

Think spectrum, not open or closed

Koh Buck Song

The Straits Times, 17 January 2006

AS EXPECTED, American billionaire George Soros left a mark with his visit to Singapore last week. More than anything else, people are likely to remember his comment that Singapore does not qualify as an open society.

He said this not once but twice, at two separate events. At the second talk to the Institute of South-east Asian Studies (Iseas) and Singapore Management University (SMU), however, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh countered his view.

Professor Koh made the point that Singapore was moving from a less open society to one that was more open, just as the United States was, in Mr Soros' opinion, moving from an open society to one that was less so. This came about after the 9/11 incident of 2001, as constraints on openness set in along with the 'war on terror'.

In Singapore, being called 'closed' tends to prompt defensive reactions and rhetoric, often at cross-purposes. A better way to consider the issue is to think in terms of a spectrum, a continuum of development, rather than in terms of open or closed. The question then becomes not what Singapore is, but where Singapore is positioned, and whether it is moving in the right direction fast enough.

Such an approach is more helpful for promoting understanding. Any issue becomes less contentious once this shift in perspective is made. There is no question that Singapore is less open than the US, in such areas as the freedom to criticise politicians or to stage street protests. These are clear factual differences that it would be futile to argue against.

Yet, Singapore has definitely been on a path of active opening up. Mr Soros' visit itself demonstrates this. His talk to Iseas and SMU was given to a packed audience that included many young people from junior colleges and universities. The discussion was frank and, yes, open. Mr Soros' critical views were reported in the media.

An even more robust spirit of openness was the order of the day at another event last week - the Institute of Policy Studies' annual conference. A panel on domestic politics featured two speakers,

academic Ho Khai Leong and writer Catherine Lim, who were unusually outspoken in their critique of the political situation.

Will Singapore develop further? It depends on another point Mr Soros made - that it is up to the members of a society to decide what kind of open society they want to have.

If it is to be left to each group of people to make and maintain the space for debate, then the first thing they need to do is not to entrench any divide by continuing to think in terms of 'either-or'. Instead, the focus should be on addressing that society's position on the spectrum of societal openness.

Indeed, Singapore's lack of openness in the past might have brought about a kind of blessing in disguise: Had Singapore been a more open society, inherent differences in values and ideology would have emerged more into the open, resulting in a more adversarial public discourse. Opposing views and groups would then have become more entrenched, and reaching the common ground so necessary for stability would have been harder.

As it is, the level of political discourse has been constrained and restrained, so much so that some issues have never been fully thrashed out. For better or worse, for instance, the real nature of the voting public remains open to speculation.

In the US, political affiliations are declared openly. Here, in so far as many political wards have not been contested in elections, the residents' political affiliations remain unknown.

Many Singaporeans have avoided having to deal with the excesses of political contention in the past. But if Singapore is to mature as a democracy, then it is time for every thinking citizen to take up his responsibility to play his part in shaping the kind of open society we all need to believe we deserve to have.

The writer is the author and editor of 13 books, most recently, How Not To Make Money.