

Singapore Governance in a Troubled Post-Brexit World

Gillian Koh

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A sense of social insecurity and ambivalence about immigration shaped the vote in the Brexit referendum. Many developed countries including Singapore are not immune from rising disillusionment with globalisation, compounded by periodic economic crises. As Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it in a Facebook post responding to the Brexit outcome, there is a growing disaffection worldwide with the Establishment. Leaders must address peoples' "needs for jobs and security, and a balance in immigration that preserves a sense of identity". How can Singapore pay heed to, and address, some of these trends?

First, through responsive governance. In Singapore, we have had equally heated debates about income inequality and immigration — from 2004, with discussions about Workfare as an ad-hoc form of income support for low-wage and low-skilled workers, to 2010 when the previous government-initiated economic review committee recommended tempering the reliance on foreign workers and focusing on productivity and innovation, to GE2011 and the tumultuous White Paper protests against the Government's proposed population policy.

Singapore leaders responded by redesigning public policy to foster inclusive growth, providing greater social assistance, ensuring social mobility is healthy among our most disadvantaged, and reducing the country's reliance on foreign labour. There continues to be government support for Singapore businesses to become labour-lean and innovative and for workers to improve their skills and stay employable.

Difficult choices were made, and the ongoing economic restructuring is painful. While some politicians and activists feel more should be done, the price is being paid to mitigate the backlash against globalisation, market capitalism and immigration.

The People's Action Party government says it takes the best policy ideas of the political right and left to build a broad centre – market-orientation with an active state to ensure that growth and business translate to real social development for citizens. Tax-funded redistributive policies and rising employer contributions to Singaporeans' Central Provident Fund accounts mean that the price for a happy society is being paid by all and the Government needs to keep these issues in view for a long time to come.

Second, engaging voters at a different level of rationality. In the days since the referendum, interviews with British voters revealed that they were neither irrational nor ignorant when casting their vote. They were certainly rational about their immediate pocketbook and job-related concerns, law and order, as well as "heartware" issues arising from their changing cultural landscape.

Singaporean voters are no different. The challenge is engaging them at a different level of rationality so that they appreciate with equal fervour the issues operating at the national, regional and global levels. Each operates with its own dynamic.

In our region, earlier generations of citizens and policy elites had a more visceral appreciation of the strategic political intent behind Asean than current generations do. Five states were added to it, with the last being Cambodia in 1999. There is an urgent need to reinforce the

Asean sensibility that there is strength in unity. By speaking in one voice, member states have the leverage and autonomy to determine their engagement of the major powers in the region, especially a rising China.

In Singapore, those still ambivalent about the size of the foreign workforce must see the tension between grassroots concerns about job insecurity and depressed wages and two other macro-level considerations. The first is whether we have the number of workers needed to achieve what we want in terms of building and manning our social infrastructure (the MRT, healthcare, eldercare and so on). The second is if having cheaper foreign low- or mid-skilled workers numbering above the close-to-full employment of Singaporeans keeps a lid on rising living costs.

Third, cultivating the “big citizen” mindset. Political leaders should not assume that citizens neither care nor have the same understanding as they do about the interplay among the local, national and regional. It is possible, however, that like those now suffering from buyer’s remorse in the United Kingdom admit, citizens may not have fully grasped the ramifications of their policy positions. Also, how were the Brexiters allowed to be less than truthful in or committed to their campaign messages and manifestos? Someone has to hold advocates and leaders to account in such critical policy debates.

This is the role that political and community leaders, experts, civil society and the media all play in fostering an informed citizenry – the bedrock of a democracy.

There may be many views but let there be robust debates that raise our appreciation of the difficult strategic choices citizens of a tiny city-state must make because the appropriate facts, information and considered views of the experts are brought to the table.

We must also be able to transcend the instincts of hewing only to the personal and our given forms of identity (ethnic, religious and cultural) to consider the concerns and needs of other groups in those debates. That “big citizen” mindset with the ability to take all of these into consideration has to be cultivated from generation to generation.

Fourth, building tighter connections. Political leaders need to keep close to the ground and respect and engage the full suite of concerns that citizens have. They have to ensure that the interaction between the local and the global is fully understood and positively affects citizens’ well-being.

That tighter connection between leaders and the led is needed because, in a democracy, things can change. The winners cannot hope to win all the time and convince the losers it is the latter’s fault, if that were even true. A divided society manifests itself in divisive politics.

Gazing into the crystal ball of a post-Brexit world, if the “separatism virus” spreads in Europe, countries and communities will shrink back into their primordial identities, and take a zero-sum view to economic growth and conflict – and the world will not be a happy one.

That fortress instinct – shutting our borders, tilling our own soil, sewing our own clothes, soldering our own robots just for the sake of planting our own flag on these – will leave us all impoverished, globally. It is not even an option for Singapore.

On the other hand, there are many transnational challenges that can be addressed through deliberate, collective action. There are many economic opportunities arising from flows of

trade, investment and people across countries and regions. It is the right politics that will keep these flows and collaboration going.

At home, what is within our ability to do is for us to put our best effort into discussing and formulating public policy that reinforces our social solidarity and the belief that we have a responsive system of democratic governance.

The writer is deputy director (research) at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.