Singapore overcame its size was by leapfrogging the region and treating the whole world - and its bigger markets - as the Republic's economic hinterland.

Warning against complacency, Mr Lim also cited signposts of decline from an essay - The Fate Of Empires - by British historian John Glubb. Singapore would do well to avoid these markers, he said.

One marker is increasing self-centredness. "Many Singaporeans have possibly observed a decreased sense of public duty," he said, adding there is a growing "desire to grow and retain individual wealth".

Another is more talk, without corresponding action. He noted the "increase in discussions, debates and arguments, especially on social media, without a focus on action or leaving the action as something for others to do".

He warned against becoming a welfare state - also a Glubbian signpost of decline. This might begin as "collective responsibility" for the individual's welfare, but end up as "collective irresponsibility" owing to its spendthrift nature, he said.