

Keeping the Singapore Dream alive

The Straits Times, 10 April 2015

In the last two weeks, the unprecedented and spontaneous outpouring of grief and gratitude at the death of Mr Lee Kuan Yew has been a national catharsis. We have learnt that even in his passing, Mr Lee's final contribution was to bring all of us together in ways never done before, to realise that in our grieving, we rediscover our common identity.

But is it possible to more specifically define our identity, besides knowing that we have one? I jotted down a few sentences and asked some friends to identify the country which I described as follows:

We are an immigrant society, and therefore persistence and resilience are the hallmarks of our identity. We've been open to the world, but in recent years have turned more inwards and even somewhat hostile towards foreigners. We take pride in our egalitarian ethos, even though income inequality is worsening. We squabble among ourselves, but to foreigners we close ranks. We have a can-do attitude which can be perceived as being arrogantly proud of our exceptionalism. We tout our meritocracy as a core value even though it is starting to fray. Above all, we love to celebrate ourselves and our achievements, and how the best is yet to be.

Who are we?

THE Singaporeans I asked unanimously said, of course that's us, Singaporeans.

Interestingly, another group I asked replied: Of course, you're describing our USA and the values behind our American Dream.

So here you have two countries, worlds apart almost in every possible way, from population and geographic size to historical origins; from political and social culture to current and future challenges; and yet the American Dream and the Singapore Dream are almost interchangeable.

Upon reflection, that is not so strange. After all, once you strip a dream of its specific cultural context, many societies aspire to largely the same things in life. The common element between the American and Singapore dreams is simply that both societies are audacious, brash and young enough to believe that whoever you are, and wherever you come from, this is your land of opportunity. This is where you can achieve your personal and family dreams, and pursue a life of meaning and purpose.

But this is more the immigrant's dream of Singapore than the Singaporean's dream, simply because many citizens do not now feel that they can achieve anything if only they just tried. Yet it is crucial to Singapore's continuing survival and well-being to maintain, nurture and polish this dream, both in terms of keeping its borders open to the outside world, as well as maintaining social mobility within.

So, in tackling this final lecture, I want to ask a simple question: How do we maintain the Singapore Dream as a meaningful, purposeful aspiration for all Singaporeans for the next 50 years? What are the most critical things we must do to overcome future or already emerging challenges to this dream?

After some deliberation, I've consolidated the various challenges and must-dos into three major, overarching tasks. They are:

- First, to strengthen the cohesive diversity which underpins our identity, against a climate of increasingly narrow rigidity;
- Second, to improve social mobility and a culture of egalitarianism, in the midst of a fraying meritocracy and worsening income inequality; and
- Third, to build a collaborative governance style and an information-rich civil society.

Let me now deal with each of these.

Cohesive diversity

FIRST, strengthening cohesive diversity. Our immigrant origins have created mechanisms for harmonious racial and religious cohabitation, but the traditional fault lines, which were successfully held together, are facing unfamiliar, non-traditional pressures which may result in new cracks.

There is increasingly vocal social diversity from people of different LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) affiliations, or alternative family norms such as single or unmarried parents, or same-sex couples. In addition, there is intra-ethnic diversity from immigrants or foreign workers who may belong to the same race as defined by our traditional CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) categories - but hardly identify or socialise with each other. For example, new residents from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong all form their own cliques which also largely exclude Chinese Singaporeans. The same is true or even more fragmented for South Asians, whether foreign workers or new citizens.

At another level, the HDB heartland world-view, with its kopitiam and roti-prata stalls, is being assailed by the slick and slightly intimidating globalisation represented by Marina Bay Sands and the billionaires' cove in Sentosa. In other words, race and class and a consensus on social issues are becoming increasingly complex and intertwined in Singapore.

The average Singaporean is anxious and confused by this onslaught of what is becoming a divisive diversity. That anxiety - what social psychologists call cognitive dissonance when reality increasingly diverges from our expectations - arises when the traditional racial lens of CMIO or the traditional norms of heterosexual orientation no longer seem adequate to describe a rapidly changing Singapore society.

One way to resolve cognitive dissonance is to abandon our stereotyped presumptions and expectations and simply treat people as individuals and not categories. We should consciously blur or even abolish the CMIO model's simplistically rigid racial categories, and welcome the

multiple identities and more complex sub-ethnicities which are increasingly the real Singapore of today.

The CMIO model, created out of necessity in the aftermath of a racially charged road to independence, has helped to create common ground between those of different tongues and dialects, but it also has the effect of oversimplifying the diversity that is our social mix. How we define people often shapes how they behave, so the less we pigeonhole people, the more chances we have for a cohesive diversity. Just thinking about a post-CMIO model already seeds a future paradigm shift.

