

Singapore Perspectives 2016 in depth: Who are “we”?

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THE Middle Ground attended part of the Singapore Perspectives 2016 conference yesterday. We wanted to watch the parade of potential prime ministers. If that sounds cheeky, it's only half tongue in cheek when you consider that the four key speakers were: Ministers Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, Heng Swee Keat and Ng Chee Meng.

They were there to discuss the meaning of the word “we”, or at least various aspects which determine what makes up Singapore and Singaporeans. We dive deep into the content of the first two panels.

First panel: Collaborative Governance?

In the first panel of the conference, titled “Collaborative Governance?”, topics such as what constitutes “good governance” and the increasing diversity of Singapore’s political arena were raised. Questions like the need for transparency, increasingly diverse political views, the PAP’s ruling power, the artistic community’s unhappiness and even the demolition of Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s 38 Oxley Road house were also discussed.

Minister Chan Chun Sing, secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, fielded the questions. And although we tried to keep his comments (and later on, Minister Ng Chee Meng’s as well) as accurate as possible, we had to paraphrase some bits and include some background info as well. Frankly, the questions were somewhat better than the answers.

For clarity, questions are placed in indented blocks, while answers will be in normal text formatting.

Question One:

Minister, I take your point on the need for shared goals and trust, and I think tripartism is an interesting example because it does deliver on the good policies and good outcomes that you were talking about. But one criticism of tripartism that’s often made in Singapore is that the process often takes place behind closed doors, and much of the debate and exchange of views and the compromise isn’t quite seen. So many people think that there isn’t that robust exchange of views. How do you go about making sure there’s that qualitative change in that process?

– Mr Warren Fernandez, Chairman of the Panel, Editor of The Straits Times

[Note: Tripartism refers to the collaboration among unions, employers and the G. To read more on closed door and open door political discussions, you can read Bertha’s article [here](#).]

Minister Chan Chun Sing: Just because we engage in tripartism doesn't mean we have different perspectives. It'd be odd if we didn't. The question is – what will allow us to have a better outcome? Open debate works sometimes, closed door consultations work at other times, but we must be able to use both processes and other processes to engage our people. Even so, it doesn't mean the union leaders, employers, or government officials have the same view if it is a closed door discussion.

Closed or open door discussions aside, what is most important is that the people involved come to the table with a shared goal, and the same values of respect, trust and humility. Whether we do it behind closed doors or open ones won't stop us from finding out solutions that would meet the needs of everyone in the country.

Question Two:

This idea of collaborative governance is not something that's very new. In fact, we've been talking about this for many years. For example in SG21, we had a huge consultation on active citizenry, what Singaporeans want, that everyone mattered, and so on. Now we have Our Singapore Conversation, so the number of people that participated in these consultations increased from around 6,000 to 47,000. But how exactly have we moved in terms of collaborative governance – in terms of the qualitative change, not just the numbers that have grown? What do you actually value in this consultation?

– Ms Lee Huay Leng, Editor of Lianhe Wanbao, and Senior Vice President (New Growth) of Lianhe Zaobao

[Note: The Singapore 21 committee was launched in Aug 1997 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, formed to discuss and study issues that Singapore would face in the 21st century. Our Singapore Conversation is an initiative first announced by PM Lee in 2012; it was a public-engagement exercise, where the G would hold dialogue sessions – or conversations – with the people.]

Minister Chan: Actually, when we talk about collaborative governance, I don't have just in mind things like SG21. For me, we have a current model that works very well. And this model means having to work on our common goals and transcending our differences. It's about acting collectively to make a decision, to take responsibility for what is done. Collective governance isn't just about conversation. It requires us to take collective action. It is easy to say, not easy to do, because in this process you require trust, respect and humility – humility to say that each may have our own perspectives but each of us may not have the best perspective.

Question Three:

I feel we might be now going into a situation where we have adjectives doing the work of nouns. For example, we might go into this binary of good and bad politics, collaborative and non-collaborative. My question is – I think we all agree with importance of collaborative governance. But how do we get there? How do we get to shared values? My concern is – we have almost finessed collaborative governance. We have trade unions and the people's sector, all very intimately tied to the ruling party. In the event the ruling party becomes incompetent or corrupt,

how do we then prevent Singapore from going through a systemic collapse, because you have all these key levels compromised?

