

## **Building a gracious society in Singapore**

Singaporeans have expressed the wish for a more gracious society in the next 50 years and while the government can encourage and facilitate this graciousness, it is something the citizens themselves have to produce, said former top civil servant Lim Siong Guan on Tuesday (Oct 10). This could take a generation, and Singapore has to start now and move in a more deliberate, urgent, and holistic manner than before, added Mr Lim, who was delivering his second IPS-Nathan lecture. Below is an excerpt of the lecture by Mr Lim, who was previously head of the civil service and Group President of GIC.

***Lim Siong Guan***

***TODAY***, 11 October 2017

Thank you for coming to this lecture, my second in the series on the theme, “Can Singapore Fall?”

I am gratified by the many reactions to my first lecture. Contrary to what some took away from my reference to John Glubb’s Age of Intellect, I am not against debate and discussion at all.

For Glubb, the Age of Intellect’s “most dangerous by-product is the birth and growth of the notion that human intellect can solve all the problems of the world, when in fact the survival of the nation really depends on its citizens.”

Intellectualising is not a problem in itself, except when it stops us from taking concrete steps forward. For Singapore, the danger is if we develop a “complaint and blame” culture where people do not bear responsibility, and we end up with a deep pessimism about Singapore’s future.

My preference is for us to focus on issues that involve all Singaporeans who are concerned about where our country is going. Let us reflect on what we have, that should be retained, modified or abandoned, and on what we do not yet have that we should bring in.

Hopefully, with an understanding of our common purpose and endeavour, more Singaporeans will decide to take action, individually and as a nation.

### **Singapore in 50 years**

At the close of my first lecture on “The Accidental Nation”, I posed the question, “Where Do We Go From Here?”

What kind of Singapore do we want in the next 10, 20, 50 or 100 years? To help us concentrate our minds, let me specifically pose the question as, “What is the Singapore we would like to see (if we were still alive then) when SG100 comes around?”

You may find it ludicrous to think of Singapore in 50 years when no one can even be clear what the future would be like in 10 years. But if we think that way, then we are thinking in a reactive mode, where we need to know a situation before we can think of what to do. This is the mental posture of the hopeless and helpless: we must refuse to be that. We should be thinking of a future we can shape and create, even though we may be small as a country, and subject to events and developments in the world that are often beyond our control.

Last November, I had the privilege of helping in a workshop of more than 60 young people in their 20s and early 30s, to address the question: “What kind of Singapore would you like to see in 50 years? Describe it in five phrases at most.” The “five phrases” rule was to ensure focus so that there can be a concentration of effective effort, yet not so narrow as to force a limited view.

The top five ideas the participants selected were:

1. Gracious society—Doing the right thing even when no one is watching
2. Going beyond academics—Focus on character and passion
3. Active ageing—Focus on the 30s and 40s, physical and mental health
4. To go beyond geographic advantage—Focus on innovation and e-commerce
5. More sensitive and tolerant people—Focus on values

I don’t know how you feel about this. But I was both encouraged and inspired. And I note again that these were young people in their 20s and early 30s.

The year before, in 2015, I had met two groups of labour movement leaders. They were mostly in their 40s and 50s. And one of the questions posed was: “What kind of Singapore would you like to have in 50 years?”

These were their top seven wishes:

1. Gracious society
2. Work-life balance
3. Innovative/ Creative/ Smart Singapore
4. Singapore as an economic leader
5. Jobs availability/ security
6. Safe and secure
7. Clean and Green

I found it quite remarkable, that in the small groups of Singaporeans I met in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s, the top wish for their grandchildren and great grandchildren is for Singapore to be a gracious society.

### **Kampung spirit and national values**

Let me explore further this wish for a gracious society. Perhaps the more colloquial term is “kampung spirit”—if we think of it as something that we perhaps once had and have since mostly lost.