Under a post-CMIO model, people will have more time and space to replace old stereotypes with more nuanced complexities, reflected in more varieties of socio-ethnic identities. This is a strategic imperative not just for enriching the Singapore identity, but also to continually attract the world's best talent and make this island, in the words of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "the best city to live, work and play".

Another way to strengthen cohesive diversity is for the majority race in Singapore to consciously overcome what one insightful non-Chinese blogger has called the mindset of Chinese Privilege, which is the attitude of a majority race towards minorities where it does not see itself as racist but acts on assumptions which are based on privileges which only it can have as the majority race. It can manifest itself in small ways, such as speaking in the majority-race language even when foreigners are part of the gathering, or making jokes which are racial slurs but justifying them because they are light-hearted and not malicious.

A final building block for cohesive diversity is recognition of the marginalised people whom my research assistant Andrew Yeo compared to composer Claude Debussy's famous dictum that "music is the space between the notes", meaning that there is equal importance in what is unseen or unheard. It is the voices of the foreign worker, the single mum, and the many other silent spaces between our national notes which make our Singapore song complete and more interesting.

Even though they are neither citizens nor permanent residents, the 1.5 million "permanently transient" semi-skilled foreign workers and domestic helpers cannot be an invisible community overlaying the visible Singapore, with uneasy points of contact which can become flashpoints. A society measured by the height of its skyscrapers and size of its shopping malls is, in my view, the ultimate Dubai-style dystopia; far better that we measure ourselves by how we treat the marginalised and voiceless in our midst.

As the cacophony of strident voices increases in the future and the people in the silent spaces between the notes struggle to even make a small sound, we should not be worried, and should perhaps even pause to listen. It is just a new Singapore song in the making, not commissioned for a famous performer to sing, but created by the people themselves, from the ground up.

Social mobility

SECOND, improving social mobility and the egalitarian ethos.

The path to success in Singapore has largely been through academic merit in transparent national examinations.

But having already achieved 50 years of continuous growth from Third World to First, over time the Singapore model is in danger of being a static meritocracy, which sieves people based on only a narrow measure of capability in single snapshots of time - examination results basically - and from there on creates a self-perpetuating elite class. Ironically, the original social leveller and purest form of Singapore-style meritocracy - our education system - may perpetuate inter-generational class stratification rather than level the playing field. The warning signs are clear:

- Only 40 per cent of pupils in the most prestigious primary schools live in HDB flats, in contrast with 80 per cent of all primary school pupils residing in HDB flats.
- More than half of Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarship recipients live in private housing, compared with only 15 per cent of the general population. And 60 per cent of PSC scholarship holders come from only two schools - Raffles and Hwa Chong.
- Sixty-three per cent of university-educated fathers, 37 per cent of those with secondary school qualifications, and only 12 per cent of fathers with primary education or less, had children with university degrees.

No doubt, the index for social mobility is still higher in Singapore than in many other countries, including some of the famously egalitarian Nordic countries. This is comforting but no reason for complacency, especially against a background of worsening income inequality globally.

Some people have advocated that the way to redress structural inequality is to practise affirmative action for the disadvantaged group; for example, to give bonus examination points to any student whose parents did not attain university education. This would, however, be the start of an unending process of affirmative actions which will only demean and discredit our meritocracy in the long run. I believe that further reforms of the overall education system can promote social levelling without undermining either the principles of meritocracy or the academic rigour for which Singapore is well known. Some measures, for example, are:

- Ending pre-teen streaming and the PSLE, and having all schools teach children a continuous 10 years straight through to Secondary 4, so that less academic pressure early on in life allows more time for teachers to focus on the personal development of students, which has been found to have a great influence on later academic achievements.
- Giving admissions priority on the basis of distance from homes has to also be relooked, because the most prestigious and elite schools are also located in the most wealthy

parts of the island. The handful of top primary schools have five-year waiting lists and parents or their maids queue overnight to get a place for their children. When the PAP came to power, it took the then radical step of essentially nationalising the entire education system, to achieve its then socialist goals. Similarly, radical steps need to at least be discussed, if not adopted immediately.

- Replacing the rigid, narrowly directed Gifted Education Programme with a far broader, multifaceted programme which focuses on the special needs of all students, whether it be due to special talents in the arts or sciences or other academic areas, or special disabilities such as mild autism or dyslexia. There has been much talk that education must now aim to develop the full potential of every student. It is time to walk the talk. Schools in a geographic cluster can specialise in their own areas of excellence, and serve special-needs students from that cluster, whether the special needs are special talents or disabilities.
- Replacing or at least augmenting the traditional A-level results with a specially crafted Singapore version of the Scholastic Aptitude Test or SAT which, as the name implies, seeks to measure the inherent aptitude of a person for critical thinking, rather than just exam performance.
- Examples of other easier and simpler programmes include: providing student counselling services in every school, because disproportionately more students from lower-income and less-educated families have emotional and domestic problems which inhibit their academic performance; or introducing volunteer tuition services by university students for secondary schools, as part of mandatory community service modules in all our universities, which will help students who cannot afford expensive private tutors.