– Associate Professor Eugene Tan, School of Law, Singapore Management University

Minister Chan: This is something we, as the Government, keep asking ourselves. How do we bring in people with diverse perspectives, how do we bring in stabilisers in the system, to constantly check themselves? At which point do good policies reach its point – and how do we know this? We know we are a small nation with little resources. So we know that we, as a nation, need to move fast. But there's always a tension between moving fast and being blindsided. But then again, if we keep on quarrelling with each other, then how do we move fast at all?

Our concern isn't whether the PAP will rule forever. Our concern is whether Singapore will last forever. Political parties are there to lead, but political parties must also change with the changing times, to evolve, to ensure the higher goal that the country is sustained, to continue defying the odds of history, and that's what we're out to do.

Question Four:

Minister Chan, while these are very good points you've brought up, my question is a little more fundamental. When we talk about governance, the question is, who is this governance for? I thought it was very interesting that you brought up the idea about the investors. And I think I speak for many Singaporeans who feel very often that the perception that governance is for the benefit of the investor may be wrong. Whereas there are academics within the institution which hosts this meeting, which did a very good study of Singaporean studies to immigration a few years ago. They showed that one in four young Singaporeans is actively considering migrating from Singapore. My question is: Do you think that we should try and address this question of what is the purpose of governance? For the investor, or for the one in four Singaporeans who's trying to actively get out of Singapore in the next five years?

– Professor Paul Tambyah, Professor of Medicine at the NUS, Singapore Democratic Party

[Note: In his speech earlier in the day, Minister Chan shared a story where he spoke with a group of mid-level executives. He asked them for their views on where they'd invest and put their money in the next 15 years. Most of them chose places like the US, China and India, and their reasons? Of resources and demographics – which Minister Chan said that Singapore did not have.]

Minister Chan: There are two purpose of governance: Firstly, for better lives and for the livelihood of Singaporeans. Secondly, to be good stewards and to leave a better future.

Throughout the years, there will be definitely people who come and leave. And there is no country that will be able to say that its policies will attract everyone. If I talk to my own residents, on the grounds of Tanjong Pagar, their needs are simple – is my life better than yesterday? Are my children going to have a better future than me? And these are two very fundamental questions that if any government manages to fulfil, I'm sure it will gain the trust of its people.

I think that as Singaporeans, we are practical people. We also understand that as society becomes more diverse, there will be greater desire for plurality of views. That's why we have the NCMP and NMP models. We don't need to put in this model if we don't want to. Or if we feel we don't want to listen to alternative opinions. I think the Government recognises that in order to govern well, we need this plurality of views. And this doesn't mean that all 80-odd people from the ruling party all share the same views, by the way. But they do share one common view – that they want a better future for Singapore. All else can be discussed and negotiated. The unifying factor must be that – regardless NCMP, PAP, NMP – we must be united by the want to deliver a better Singaporean.

Question Five:

Minister Chan I hope you will not mind if I ask you two provocative questions.

Firstly, the PAP is probably the most successful political party in the world. But it is a victim of its own success. Former Minister George Yeo has once compared the PAP to a banyan tree, and the banyan tree has such a huge canopy that it doesn't allow things to grow under its shadow. So he spoke of the need to trim the banyan tree. This was in 1991, during his lecture on civic society. My question is: Is the party aware, and acknowledges the need, to trim the banyan tree further in a new Singapore? Would the party give more room to civic society, to civil society, and reduce the role that it plays? I give you an example. I'm often puzzled that so many PAP MPs are leading so many sporting organisations, even though some of them don't seem to have any obvious sporting credentials. So why doesn't the PAP trust the people and allow people who are sportsmen and sportswomen, who have excelled in these sports, but who are also men and women of integrity, to lead these organisations?

My second question: There's some unhappiness in our artistic and cultural community. In the past year, two events have caused a lot of unhappiness. A film produced by a very prominent and respected filmmaker, and a book grant given by NAC was subsequently withdrawn. My question is: Can we expect, in the years to come, the continued growth of what I'd call a "culture of tolerance"? Will the Government embrace the continued growth of culture of tolerance, a culture that respects and accepts a diversity of viewpoints, a culture that accepts alternative views and does not seek to punish those who express these different views, either by banning a film or withdrawing a book grant?

– Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Special Adviser of the Institute of Policy Studies and Chairman of the Centre for International Law, NUS

[Note: While both the filmmaker and the book grant were unnamed, Professor Koh was probably referring to Tan Pin Pin's documentary feature on political exiles, *To Singapore, With Love* (2013), which was banned from public screenings in Singapore since Sept 12, 2014 – it carries the Not Allowed for all Ratings classification. As for the book grant being withdrawn by the NAC, he was probably referring to artist-illustrator Sonny Liew's graphic novel, *The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. The NAC said in May 2015 that it had "sensitive content".]

Minister Chan: Yes, we are a victim of our own success. Should anything go wrong, we must come in to arbitrate. Have you stopped to wonder if you are sitting on our side of the line, how often you wish you didn't have to be the final arbiter? With regards to the sports associations, I think many of the MPs, unless they are already involved in the sport, would ask themselves: why do I need to do this? You cannot just be a figurehead. So if the MP can value-add, go ahead. If the organisation decides they want a particular MP, then by all means do that, because other MPs would have other preoccupations.

And even if organisations like the football association lose a match, what will the Government do about this mess? Do we have to solve everything? I would gladly ask someone else to come and help us up, to bring us to greater heights.

About the arts community. How we wish that the community can settle amongst themselves – how to define various arts classifications, what is good art, and so on and so forth. The reason why we set up the NAC was because we needed to take in all the different advice from all the public – not just the arts organisations. Finding a consensus across society isn't easy. But the arts community also needs to convince the rest of Singapore that their decision is right. Plus, arts isn't just about collaboration within the arts community. What is allowed and what is not allowed has great diversity of issues beyond the arts community. It takes into account the arts community and the larger community out here. It's not that straightforward.

Question Six:

Firstly, the people need certain information and data. The sense of transparency has to come across to build trust with civil societies. If we don't have any data on, say, where is the poverty line in households – which has never been really defined – it's hard to gauge how many people are left behind, and what we need to do collectively to help these people rise up. How many people are on welfare? If that could be something the Government could be more transparent about, it could help us all come up with more ideas.

Secondly, the point I'm raising is not new. We need to feel places in Singapore we're nostalgic about. I think many people would agree that bringing down old national library is an old mistake. Chinatown has become so modernised that there is no soul. And so that comes to the latest matter, on Mr Lee Kuan Yew's house. Basically that is a building of huge historic significance. I would say that many people would like to see this house preserved. So I would therefore ask, if the current leaders of PAP have the courage to preserve this house not be intimidated by one man's wish.

– Ms Angie Chew, member of the audience

[Note: In December last year, PM Lee recused himself from any governmental decisions regarding his father's house. And while it Mr Lee Kuan Yew wrote in his will that he wished his house be demolished after his death, it would be up to the G to decide whether his house at 38 Oxley Road would be ultimately demolished.]

Minister Chan: As we go forward to build a Smart Nation, more data will be shared. But even with more data comes the question – how do we make best use out of this data? With regards to the poverty line, it's been something I have personally examined for a long time, in my previous capacity as Minister for Social and Family Development, and as a young economics student. I don't think the world can be defined so simply and so neatly as one line. We have a continuum of people that need different kinds of help. To define a single line might be convenient, but not that effective. I believe Singapore doesn't have just one poverty line, but many.

Yes, we miss many of the landmarks. At each generation, we have to ask: To what extent, and how prepared we are to allow our next generation to build their dreams? There is no easy answer. If each and every one of us holds dear to what we cherished, and allow no space for the next generation to build their dreams, then we won't move far.

With regards to Mr Lee's house, whether it's preserved or not, there will definitely be a diversity of views. If you take a poll, right here, right now, I'm sure you might not get a uniform answer. The question is – what is the best way to honour him? Is it to keep the house? Or is it to leave the spirit and dream that he stood for? My answer is that I hope that beyond the house, that this generation and the rest will uphold the very values that built this nation. The best way to honour him is to continue to make sure that Singapore will continue to succeed for generations to come, that future generations of Singaporeans have the chance and the desire to want to be called Singaporeans.

Second panel: Cohesive Diversity?

The second panel, on Cohesive Diversity?, tackled issues such as how to integrate new migrants into Singapore, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) persons, and how local divides of race, language and religion have changed over the years. Questions such as whether the Chinese Malay Indian Others (CMIO) race categorisation model should be scrapped, minority representation in Parliament, and whether the pledge should be altered were raised in the Q&A section.

Minister Ng Chee Meng, Acting Minister for Education (Schools), and Senior Minister of State for Transport, fielded the questions.

