

Singapore still a work in progress: MM Lee **He calls on younger generation to carry on task of nation building**

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Thrust into existence in 1965, Singapore, the concept, was born.

But Singapore, the nation, had to be built. And yesterday, 46 years on, its founding leader offered his assessment: it is not finished.

And he had this challenge for the young generation: carry on the task.

Said Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew: 'We are a nation in the making. Will we make it? Am I certain we'll get there? No, I cannot say that. Something can go wrong somewhere and we'll fall apart.'

'It is the business of your generation and the generation that succeeds you to understand that vulnerability, that fragility of our society and keep it in cohesion.'

Mr Lee made these sobering remarks at the launch of a new book published by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), *Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*. The 458-page book, based on 16 interviews with seven *Straits Times* journalists, fleshes out his views on a range of issues such as Singapore's geopolitical realities and political system, the danger of racial or religious intolerance and climate change.

The launch event at the John Jacob Ballroom at St Regis Singapore was attended by 160 people, including diplomats, academics, MPs, and captains of industry. The book is now on sale at bookstores at \$39.90, and comes with a DVD of scenes from the interviews.

Speaking off-the-cuff for more than eight minutes, his voice mellow, Mr Lee urged the younger generation not to assume that Singapore's nationhood or success was a given: 'If you believe it's a reality, then I think you're making a mistake. It's an aspiration, it's something we must make into reality probably in another 20, 30, 40, 50 years.'

Despite starting out with 'multiple peoples, no common language, no common culture', Singapore has succeeded in making its citizens feel there is a place here for them, creating 'a very rare society where people of all races live in the same tower blocks, go to the same playgrounds, and now speak a common language which is not their native language'.

English was made the lingua franca because it was the only one that could hold Singapore together. If Chinese had been chosen, 'we would have split this country wide apart', and it would have been hard for Singapore to make a living.

But having a place for all races was a different thing from becoming a nation, which he defined as one where people made sacrifices, or died for one another.

He cited China and Japan as examples of bona fide nations which had been 'ravaged, demolished', but whose people would come together again to rebuild it. But if the same thing happened to Singapore, it may simply fall apart, warned Mr Lee, adding: 'I do not deceive myself for one moment that our differences of race, culture and religion will disappear.'

'So this precious, accidental, improbable, unlikely nation that we have created should be nurtured, should be carefully strengthened and built upon.'

He said this was why he had agreed to spend time having a 'dialogue' with ST journalists Han Fook Kwang, Zuraidah Ibrahim, Chua Mui Hoong, Lydia Lim, Ignatius Low, Rachel Lin and Robin Chan on important issues: so younger generations of Singaporeans can appreciate the fragility inherent in Singapore's condition. 'And that is the message I wanted to convey very strongly before I'm no longer able to say. I'm not sure I got the message across in this book but I hope I have.'

It was important, he added, that Singapore remain a cosmopolitan and accepting society, as it was part of its 'destiny' as a small, open economy.

Looking to the future, Mr Lee mused: 'Will we make it? Am I certain we'll get there? No, I cannot say that. Something can go wrong somewhere, and we'll fall apart.'

But he saw cause for optimism: 'Give that a very good try and there is a chance that we would get it. Fifty years? Maybe more. It doesn't matter, so long as we make progress.'

Paying tribute to the man who began this process of nation-building, SPH chairman Tony Tan said of MM Lee: 'He has done what he can, by entrenching values of incorruptibility and good governance into the People's Action Party, and by creating institutions like the elected presidency to act as a check on the executive.'

'The rest is up to a new generation.'

Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies K. Kesavapany agreed that Singapore still lacked cultural ballast, although he felt things were improving.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies agreed with Mr Lee that the work of nation building was still in progress: 'We have to look at some abiding values, abiding ideas and work towards them. And the new people who come in to help to form Singapore also need to be reminded what it means to be a multiracial society.'

One young Singaporean who took Mr Lee's message to heart at the launch was Mr Robin Chan, one of the book's authors. The 27-year-old said in a video screened at the launch about his moment of epiphany working on the project:

'There was a moment that came across strongly when MM talked about how Singapore is a near miracle, how it came about by combination of factors and an exceptional organisation.'

The Singaporean who grew up in Hong Kong and came back to do his national service said he realised, listening to Mr Lee, that Singapore is a land of opportunities, where people chose to settle because they could have a home here, regardless of their race or culture.

'That's very powerful for me. We have these basic but crucial values which stand us apart from the region. That's something worth fighting for and dying for.'