

Ho Kwon Ping: Young and upset? Offer solutions

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In five lectures over the past six months, the Institute of Policy Studies' first S R Nathan Fellow, Mr Ho Kwon Ping, stirred up debate about Singapore's trajectory over the next 50 years. The executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and one-time political detainee tells Charissa Yong about the polarised responses to his ideas and the political implications of the outpouring of grief for the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Q: Which of your ideas provoked the most response?

The two that got the most response included the first one, (which) broke the ice about being able to talk about scenarios for a possible loss of power by the People's Action Party (PAP). That got quite a lot of responses, comments, discussions.

The second one was the idea of national service for women.

I'm not sure they're positive responses, but they're the most responses.

Q: What was the response regarding the possible loss of PAP power?

I got all kinds of responses, because anything to do with the PAP elicits both the very positive and the very negative. I think the response was generally one of "this issue is now in the open, we can discuss it without feeling that we are anti-PAP, this is something that we need to discuss".

My understanding from other sources is that nobody in the PAP was particularly upset either. In fact, some asked their own friends to read it.

It's not bad for a ruling party to understand how it might lose power, in the same way that I welcome people telling me how Banyan Tree could collapse. You have to know what could be the source of your demise in order to ensure that it does not happen.

Q: What about the response to national service (NS) for women?

The knee-jerk reaction from women was, "Oh no, no way am I going to do that for two years."

But once there was a greater realisation of what I was actually suggesting - NS for women during a short period between schooling - the responses were actually quite positive.

Particularly the notion that a) women nowadays don't want to be seen as pretty little things that are quite useless, and that should there be an emergency, women knowing how to do CPR is useful; and b) within the context of the rapidly ageing society, caregiving has to be undertaken by a lot of people in the future.

These notions of NS - in a broader context of what Singapore as a society needs in the future, not just defence - drew more positive responses.

Q: Were you trying to be controversial or do you really believe in these ideas?

Oh, yes. I'm not trying to be provocative for provocation's sake. Part of my intention was to give ideas I think are workable. But the overarching intention was to try to promote some degree of discussion within Singapore.

I wanted to make other people feel that if you are willing to look at an issue, and to give a well-intended critique and solution, you should not be embarrassed to do so.

The PAP losing power is actually not a new idea. It's an elephant in the room because it's so obvious, but nobody's alluded to it. So that was not provocative, I was just trying to say this is the elephant in the room and we need to recognise it.

Q: What was the one message that you wanted to bring across in your lectures?

If you're young today, and you're not happy with everything that's happening in Singapore, go out there and do something about it. Don't just sit and complain and write comments. Writing blogs is okay, because then you have to spend several hours thinking through what you have to say, and then you are actually quite humbled by recognising that, hey, there's a lot I don't know. You realise that it's so easy to criticise.

But a lot of people go and post things and put one, two liners on social media, and they're quite thoughtless. The energy that goes into this could be so better channelled into saying okay, I'm not happy with this, but what do we really want to do about it? What are the ideas that we have?

Q: What should young people do instead of complaining?

I was most impressed by the fact that I met young people from so many different civil society groups. A lot of millennials are very interested. They want to do something that gives them meaning.

And they are getting up and doing their things. Unlike my generation where you sit and complain about the Government.

Q: You said there were scatological comments which were almost defamatory. Did they upset you?

Not at all. These one-liners would be - "That absolute idiot Ho Kwon Ping!" Or it'd be "Right on, man! Take on the PAP!" It's quite stupid. It's like anything you say that is slightly critical of the PAP, oh, then you're a hero. Anything you say to defend the PAP's policies, they say, "Oh this guy is a lackey." That kind of divide is so silly it can't possibly insult you.

The problem is, you get a lot of those comments that are not terribly thoughtful. You wish that people could get more engaged with serious commentary.

Q: You observed that in the wake of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death, Singaporeans were brought together in an unprecedented way. Will this last and prove beneficial for the PAP?

It could go two ways. One school of thought is that this will connect young people emotionally, through Mr Lee Kuan Yew, a lot more to the PAP. That will translate into votes.