Question One:

The CMIO model has been the typical approach in which we approach governance and policy-making in Singapore. It filters into housing, education, and more. However, I question if this model is still capacious enough to accommodate the greater diversity in Singapore today. We see the Others category expanding, and at the same time is that the irony is that within the Chinese and Indian categories, we see growing differentiations, with new migrants coming from China and South-Asia. I wonder if the CMIO model is still a good way to go about managing ethnicity, the intersecting types of identities and the different kinds of people converging in Singapore today.

– Associate Professor Elaine Ho, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

Chairman of the panel, Mr Walter Fernandez, Editor-in-chief, Mediacorp: Do you have an alternative model for the CMIO model?

Associate Professor Ho: Personally I think the CMIO model has served its purpose. It's probably been about 50 years now, and I would actually like to see these categorisations dissolved, more so. I realise we do have mixed-race categories now but that's just another form of categorisation.

Minister Ng Chee Meng: If we want to answer this, we have to ask – is it practical? How do we balance this need for idealisation, the need to identify with other people, while being practical at the same time? Plus, if we do away with this categorisation or blur the lines here, how would we then represent our minorities? I would be very careful to move away from principles that have served us well for so long. But it is a long journey ahead of us, and I believe the better approach towards such sensitive topics is to allow for evolution. To allow time, to allow space, for these policies to take place.

Professor David Chan, panel member: I just want to remind ourselves that we all have social identities. It gets activated. I can't change my race. So we must be careful when we talk about things like the CMIO model because there's some things that are fundamental. We didn't choose to be a particular sex or race and so on. It becomes important that we must not have a policy that makes such fundamental identities a disadvantage or advantage. If you don't want to talk about CMIO, is it that necessarily a good or bad thing? Anonymous surveys show that I can be incredibly Malay and still be incredibly Singaporean. What exactly, then, are we doing away with when we throw away the CMIO model?

Question Two:

With the competing of shared identities, like the Muslim or Christianity community, comes the need for a new leadership. My question isn't just about the process – but more about the how. What kind of leaders do we need? Is it the kind of leadership in Mr Lee's time? Or the consultative and inclusive kind of leadership as seen under Minister Goh Chok Tong? Do we need good economists, or good union leaders?

– Unnamed member of the audience

Minister Ng: In Mr Lee's era, cohesive diversity was not great. Rather, the tensions in society were pulling us apart. So what kind of leadership did we need in that period? Consultative? Would that have worked as well? We wouldn't know, because we can't turn back the clocks of time. But as we succeeded, we grew, came up with good ideas, with which our leadership style evolved. In each era, we can't just put a form of style of leadership into a vacuum. We need to understand the context of that particular time and find a way forward.

In this era, I believe many of us want our voices to be heard. Just like this conference, with around 1,500 people here waiting for their voices to be heard. At this stage of our country's evolution, we can collectively speak in a rational manner, to find out who thinks what, how can we think better, and ultimately, how do we design policies that move us collectively forward – like the pledge – as one united people?

Question Three:

I'm just concerned that the CMIO model has been segmented to such an extent that it defines national identity into such narrow categories, and ignored the proliferation of other minority groups. 'We' as a category shouldn't just be limited to Singaporeans. Some are temporary migrants, some are new permanent residents, some are potential citizens. 'We', in terms of citizens and Singaporeans, ignores a large part of our population. Are there ways to think of it in more nuanced ways?

Associate Professor Elaine Ho, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

[Note: The recent debate over the CMIO model was raised in an ST article in November last year, which discussed how the term came to be used as a race classification and its particular pain points. This is especially so considering more and more people fall into this category, with the rise of inter-racial marriages in recent years. TMG also spoke to 40 Singapore citizens who fell under the Others category, to see how they felt about the race categorisation issue.]

Minister Ng: I believe these things take time. And many a time, it takes individuals like all of us – individuals who function in a community – to ensure that minorities aren't ignored. But, I must say that being a Singaporean citizen must have its own unique privileges. If not it's very difficult to define a Singaporean state.

Question Four:

My question is with regards to rights about the minority community, like the LGBT community, and single mothers. Now, we are often told when we are talking about issues that deal with these communities, that such issues are polarising, and it is most practical and beneficial to wait for society to evolve before we can see any change implemented in our policies. I have two observations.

One, it means that protections of such minority interest would only be granted when the majority approves. That kind of defeats the purpose of protecting the interests of the minorities.

