

## Throwing more 'Cs' into the mix as S'pore approaches 60

The 5 Cs still matter. But let's discuss some other attributes that can make our nation better.

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Singapore turns 60 in the new year.

In marking this milestone, it is timely to pause and recognise the amazing progress we have made – as a country and a people – from a small trading post to a global hub for commerce, technology and culture.

The transformation has been remarkable, if not unprecedented. Many of us are familiar with the reference to the “5 Cs” of Singapore – cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club – a term first coined as a popular observational joke during the 1990s, about the aspirations of Singaporeans.

These Cs remain important, but as the country matures, can I toss a few more new Cs into the ring for our collective consideration?

### OF COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

A large part of Singapore's success can be attributed to the “Pioneer Generation”, which contributed meaningfully to nation building with stoic resilience and little murmuring.

Now that Singapore has attained an enviable place on the global stage, the Chinese idiom 前人种树，后人乘凉 (qián rén zhòng shù, hòu rén chéng liáng) comes to mind. This broadly translates to ‘forefathers planting trees and later generations enjoying the shade’. One is also aware that Singaporeans are often given to complaining ‘under the shade’.

My foreign friends are sometimes intrigued by our propensity to gripe and by our legendary “Complain kings and queens”.

Notwithstanding the high standard of living enjoyed in Singapore, research by the Institute of Policy Studies reveals that Singaporeans tend to express dissatisfaction or to complain, more frequently than expressing gratitude – often through the readily available social media platforms. This “complaining culture” may be attributed to various factors including high-stress levels, societal expectations and the nation's rapid pace of development.

As a society that prides itself on efficiency, Singaporeans have high expectations of their public services, infrastructure and living conditions. A study by the National University of Singapore noted that when these expectations are not met, it leads to complaints. The same study highlighted that the complaining culture might be seen as a means for Singaporeans to assert their rights and demand accountability, reinforcing the democratic process of every individual having a “view and a voice”, that somehow needs to be expressed.

I am not advocating for a ban on complaining, although a friend teased that a monetary fine could possibly be imposed to discourage this behaviour – in keeping with our reputation as a “fine” country.

Rather, one wonders if each complaint (or feedback, if you will) can be balanced with an accompanying compliment? Can we learn to recognise first that a glass is half full (and express gratitude for that) instead of merely focusing on it being half empty? After this initial step is taken, one can then follow up with suggestions on how the glass can be further filled up.

A sports coach from my youth expected us to show up for training with 2 “Cs” – if one had a “Criticism or Complaint”, it required an accompanying “Compliment or Contribution” on how to make things better. The logic being that expressing a sense of gratitude tempers and frames one’s criticisms with the appropriate lens. In other words, don’t just complain for the sake of complaining: Offer a constructive solution, whilst expressing gratitude.

A case can be easily made for this enlightened approach to also apply to citizens of a maturing country turning 60.

## **COMMUNITY AND CONNECTEDNESS**

I grew up in the 1960s in Bukit Ho Swee, a poor estate then, in a three-room HDB flat with neighbours who had little materially but were nevertheless manifestly “well off”, socially and relationally.

There were no qualms or hesitation in approaching the next-door resident for help: To borrow a cup of sugar or to ask for ice cubes to chill beverages on a hot and humid day. A neighbour from that past recently reminded me of those remarkable “kampong” experiences from the last millennium. He challenged me to experiment and do the same today, wondering what quizzical (or incredulous) responses one would get: Is this a joke or some form of scam?

It would be worthwhile investing our time and effort now to recreate that kampong connectedness of the past. This year saw an old classmate bid goodbye to his spouse whom he had known since the time they were junior college sweethearts. The grief and sadness were lessened to a small degree by the many friends who came together to organise and attend the memorial service, celebrating the life of my friend’s late spouse, given that he and the young son were distraught from their bereavement.

The recent months have also seen another group of friends coming round to journey with and encourage a friend’s youngest adult child (in practical ways) as she navigates the multiple chemotherapy treatments to fight cancer – from preparing convalescent food to suggestions on how to mitigate the hair loss associated with the treatments.

What’s my point?

Singaporeans have always celebrated individual resilience and the ability to punch above our weight on our own. But we should also celebrate the sense of community and connectedness – where compassion is extended and encouragement provided. Put simply, it’s about “doing life together” and being there for others. Community and social support networks are key to one’s overall wellness.

A friend who is in remission from cancer has a small WhatsApp chatgroup of fellow survivors who share snippets of personal trials and triumphs. Besides the mutual encouragement received, he jokes that it also serves as digital “proof of life”. Those who don’t respond get a swift phone call or a personal visit to ensure that they are well and (rather morbidly) alive.

## **DON'T FORGET CHILDREN**

I will finish with the final “C”, which may prove controversial.

It is “Children”.

Some Singaporeans will already be moaning that they have heard this subject being extolled ad nauseum. But bear with me and hear me out.

The actor Al Pacino became a father for the fourth time in 2023 at the age of 83, welcoming a baby boy named Roman with producer Noor Alfallah. Pacino shared that becoming a father inspired him to write his memoir, *Sonny Boy*, so that Roman can learn about his father's story. Pacino lets on that he loves being a father and assuming that role has changed him for the better.

The other actor who demonstrated much vulnerability on the topic of children is Oscar winner Michelle Yeoh. Speaking recently on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* she provided a personal glimpse of her fertility challenges. “It wasn't for lack of trying, because I have always, and still do, love babies,” she said. Given her inability to conceive, Yeoh said she “felt like a failure” for not being able to have children.

But Yeoh was balanced in her views, clarifying: “I believe that it's a woman's choice. It's your choice whether you want to have children, and it shouldn't be imposed on you... but I always wanted to have children.”

At the personal level, having children is about replicating ourselves, a passing on of our genetic material. At the macro level, the act of procreation is also about the sustainability of our nation's numbers – ensuring that there are enough future individuals to carry on the dreams and ambitions of our small city state.

However, this challenge is not confined to just having children who are our physical issues. More broadly, it's about nurturing the next generation – working to make our “ceiling be the floor” of the next generation of children – regardless of whether they possess a DNA connection to us or not.

Having “children” of this latter nature can take the form of mentoring, providing guidance, being a sounding board for the next generation. It is about passing on one's life lessons, even to those not related by blood or kinship.

One may ask: Are the ambitions listed above too lofty or impossible to achieve?

Well, when Singapore was first established in 1965, not many believed in our vision to build a viable country that had no natural resources.

But we prevailed.

There is no reason why we cannot aspire to be an even better Singapore when we celebrate our 60th birthday.