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The other school of thought is that expectations for change may even become higher now. It says that a lot of young people who queued for 10 hours for Mr Lee Kuan Yew's lying in state recognised he was like the proverbial grandfather you never appreciated. Then when he died, you suddenly realised that he was the person who made your entire life possible. And you grieved partly out of appreciation, partly out of guilt that you did not show him gratitude when he was alive.

This school of thought says that once young people go through that catharsis, they then will say, I know how much you've done for me, I've grieved for you. But now the slate is clean. Now I look forward to the future and if the world doesn't change according to the way I want it to, I would still show my unhappiness.

Q: Are Singaporeans ready for the "Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others" (CMIO) categorisation of races to be blurred, as you suggested in your last lecture?

I think it is already happening. My point was that we may not want to use the more crude categorisation of CMIO. We should recognise that there are more ethnic subdiversities and celebrate them.

But I'm not advocating, at all, the removal of the strictures against insulting another race or religion. I think it's entirely possible that if we do not recognise that the fundamental fault lines of race and religion still exist, the fault lines can be worsened.

It's important to recognise the complexities of diversity today. But the fault lines are there.

Q: A critique of your proposal in your second lecture that the Housing Board introduce sales price caps on flats and auction land to private developers is that developers might cut corners on quality to improve their profit margins. What is your response?

The market speaks for itself.

HDB could take a large piece of land, plan it completely, build the infrastructure, decide what would be the price caps, then developers bid for it. That's the power of the marketplace. Those of poor quality won't be able to sell.

But I'm not even saying I think my model is the best. I'm not a politician pushing for my manifesto. I'm saying the next 50 years compels us to look at different scenarios. If we stick to

that same model, we may find ourselves so rigid in accepting the success we had, that we're not going to be flexible enough to meet the challenges of the future.

Q: You also suggested converting foreign worker levies into a deferred savings fund for them, but some said these workers would just end up paying higher placement fees to agents to get jobs here. What do you think?

I don't understand the logic at all that this would just make agents push up placement fees, because you're talking about a free market. In Singapore today, the agency charge for maids is a competitive one. You have an agency charging \$600, and if you bump it up to \$1,000 because there's so much demand from foreign workers for these jobs, I can come in and undercut you.

Where do you have really exorbitant fees? It's where an illegal market takes place, basically snakeheads bringing in illegal immigrants into any country. And because it's criminals engaging in illegal behaviour, there is no free marketplace for it. You don't have that happening in Singapore.

Q: How would the rich respond to your idea to re-look priority Primary 1 admissions based on distance from homes, since some elite schools are in wealthy neighbourhoods?

I would think if you're the super rich you'd be absolutely up in arms. But if you're not the super rich, wouldn't you be happy?

Our Government always should be aware of all constituencies. The rich are a constituency. Their needs and their wants must be regarded also. But the Government's responsibility is to the people of Singapore.

If it is in the interests of the larger society to do what I've suggested - if there are other ways of doing so, great - the Government needs to do it. Hopefully, they could find means that would upset fewer people.

Q: Others said your ideas did not go far enough. For example, you called for the Internal Security Act (ISA) to be amended but not abolished. Are you less radical now than when you were younger?

It's certainly not self-censorship.

It's not because I'm scared to say this, because I don't think the Government is going to throw me in jail any more. But age does make you more conservative. I see other sides of the picture now.

If I became prime minister today, those things I would do as prime minister, I would say should be done. But if I wouldn't be willing to do it, then it is a hypocrisy to advocate it.

And I can honestly say that if I were prime minister today, I'd be very worried about ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)... Do we need preventive detention? Yes. Absolutely, because you cannot prove everything in a court of law. Ultimately, what is the danger of preventive

detention? It is abuse of political opponents. So tweak (the ISA) so that a lot of the abuses cannot occur.

I do not believe that my role is to just position myself as being the poster boy of civil society and push for things simply because some people who are civil society activists think it should be done.

I can live with people saying that I have copped out and I have softened my position, because these are truly my own views.