Secondly, the time and pace of waiting for these changes to happen might not keep up to the needs that we need to deal with – i.e. bullying of LGBT children in schools, housing needs and healthcare needs. My question is: While we're waiting for society to evolve, should the Government, or is there a role of the Government to intervene to take steps to protect minority interests in the meanwhile, and to help change misconceptions of such minority communities?

– Unnamed member of the audience, from non-profit movement, Pink Dot SG

Minister Ng: In some ways, the best way forward is to allow for time to step in, to allow society to evolve and change. Perhaps overtime we'll find new equilibriums that society at large would accept it. However, I would separate the LGBT minority community with single mothers; they aren't in the same category. In these areas, we can design policies to help. For example, single mothers with needs for housing. In other policies, however, we have to allow time.

Question Five:

My question is: How are we to achieve cohesive identity when groups like single mothers and LGBT are marginalised, marginalised at the edges of society in the sense that they don't achieve the same rights and benefits, like childcare benefits or rights to reserve BTO flats. For example, the petition to remove Adam Lambert from the New Year countdown attracted 20,000 signatures. And the next day, there was a counter-petition, attracting a similar number of signatures. Here we have two very different groups, with very different world views. On one hand, a group with pro-family values, who believe in the nuclear family unity, and the other with a more liberal view towards LGBT rights. My question is – does the Government have a definitive stance on LGBT rights, and how it going to handle this delicate clash of values?

– Ms Foo Ai Long, National Junior College student

Minister Ng: I have no new answer for you, because I have answered the previous gentleman. When you talk about two different views, do we come into the conversation to force our viewpoint, or do we come in with the humility and respect to consider other viewpoints? At the end of it, how do we look at the solution as the best way forward? It's not just a simple debate. Maybe the solution is to allow for the luxury of time for evolution. It won't be satisfactory for a young girl like you, but in the human dynamics of society and governance, sometimes time is a great resource. There will definitely be issues we won't have consensus over. We will just have to find a way forward under this umbrella that is Singapore.

Question Six:

The pledge is a kind of 1965, 1966 finalisation. And while race, religions and language are there, gender is not. I think it is a primary issue when we want to talk about diversity, because in our constitution too, gender is not there. I'd like to hear the views of yourself, Minister Ng, when gender can come both into the pledge and the constitution?

– Unnamed member of the audience, from a local civil society

Minister Ng: Well, I agree. Political leaders will never really get all the answers; I will never have the answer for you, it won't be my view whether or not the pledge should be changed, but it should be ours. This forum is to listen to your views. If that is something Singapore wants to think about, then we can have a conversation about it.

Professor David Chan, panel member: Gender is quite different from racial groupings. Half of the world is male, and half of the world is female. If I stop seeing you as male or female, there will never be the Woman's Charter. Likewise, if I stop seeing people as part of the CMIO categorisation, I will not have the HDB quota system. If we need to reexamine such categorisations, I would ask, are you sure? The Government needs to find a way to activate my other different social identities. If you and I disagree on LGBT issues, surely you and I have more in common than our sexual orientations? Are we also not Singaporeans? Do we not believe in social harmony and respect for human dignity? And if we do, then, can we talk about such issues with these parameters of social harmony and respect in mind?

Question Seven:

I am just a young Singaporean. I was an all-SAP Chinese school kid. From primary school, all the way to junior college. I would actually like to say, please do away with SAP schools, because I really wish I had grown up, played with, learnt with and fought with people from different races, and yet still had the same access to resources as I did in my SAP school. I also don't understand why we're wondering if we should walk away from the CMIO model, because it was a simply reductive model to begin with. Why don't we just learn from the CMIO model and take this, and look ahead with it? Perhaps the reason why a lot of Singaporeans have problems dealing with new alternative communities coming into Singapore was because we've been programmed, educated and taught to reproduce these reductive models of identity instead of relating to one another as individuals.

– Unnamed member of the audience

Minister Ng: If we see the CMIO model as the root of the problem, then we should do away with it. But we have to think about the first time it was introduced – even back then, even the Chinese were diverse. There were different clans and different dialect groups, the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, etc. If we had to rethink the model 50 years ago, without it, what would happen? Will we be able to pull ourselves together? So I say this with humility – of course there are always better ways to do things. But have we done well in the past 50 years with these resources? Now, we have the luxury of strength. And we have the luxury of talented individuals – like you – to move a way forward.