I have a friend in Penang who remarked to me, “You guys in Singapore talk about kampung spirit. Do you know what it means? During Chinese New Year, my father gives out ang pows to his grandchildren, who all line up eagerly to receive their yearly collection. Many children in the neighbourhood, including the Malay and Indian children, would line up also and duly get their ang pows. Would Singaporeans who want the kampung spirit do likewise?”

In our busy city life, the kampung spirit is also in the Malay motorcyclist who stops in the rain to check up on you when your car has stalled by the roadside, or to help clear the traffic for an ambulance during rush hour.

So there are still instances of this, indeed they are often remarked upon, precisely because we do not yet have a deep culture of graciousness so that each of these incidents become worthy news in itself.

Indeed, some of us might leave our home each morning and wonder, “How come my neighbour doesn’t appear to care about me and my family?” We can be sure our neighbours are asking the same question about us. Who is going to start this process of care and concern for our neighbour?

To get some sense of Singaporeans and their idea of the kampung spirit, let me refer you to a survey of national values that was conducted from March to June 2015, by aAdvantage Consulting, a consulting firm in Singapore, together with the Barrett Values Centre of the United Kingdom. What the survey involved was they used an international survey instrument, which has been applied in many countries around the world. Respondents are shown a list of values and behaviours, and they are asked to pick from the list, values that they consider the most important for themselves personally. Then, from the same list, they are asked to pick the values and behaviours they see in others around them. Finally, from the same list, they are asked to pick what they desire for the future.

The top 10 values and behaviours the respondents in Singapore picked as representing what they considered to be the most important for themselves personally were, in order of priority:

1. Family
2. Responsibility
3. Friendship
4. Happiness
5. Health
6. Caring
7. Honesty
8. Compassion
9. Positive attitude
10. Respect

It is, of course, a highly commendable list, and we all should be proud of it. Of the 10 items, I would say only one clearly involves the government, namely, “health”, which perhaps is something like 50 per cent personal responsibility and 50 per cent government responsibility. All the others involve personal behaviour.

Next, bearing in mind the respondents were choosing items from the same list, the top 10 values and behaviours they saw in the others around them were, in descending order:

1. Kiasu
2. Competitive
3. Materialistic
4. Self-centred
5. Kiasi
6. Blame
7. Security
8. Education opportunities
9. Effective healthcare

## 10. Peace

I grant that the last four items—security, education opportunities, effective healthcare and peace—are principally the responsibility of the government. But the first six items—kiasu, competitive, materialistic, self-centred, kiasi and blame, reflect the life attitudes of individuals.

The interesting question is why what is perceived in Singapore society is so different from what the survey respondents said were their personal values.

If the personal values were actually lived out, we should reasonably expect that at least some of these values would be reflected in a description of current culture. But, at least in 2015, not a single one of the personal values was reflected in the prevailing culture as perceived by the respondents.

One explanation for the incongruence is that the list of personal values did not reflect the truth because respondents wanted to present a positive image of themselves.

But there is a second fascinating explanation: both the lists are honest and true; the most important value for the individual is “family”, so because my family is the most important, I would cut queues for the sake of my family, I would argue with my daughter’s teacher because my family is most important, and so forth.

Others may see my behaviour as kiasu, whereas all I was doing was living out my belief that family—my family—is most important to me. You can decide for yourself what the correct explanation is.

It would seem that there is something instinctive when Singaporeans in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s all say that the most important characteristic of Singapore, which they would like to see in 50 years is a gracious society, not economic success. But how practical would it be to expect such an outcome, given the survey of national values I mentioned earlier, which found the dominant perceived cultural characteristics of Singapore to be kiasu, competitive, materialistic, self-centred, kiasi, and blame?

The most critical observation we have to make about gracious society or kampung spirit is that it reflects the state of relations among individual citizens. In other words, this is not an outcome the government can produce. The government can encourage and facilitate, but gracious society is something we the citizens have to produce.

