

Mavericks wanted in Singapore

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The Middle Ground, 20 May 2017

I RECALL reading Dr Benjamin Gussen's piece in ST in January and thinking to myself: this can never fly. So I was surprised to see that Mr Peter Ho had [raised](#) it as an example of thinking beyond national boundaries in his final S R Nathan lecture.

Dr Gussen, a law lecturer in the University of Southern Queensland, had proposed that Singapore and Australia set up a charter city in Australia. Think of it like a Special Economic Zone. Except that his concept was quite extensive, with equity partnerships and a constitution with a 10-year transition period after which the residents can choose their own representatives. He even called his hypothetical city Dilga. You can [read it here](#).

Dr Gussen saw it as a demand and supply problem. Singapore needs space; Australia has plenty. Both sides have plenty to offer each other in terms of resources and know-how. It will be win-win.

Why did I dismiss it out of hand? After all, it is true that Singapore needs space and Australia isn't far away. There are plenty of Singaporeans working and living there. I suppose it's because I'm used to the idea of Singapore as a little red dot on the map. Plus, immediate problems of national identity come to mind. We are a country that doesn't even allow [dual](#) citizenship and chafes at the presence of so many foreigners within its borders. Then there are practical problems, like should charter city residents do National Service?

I'm afraid the cons came to mind much faster than the pros. Mr Ho is right to say that we shouldn't let our physical size constrain our thinking. Perhaps, we wear our little red dot badge rather too proudly. Perhaps, we've been so conditioned by the vulnerability narrative that we only think in terms of what we can do *here*, get people and products *here* and how to prosper *here*. Mr Ho, a nice man, said it's natural that we cling to what we're familiar with and project the future from what we know of the present. But given the accelerating change that technology brings, the present is not a good predictor of anything.

Acknowledging that establishing a charter city would be difficult, he said: "But even if this specific idea may not gain much traction, it raises this possibility – that the idea of Singapore need not be confined to this small island."

Have we done what we can with the space we have? At 719 sq km, Singapore is now 25 per cent [bigger](#) than it was two centuries ago. Late last year, the G said a new [method](#) which doesn't rely so much on sand will be used to add to Pulau Tekong. We've built artificial islands, like Jurong, we've built upwards and we're building [downwards](#). Over the past two years, we've been talking about digging tunnels and developing spaces underground. We already have [caverns](#) to store liquid hydrocarbons and ammunition. We can also also build more intensively (we're not as densely populated as Hong Kong), while, hopefully, remaining a liveable city.

Dr Gussmen and Mr Ho are futurists who believe that we should think about living somewhere else or even virtually – while still remaining Singaporean.

Mr Ho gave examples of what a few other small countries are doing to extend their boundaries – and he doesn't mean land reclamation.

There is Luxembourg, with just 600,000 people, which is reaching for the stars. It introduced [legislation](#) in November last year to let companies own resources such as platinum, obtained from space. It has set aside money and attracted American companies dealing with the space industry. We shouldn't laugh because the country happens to know quite a bit about space. It founded one of the largest satellite companies in the world. It's no space cadet.

By the way, Singapore has a space and satellite industry too. It currently [comprises](#) 30 companies and employs 1,000 people. Late last year, the G said that the [industry](#) is a new cluster it will focus on growing.

There is Estonia, with 1.3 million people, and where babies get a [digital](#) identity at birth that would allow them later as adults to sign contracts and do transactions. It is pioneering e-residency, said Mr Ho.

“You may live abroad. If you become an e-resident of Estonia, you can use some of the digital services available to Estonian citizens, such as setting up an Estonia-based company. E-residency helps Estonia generate business activity for Estonian companies, from independent contractors to small companies with clients worldwide. More than 18,000 people have since become e-residents,” he said.

Come to think of it, if this concept was applied here, it would solve our manpower [shortage](#) problem. It's like having Singapore permanent residents who live somewhere else. One condition needs fulfilling though. Singapore would have to be a really, really Smart Nation which is extremely “networked”.

Then this may happen: “In the future, digital platforms can tap into labour based abroad, without even setting up a Singapore-supported industrial park abroad. Such platforms, like Konsus, already exist. Konsus matches high-end independent contractors or freelancers with projects, including when the freelancer and the project client are based in different places. If cross-border supply of services increases, Singaporeans may be able to work with co-workers and clients based abroad, as if they were physically present in Singapore.”

Mr Ho thinks that Singapore is capable of overcoming constraints because, ironically, its small size makes it easy to change course – or do a course correction – quickly. Quick changes are inherent in Singapore's DNA, which was why it succeeded from moving from Third World colony to global city.

But who's going to steer the boat and will the people row? It comes back to politics and leadership.

“A key source of Singapore’s strength has always been our people’s trust in fair competition and just reward for effort and achievements, compassion for the unfortunate, and a restless yearning for continuous progress. The points on trust and compassion bear emphasising. This has to be carefully fostered by the leadership because, without it, it would have been impossible for our leaders to forge consensus on far-reaching policies and tough trade-offs between different priorities, interests, and groups.”

The above is from his fourth lecture.

But I prefer the way he [discussed](#) leadership in his second lecture.

“Change requires leadership, because it means leading people out of their comfort zone. Getting them to change is an act of will. The future-fit leader has to persuade his people to believe in the need for change, instil confidence in change, and empower his people to change.

“Successful leaders of change also make their people brave enough to express their opinions, change their behaviour, take risks, and learn from failure. They tolerate mavericks – even if they do not embrace them – because all future-fit organisations need mavericks. They are the ones who are prepared to challenge conventional wisdom and come up with the ideas that can change the rules of the game.”

Yup. Everyone needs to open up their minds, challenge orthodoxy and even slaughter some sacred cows. And if it’s done in the country’s interest, no one should be batting an eyelid. That’s the way to find our future.

Majulah Singapura.