

Singapore does not need sycophants. It needs loving critics

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It is no secret that Singapore is preparing for a general election. After this election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said that he will pass the baton of leadership to a new prime minister.

I would respectfully propose the following agenda for the fourth Prime Minister's consideration.

First, keep the country safe. Attacks on Singapore can come from the land, sea, air and cyberspace. Cyber attacks can be as lethal as bombs, bullets and missiles.

We must also guard against a new form of attack -- the use of social media to spread false information, sow discord and influence the outcome of elections.

Second, maintain our precious achievements of racial and religious harmony. We should investigate allegations by members of our minorities of discriminatory hiring practices by the majority. We can and should do more to help the Malay community catch up with the Chinese and Indian communities. The Malays are under-represented in our elite schools, in our universities, in our professions, in the senior levels of our civil service and Singapore Armed Forces. There is no Malay Permanent Secretary or General.

Third, we should make Singapore a more equal society.

We should have the courage to follow international practice and draw the poverty line at 50 per cent of the median income, which would be \$2,200. MOM (Ministry of Manpower), NTUC (the labour movement) and the Singapore National Employers Federation should cooperate to raise the wages of our workers above the poverty line. We should be more generous in helping the over 100,000 households living in absolute poverty.

Absolute poverty means that they cannot afford to buy the basic necessities of life. I refer readers to the Singapore Management University's publication, *A Handbook On Inequality, Poverty And Unmet Social Needs In Singapore (2015)*. This population includes the elderly poor, the disabled and single mothers. It is a disgrace that such poverty should exist in one of the richest countries in the world.

Singapore used to be a classless society. Today, Singapore is not a classless society. Singapore is divided by wealth, income, education, profession, place of residence and even the school one attended.

According to the United Nations, Singapore is the second most unequal high-income society in Asia, after Hong Kong.

Fourth, we should make Singapore a more caring and inclusive society. One neglected group is the disabled.

According to the International Labour Organisation, only 5 per cent of our disabled are employed. The Ministry of Manpower has said that the actual number is 25 per cent and not 5 per cent. In Australia and France, 40 per cent of the disabled are in employment. The truth is that in Singapore, the disabled feel that they are second-class citizens. Another group of citizens who feel marginalised is the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community. We should accept them as full members of our family and not discriminate against them.

Fifth, we must continue to grow our economy at a sustainable rate and in harmony with nature. I am confident that Singapore will succeed in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, because our schools, Institute of Technical Education, polytechnics and universities are world class. We are also reorienting our education system towards learning skills and not just book knowledge. The history of technology shows us that for every job destroyed, two new jobs will be created. The problem is the mismatch. Those who are laid off may not have the skills required by the new jobs. The government and employers must step in to help. We should not abandon the displaced workers.

Sixth, Singapore's economic policy is to lock our economy with those of the bigger countries, such as the United States, China, India, EU (European Union), Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

Singapore is also a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). A few days ago, Singapore concluded a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union. This policy is correct and it has expanded Singapore's economic space.

However, when we look at the world economic picture today, we see many negative developments: a trade war between the US and China, a smaller trade war between Japan and South Korea, the likely departure of the UK from the EU, without a withdrawal agreement and great turmoil in the Middle East. In the midst of this gloomy picture, there is a bright spot. That bright spot is Asean.

Asean is the world's fifth-largest economy. It has become a single market. It continues to grow at a steady pace. It is time for Singapore to elevate the importance of Asean in our economic agenda. We should invest more, trade more, manufacture more, build more in the Asean countries. We should encourage our students to learn an Asean language, such as, Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese or Thai. We should re-orient our school trips, internships, university exchanges towards Asean. We need a whole of country re-orientation towards Asean.

Seventh, Singaporeans used to be thought leader in the field of the environment and sustainable development. We have lost that lead to Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

The reason is that we have become timid and risk-averse. We should do more to promote the use of solar energy and the building of net zero energy buildings.

The NUS School of Design and Environment has shown us that this can be done. Singapore is a compact city. It is perfect for electric vehicles. Does Singapore know that by 2030, more than 20 cities such as London, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Mexico, Madrid, Barcelona, Brussels, Copenhagen, Auckland, Vancouver and the Chinese province of Hainan will ban all petrol-driven and diesel-driven vehicles? Shouldn't Singapore be on that list?

Singapore can be a leader in green technology and green finance. Climate change poses an existential threat to all of us. Let us all, government, business, civil society, individuals do our part to save our planet. Each of us can reduce our carbon footprint.

Eighth, I want to begin with a story. Mr Lee Kuan Yew once recalled that when Mr S. Rajaratnam went to see him and to propose the appointment of Mr David Marshall as Singapore's Ambassador to France, Mr Lee said, he almost fell off his chair. He told Mr Raja that David Marshall was their political enemy. He was eventually persuaded and David Marshall served as Singapore's Ambassador to France, with great distinction, for 10 years.

On the occasion of Mr Raja's 80th birthday dinner, Mr Lee Kuan Yew praised Mr Raja for his virtue of magnanimity in victory.

I would respectfully urge the Government to embrace Mr Raja's virtue. Guided by this virtue, the Government would not have banned Tan Pin Pin's film, To Singapore With Love or withdrawn the book grants from Sonny Liew and Jeremy Tiang. The contestation of ideas is a necessary part of democracy.

We should therefore not blacklist intellectuals, artists and writers just because they are critical of the government or hold dissenting views. We should welcome criticism as long as the critic loves Singapore and is not out to destroy Singapore. Singapore will languish if its lovers are uncritical and its critics are unloving. What Singapore needs is not sycophants but loving critics and critical lovers.

Conclusion

I have full confidence in the ability, integrity and commitment of our 4G leaders. I believe that they are both fighters and builders. We need our leaders to have both qualities because, as Professor S. Jayakumar, has pointed out in his book, Diplomacy, they will come under pressure from bigger countries.

Singapore may be a small country but our track record is that we cannot be bullied or intimidated. They will inherit from their predecessors a Singapore which is a great success.

However, what is already very good can be made even better. It is in this spirit that I respectfully put forward some ideas for the consideration of our Fourth Prime Minister.

Professor Tommy Koh, a veteran diplomat, is ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This article is adapted from a speech he delivered at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference on Oct 1.