Yet another idea, which is already starting to happen, is the rotation of top principals and teachers among neighbourhood schools. All these and other piecemeal measures with the same intent can add up to create a powerful overall impact.

Besides reforms to the education system, the civil service needs to also lead in social levelling. Recent announcements that non-graduates will be allowed to fill positions previously open only to graduates is a good start. But only if the most elite cadre of civil servants - the Administrative Service - changes its recruitment criteria to replace academic pedigree with psychometric and other aptitude tests which create an open and level playing field, can we start to have a continuous, dynamic meritocracy where one's destiny is not already largely determined at 12 years old, reinforced at 18, and virtually fixed at 22 years old.

Collaboration and civil society

THIRD, building a collaborative governance style and an information-rich civil society.

When I first entered university some 40-plus years ago, the target of student activism was an obscure Latin expression, "In Loco Parentis" - which is a legal doctrine whereby certain institutions such as universities actually assume the legal powers of a parent.

The Singapore state has not assumed the same level of paternalism over its citizens, but it has come close, making decisions which might elsewhere be individual responsibilities. While this has been widely accepted in the past 50 years, a paternalistic governance culture may need to change to a collaborative model in the future. This is already happening with the abundance of debate about directions facing Singapore in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era. However, such a governance culture of participatory democracy can work only if the institutions of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making.

For that to happen, civil society players need access to that lifeblood of robust discussion: freely available and largely unrestricted information. Information is the oxygen without which civil society players suffocate in their own ignorance and resort only to repetitive drumming of their causes, but without the ability to really engage with their own members, with other players, or with government. Access to information is an existential imperative for civil society to perform its functions responsibly and knowledgeably.

The currently unequal access to information is called "information asymmetry" by academics, and one of the reasons all governments are averse to sharing information is not just because of the sensitivity of secrets, but because information is power, and asymmetry between seeker and owner of information shapes their relative power relationship.

To rectify this imbalance, some civil society activists have called for a Freedom of Information Act or FOIA. This would require open access to and declassification of all government archives after 25 to 30 years, and almost unfettered access to information about oneself at any time.

So should Singapore simply adopt a FOIA? Just joining the bandwagon is not by itself meaningful. Of the 99 countries which have FOIA legislation are such beacons of liberal democracy as Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, China, Pakistan, Thailand, Russia, Yemen, and all the "Stan's" of Central Asia. The reputations of these countries for good governance are so questionable that one must wonder whether their own FOIA are actually devices to smoke out and track potential dissidents.

Of course, most Western liberal democracies do have effectively functioning FOIA, but while it has redressed information asymmetry, the downside is that it also exacerbates the adversarial relationship between civil society and government. While this may be the underlying basis for a check-and-balance system in Western political cultures, it does not encourage a collaborative governance style. It can even be dysfunctional for the conduct of diplomacy and general statecraft, which must often require total confidentiality between parties.

One possible way to redress information asymmetry within a collaborative governance culture is to legislate a Code on Information Disclosure which is not legally enforceable but morally binding, and sets out the principles by which ministries can or should not protect information, and the importance of open sharing of information for a civil society.

Ministries would be required to employ independent access-to-information officers such as retired judges, to evaluate and give written replies to information requests. Media attention and

public pressure would serve as leverage in cases of non-compliance with the code, or where there is controversy. Hong Kong, I understand, has a system similar to what I have described.

But with more information equality, there will inevitably be more and different interpretations of data, of events, of history itself. Official narratives, such as the controversies surrounding Operation Coldstore, will be questioned and debated by generations of new historians.

The young possess a certain oddly dispassionate objectivity towards history, compared to many of us for whom the past 50 years were filled with deep emotion and very personally partisan perspectives. The young don't take our version of history as the gospel truth; they want to discover the facts themselves and make up their own minds. This is healthy, because the attribute of critical inquiry and continual search for the truth will stand the next generation in good stead as they transit to becoming the leadership generation.

Rather than consider such re-assessments of history to be revisionism which has to be prevented, we should accept that information equality will inevitably lead to such questioning. But we should also have confidence that history, through the collective wisdom of time and millions of people past, present and future, will accurately and fairly assess the enormous contributions and legacies of our past leaders, including Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

We should trust in our young people enough to allow space for them to develop their own opinions. In the end, future leaders of Singapore should be bold enough to own the future rather than defend the past.

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The writer is the first Institute of Policy Studies S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. This essay is based on his fifth and final lecture on Singapore: The Next 50 Years - Society and Identity, which he delivered yesterday. He will address the issue of creating identity in a second essay from the lecture.