Can we do it? Do we want to do it? Is it important enough? While the Singapore we wanted in its first 50 years may have been defined in economic terms, it is rather clear that the future Singapore we want in our next 50 years ought to be also defined in social terms, without neglecting the economic wherewithal to maintain our living standards.

Our practical Singaporeans might say, gracious society is nice to have—but does it have to be the top priority now, is it really urgent?

My view is that we can only get there if we think in terms of a change that happens over a generation—and because it is a long-term outcome, it requires conviction, tenacity, and action now. Even though little money would be required, the heart and the mind must want it almost as a “life and death” issue.

A gracious society could be exactly the kind of antidote to the social degradation and national decay that Glubb finds to afflict nations, both large and small, once they reach high levels of affluence. But let us first think about what a gracious society would be like so that we can have a clearer idea of whether we want it, and whether we can get to it.

### **How a gracious society can look like**

Often when people think of a gracious society, their minds imagine the displaced and the handicapped, the poor and the misfits, and how those groups of people should be taken care of. But gracious society or kampung spirit is really about the countless little interactions between neighbours and everyone else we mix with or have to work with every day of the week.

It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society.

I know there are already many initiatives for people to help one another and be kind to one another. There have been many occasions where people reach out to help others in trouble.

This gives us optimism that in a crisis, people will not simply think of themselves and their families, but will extend their hearts and hands to those around them. But what I am advocating is graciousness as a part of our character as a nation, not just episodic acts of kindness. This is culture: an integral part of our make-up as a people.

If we open our eyes and our hearts to the world around us each day, we can see a lot that is worthy of our honour, our care and our support.

Someone described a situation in Japan where at the end of lunch he was asked if he would like to have coffee. Yes, he would like to have coffee, but he found that all his Japanese friends at the lunch decided not to.

His friends later explained to him that they had noticed that other people were waiting for tables to clear so that they in turn could have lunch, so his friends decided the right thing to do was to release their table as quickly as possible, thus declining coffee.

Another person was telling me about his experience in climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge with a group that included several Japanese. At the end of the climb, everyone was given a towel to wipe off their sweat. But he saw that the Japanese also used their towel to wipe the safety gear the group had been equipped with. They were doing it in consideration of the next group who would be making the climb.

I think Japanese culture, nurtured in children from young, fosters social consideration and responsibility, a looking out for others. I quote Japan not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones, but to show that it is possible to have a social environment where people feel a sense of being recognised and being treated with respect and consideration.

These are the little day-to-day things that we all can do, if we look beyond our own immediate needs, and actually notice others and their needs. We can learn to see anew and act; we can get to be a gracious society if we think it important enough.

Singapore has had the Courtesy Campaign in the past, which has since been absorbed into the Singapore Kindness Movement. Can we do more? Should we do more? Can we get to being a gracious society faster?

Caring about others and doing good is basically a matter of the heart. This is not about religion; it is about beliefs and values and morals and ethics, which may come from religion, or a personal study of civilisation and culture, or simply the way we have been brought up.

### **Starting with parents and the young**

The Chinese have a saying, 三岁定终身 (sān suì dìng zhōng shēn), which means, “At the age of three you can know what one will be like for the rest of his life.” What a remarkable statement drawn from thousands of years of Chinese civilisation! Three years old is before the kid even turns up in nursery, not to mention kindergarten or Primary One.

The lesson is plain: parents and the child’s earliest environment hold the key to the behaviours the child will display towards others as they grow up, and their attitude towards life and work in adulthood.

Speaking to teachers of children in the lower primary levels, I found that many of them feel that what they are having to do, often with only limited success, is to undo the damage parents had caused at home, from what they had done or failed to do.

If three years old seems much too young for you, you could take comfort from a saying by the Jesuits, an order in the Catholic Church. They say, “Give me a child till seven and I will give you the man.” In other words, they believe that a child can be moulded for life within seven years.

