

The Case of The Globalised Youth: Why Looking Back Is Important For The Future

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Singapore's next electorate is vastly different from its predecessor and yet strikingly similar.

Sure, there is no burden to lift the country from beginnings and poverty, but Singapore's mid-life identity crisis is cause for today's youth to find solution to punch above its weight. Bread-and-butter concerns may have been mutually exclusive from career passion in the past, but creativity and innovation in such endeavours are now issues youth must answer. Higher-level concerns such as ownership, freedom and choice are on par with previous issues of survival.

All these may be fine and dandy, but at the **Singapore Perspectives** conference Monday, there was much talk of how the country needs to take stock of its sovereignty and global status to stay afloat, including its oft-chastised pragmatism.

While the electorate of tomorrow is looking ahead and charting new ground, concerns still remain of how the country's size is still being perceived as its Achilles heel and how the city-state's current strategy of looking to the West may not bear as much fruit now as a collective, shared vision with ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations).

A [survey](#) the Institute of Policy Studies conducted showed Singaporeans were not as aware of events such as [Operation Coldstore](#), the ["Marxist conspiracy"](#) plot and the [1961 split of the People's Action Party](#) as compared to the formation of the Mass Rapid Transit and the Housing and Development Board.

The pragmatism shown by survey respondents is a clear sign of where Singapore's society is. However, recent events such as the Anton Casey incident, the Pink Dot gathering and repeated calls for a Singaporean core show that morality is increasingly becoming an ideal of governance.

Even-handedness in idealism and morality vis-a-vis pragmatism was espoused by Assoc Prof Eugene Tan, arguing that Singapore can no longer be run by either/or precedents or issues of practicality at all costs. Assoc Prof Tan believed Singapore needs "to have soul" and must "go beyond cost-benefit analysis", insisting that the city-state "shouldn't be enslaved by pragmatism". This, although an attendee [believes](#) pragmatism is at the core of all government, be it in the form of freedom or democracy.

Assoc Prof Tan also said that pragmatism curtails discussion, a sense of mission and promotes tradeoffs, including how the Group Representative Constituency (GRC) electorate system could have been used to "pull votes along racial groups". The Business Times associate editor Vikram Khanna went a step ahead, questioning if Singapore's multitude of golf courses and Operation Spectrum which "stifled cultural and political expression" were seen as good emblems of pragmatism.

But there were realists who reminded Perspectives delegates that survival concerns still are key for a small state like Singapore to survive. Ministry of Foreign Affairs ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan (above) said that “you cannot have soft power if you first don’t have hard power”, [arguing](#) that being extraordinary and successful in various political and economic aspects were signs that other countries could not trifle with Singapore’s sovereignty and independence.

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Kishore Mahbubani was another realist who stuck hard to the line of pragmatism over idealism. Arguing that multiracialism is a pragmatic mindset over freedom of speech as highlighted in the [Charlie Hebdo attacks](#), he said that widening a small state’s geopolitical space through pragmatism was going to increase its freedom of action in various areas including foreign policy.

Some strong statements about the future of Singapore were also hashed out at the conference. Among which, academics made calls for state policy to catch up to countrymen with multiple identities — a strong call for dual-citizenship laws to emerge. Professor Linda Lim said that Singapore should stop looking towards the rich West and more at mid-income South-East Asia where potential growth lies.

She also believed in boosting Singapore’s global business attractiveness other than tax incentives. Professor Tan Kong Yam was worried that low-income Singaporeans would be left behind; he argued for the taxing of “the Singapore premium” where relative winners of Singapore’s infrastructure and meritocracy assist the relative losers (namely the bottom 30% and the aspiring middle class) to ensure long-term social stability.

Do all these new trajectories chip away at the understanding of what Singapore is and should be? Compromise is key, and that is what minister for social and family development Chan Chun Sing said at a dialogue session capping off the event.

Do we have the maturity to find convergence in diversity? It takes a certain maturity to have a give-and-take relationship, to be circumspect that we may have a different view from someone else but that doesn’t necessarily always make us right.

Many have championed for their own respective causes lately, and so they should. Are we able to embrace other people’s differences and find that synthesis to take the country forward?

Minister Chan Chun Sing promised that, upon hearing calls from youth to write a new narrative for the country, the government will work in tandem with key political and societal partners to “galvanise a country that has moved past the basic needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy Of Needs”. However, he cautioned towards electoral politics being divided by generations, arguing for consensus and a shared vision.