

## Kishore, Beng Huat Verbal Duel

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I didn't see any Opposition presence at the Institute of Policy Studies' Perspectives 2014 conference on Tuesday. They could have picked up a point or two in preparation for the next fight with the PAP.

It was the verbal duel between Kishore Mahbubani and Chua Beng Huat that was the highlight when they argued the motion that "Consensus rather than contest will secure Singapore's future".

Every member of the audience had a digital device to enter a vote either for the proponent (Kishore) or opponent (Chua). Before either of them spoke, the vote was 274 (59 per cent) for consensus and 187 (41 per cent) for contest.

After each side spoke, Kishore received 39 per cent of the votes (214) and Chua 61 per cent (331). By the end of the debate, after a number of people in the audience had their questions answered by the speakers, the vote swung back to supporting consensus (316/232).

Kishore, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, made these points:

- For 40 years (between 1971 and 2011), Singapore existed in a political bubble, where the top-down process ensured peace and prosperity;
- This "top-down" process is now gone and with more divisions emerging, there is a need for more consensus;
- Now, Singaporeans expect to be consulted, to be part of the consensus process.
- Chua, a noted sociologist with the National University of Singapore, said:
- It is wrong to assume that the past 40 years was a period of consensus in Singapore, citing the graduate mothers' proposal (which met with strongest opposition from educated women, even though they stood to benefit the most), and the rise in ministerial salaries as issues which divided the nation;
- The excesses of totalitarian oppression were tolerated because of what the government provided;
- In the past, there were no platforms for the expression of disagreement, but now we have the Internet and that has ensured that decisions which have to be made more quickly (such as cutting back on ministerial salaries) are made.

Kishore cautioned that there are certain issues that are best not put to the vote, like abolishing 377A from the Penal Code (which makes sex between homosexuals illegal): what if a referendum showed that people who want 377A more strictly enforced, he asked. Or if the Chinese majority population voted against the use of English as the language of education in Singapore, citing the example of Sri Lanka where Sinhalese was given official

dominance over Tamil. “Is what is happening in Thailand normal democracy?” “No!” responded the audience loudly, and Chua answered: “That’s a bad example!”

Chua scoffed at PM Lee Hsien Loong’s Sunday meeting with Malay leaders behind closed doors: “I bet there were some Malay leaders who were not happy with the meeting,” he commented to much audience laughter.

Had opposition party members been at the debate, they would have seen from the reaction of the audience that picking the right examples to support your points is important and persuasive language and a sense of humour can swing votes to you. As Chua pointed out, people want to be heard, and their points considered in the process of arriving at a consensus.