Whether we decide to take the word of the Chinese of old or the Jesuits, the point simply is that parents and the family have the most fundamental of responsibilities in guiding and shaping the child before they get to kindergarten or school. I am speaking here of values and attitudes, which are more caught by example than taught by instruction in our youth.

So, where have we got to, starting from Glubb? His study of the Fate of Empires indicated that the push for affluence brought economic wealth and political power to nations, but affluence subsequently catalysed the nations’ decadence and decline.

What we would like to explore is whether Singapore could think of a way to ameliorate the weakening of the nation, and inspire a new pioneering spirit for growth and well-being. Singaporeans seem to agree that we want a gracious society, but developing a whole culture and value system starts from the home, reinforced by school and society.

It may well take a generation, and we have to start now, building upon what has been done in the past, but moving in a far more deliberate, urgent, and holistic manner.

Are we merely promoting naïve altruism when we suggest that Singaporeans think and care about others? Far from it, I think it can in fact be more like enlightened self-interest. Let me explain.

I am sure most of you would have heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. When I ask my audiences how many needs there are in the hierarchy, I get responses like five or six or seven. Often, people are not sure.

But when I ask them what is the highest need identified by Maslow, everyone knows it is self-actualisation. We can all remember what is most important to ourselves. However, further research in the field concluded that Maslow's list is incomplete, and that human beings have three more needs:

- Cognitive needs (a need to understand)
- Aesthetic needs (a need for beauty, balance and form in life)
- Transcendence needs (a need to help others realise their potential)

It turns out that the highest need we all have is the need for transcendence. That is, the need to move beyond just thinking of ourselves, to thinking of others and helping them reach their personal growth and self-fulfilment.

Transcendence is ranked as the highest of all needs in the human psyche. To put it simply, if we want to live a full life, we have to remember that it is not about ourselves, but about others.

Sure, not everyone would agree with Maslow's five needs, or this extended list of eight. But I believe that most of us derive an enormous sense of satisfaction and fulfilment when we do something good for someone else, enjoying their gratitude and having the smile in their eyes warm our hearts. Serving beyond ourselves is what gives each of us meaning and a deep sense of purpose in life and achievement.

But a gracious society is not just about giving. It is not about "giving until it hurts". Certainly, it is not naïvely dealing with people who say "give and take" but who really mean, "you give, I take!"

For giving to be possible, there must also be a "receiver". And sometimes, we need to be the receiver so that someone can give.

I have a friend, older than me, who tells me that, often, when he rides the MRT, some youngster would offer his or her seat.

He used to turn down the offer, saying he only needed to go a short distance and therefore could stand. And the youngster often looked embarrassed that his or her offer had been turned down.

One day, my friend had an epiphany: from then on, he accepted the offer of a seat, even when he only had one station to go.

His humility means giving the youngster his good deed and happiness for the day. So my friend has come up with an aphorism: When you are young, you give happiness by giving with good grace and humility; when old, you give happiness by accepting with good grace and humility.

The fourth generation will hopefully have much to celebrate at SG100. But we cannot simply leave it to them to make the Singapore of their time for themselves. Certainly, many things they can, and should, do for themselves.

Each generation must solve its own problems. But some things require the work of a generation or more to bring about. For these, we must start work on now, to be in time for that future. A gracious society is such a thing. It would be a society that makes Singapore stand out from the rest of the world.

A gracious society, because of its spirit of other-centredness, can help to induce better relationships among people and the different sectors of society, including organisations and the government.

A gracious society is one where people feel good because others care, where we flourish together because we each can be the best we can be by helping ourselves, and helping one another.

We can start today to build a first-world Society that our fourth generation will be proud of, and benefit from, because we have moved in our generation to lay the groundwork for them to flourish and prosper 50 years later.

By that time, and hopefully earlier, whenever any Singaporean or Singapore resident thinks of “SG”, they will also think, “GS”—gracious society.