

Celebrating diversity rather than single Singapore identity: Ho Kwon Ping

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Noting that former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has essentially created a hegemonic Singapore national identity for us, SR Nathan Fellow Mr Ho Kwon Ping said that Mr Lee's recent passing serves as a poignant reminder about how it is now time to forge our own identity based on a collective of diverse identities and histories.

Mr Ho was speaking at the last lecture of his "Singapore: The Next Fifty Years" series, which examined the evolution of Singapore society and our national identity. The lectures were an initiative by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Mr Ho Said that the common narrative of what makes up the Singapore identity – a migrant society, resilient, globalised, egalitarian, meritocratic – were attributes that any other society can identify with, which essentially makes the American Dream and the Singapore Dream "almost interchangeable".

"But this is more the immigrant's Dream of Singapore than the Singaporean's Dream," he said, "simply because many citizens do not feel that they can achieve anything if only they just tried."

"Yet it is crucial Singapore's continuing survival and well-being to maintain, to nurture, and to polish this Dream, both in terms of keeping its borders open to the outside world, as well as maintaining social mobility within."

Mr Ho identified three broad tasks to achieve this – strengthening the cohesive diversity that underpins our identity; improve social mobility and a culture of egalitarianism; and build a collaborative mode of governance and an information-rich society.

Cohesive diversity, always messy

Mr Ho suggested that Singaporeans are divided by cracks surfacing in traditional fault lines as well as newer social pressures.

The ethnic segregation of Chinese-Indian-Malay-Others (CMIO) no longer make sense, as new immigrants meld into this mix but increasingly keep to their own cliques of former national identity. There are also newer divides showing in class and status differences, as well as marginalised groups within Singapore.

Mr Ho suggested that the first thing to do is to "consciously blur or even abolish the CMIO model's simplistically rigid racial categories, and welcome the multiple identities and more complex sub-ethnicities which is increasingly the real Singapore today".

Doing so fosters a certain chaos that “has its own logic”, which would help Singaporeans realise that “there is no clash with reality and therefore no cognitive dissonance”, whereby everyone is different because there is no need to fit into a certain social mould.

However, Mr Ho clarified that doing away with the CMIO model does not mean that we simply choose to believe that “racial and minority support is no longer important. We must continually have real diversity in leadership and everywhere else.”

“We must always celebrate (diversity) and execute it through our actions, the fact that diversity in Singapore is not just a lip service term, but is actually a living reality.”

Mr Ho also noted that, beyond racial and ethnic distinctions, there is also a need to recognise marginalised communities, including the voices of foreign and transient workers, single mums, and the LGBTQ community, and there should not be “an invisible community overlaying the visible Singapore, with uneasy points of contact which can become flashpoints”.

Social mobility and egalitarianism

Beyond accepting diversity, Mr Ho also believes that there is a need to improve meritocracy in our education system.

“Ironically, the original social leveller and purest form of Singapore-style meritocracy – our educational system – may perpetuate inter-generational class stratification rather than level the playing field.”

Mr Ho proposed that streaming and the PSLE be scrapped in favour of a through-train model for the first 10 years of education to allow students more time to develop; doing away with proximity of school allocation, as the top schools tend to be located in affluent estates; revise the Gifted Education Programme in favour of a more broad-based programme that encompasses both special talent and special needs students; and doing away with the ‘A’ Levels in favour of an aptitude test that measures critical thinking.

He believes that radical steps to review the education system are needed, just as the PAP has taken similar steps in the early years. “We cannot presume that what has worked in the past 50 years will continue to work for the next 50.”

And for the government to set the example for education, he suggested that the Administrative Service “changes its recruitment criteria to replace academic pedigree with psychometric and other aptitude tests which create an open and level playing field, can we start to have a continuous, dynamic meritocracy where one’s destiny is not already largely determined at 12 years old, reinforced at 18, and virtually fixed at 22 years old.”

Collaborative government, information rich society

Mr Ho also identified areas of improvement for citizens to be more involved in creating their own identity through an active civil society.

He described civil society as “a loud cacophony of voices, of disorganised aspirations, of an exciting market place of ideas.”

“A paternalistic governance culture may need to change to a collaborative model in the future... However, such a governance culture of participatory democracy can only work if the institutions of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making.”

To realise this, civil society players need access to freely available and largely unrestricted information, so that they may actively engage with each other and the government with the right knowledge, instead of simply repeating their causes.

However, Mr Ho cautioned against “joining the bandwagon” of implementing a Freedom of Information Act, as that in itself is not meaningful and equally prone to abuse by errant states.

Instead, he proposed to legislate a Code on Information Disclosure which is “not legally enforceable but morally binding”, which requires ministries to employ independent Access-to-Information Officers such as retired judges, to evaluate and give written replies to information requests. Media and the public can also monitor and pressure the government in cases of non-compliance by ministries.

With access to information, Mr Ho said that it would be unavoidable that younger Singaporeans will start to re-write history, but this should be seen as healthy, as “the attribute of critical enquiry and continual search for the truth, will stand the next generation in good stead as they transit to becoming the leadership generation.”

“We should trust in our young people enough to allow space for them to develop their own opinions. In the end, our future leaders of Singapore should be bold enough to own the future rather than defend the past.”

Singapore identity – a messy mix, not a single fabrication

In closing his last lecture as an S R Nathan Fellow, Mr Ho shared his personal experience and why he chose to be Singaporean – “My simple answer... is that here, I do not feel a stranger.” He believed that this was the same call that brought migrants to our shores, and the same sentiment that should connect Singaporeans despite our differences.

“We should not feel lost if we are not able to define a single common identity. We are all identities in creation, and the end result will not be uniform. Instead, by sharing stories of who we are, we find resonance with each other. These collective stories can kindle of sense of “being Singaporean”, even if we cannot articulate or pin down specifics.”