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A Discussion on the Political Discourse Surrounding Immigration in Singapore

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As Singapore recently celebrated her 46th birthday, it is timely to reflect on how far we have come. No longer focused on quelling communist sentiment or racial riots, Singapore's leaders have focused their attention on pertinent issues at the global-local interface. The issues today are different from those encountered as a nation in its nascence and the manner in which political discourse is articulated has also changed.

Scholars like Sim Soek-Fang and Christopher Tremewan have theorised about how political discourse has changed throughout Singapore's modern history. While first-generation PAP leaders relied on "coercion", it has gradually given way to a less forceful management of dissent that is more ideologically based (Sim 2001:53). Indeed, in the past, an explicit PAP-knows-best tone was taken as exemplified by then Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew's 1986 National Day Rally speech:

> I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet if I did not, had I not done that, we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn't be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters— who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. That's another problem. (Lee 1986 cited in Tremewan 1994:2)

Since the late 1980s, a middle class has emerged to demand greater involvement in policy making. Christopher Tremewan has indicated that this better educated and more autonomous class posed a "potential threat to [PAP's] control" (1994:231). Thus, in order to maintain their political stronghold in Singapore, PAP leaders have, and have had to, manoeuvre around such sentiment and take a different tactic. The evolution of the style of political discourse in Singapore today is evident. Today's speeches feature a subtler manner of persuasion. In articulating the government's stance, more tact is put into addressing and negotiating the tensions that Singaporeans face. In this piece, I examine how the issue of immigration has been articulated in recent speeches (from 2009 onwards). I find that instead

of didactically spelling forth policy, the speeches show an effort to ingratiate with the people by using subtle techniques of persuasion.

At the heart of the discussion on immigration is the tension between change – which is often taken to connote progress – and stability, which brings with it a sense of security for the citizenry. Political speeches carefully tread the line between the two poles when it comes to immigration. An inflow of new immigrants of course, results in a state of flux and anxiety for Singaporeans, and this change is presented by leaders as a necessary one to bolster Singapore's ageing work force and keep us competitive in the global arena. Yet, at the same time, the influx of foreigners also appears as an incursion into our national territory, threatening traditional notions of citizenship and national identity. Rem Koolhaas, a foreign architect, puts it well when he says that a "systematic erosion" of "tradition, fixity, continuity" has and continues to take place, leaving Singaporeans "in a convulsion of uprooting, a state of permanent disorientation" (cited in Kwok 1988: 25).

How have leaders in Singapore couched immigration issues? In the early phase of Singapore's development, the tone was more authoritative. However, from the mid 1990s, there was a shift towards a more consultative tone. In the recent discussion, the leaders seem to have used a language that emphasises security and safety for Singaporeans via three themes in their speeches: 1) framing of Singaporean forefathers as immigrants, 2) emphasising the significance of citizenship, and 3) maintaining Singapore's ethnic mix.

Framing of Singaporean Forefathers as Immigrants

A running trend through many speeches has been the constant reference to Singapore's roots as an immigrant society. In PM Lee Hsien Loong's 2010 National Day Rally Speech, he said "had our ancestors not come here, today, Singapore would not exist, so we have to continue to be open today so that we bring in the right people, manage the difficulties whatever they may be so that a generation from now, Singapore will still be thriving and prospering" (2010). A two-fold leap of logic has been made as thus: firstly, Singapore's success today has been contingent on our immigrant past and next, that because immigration has worked out well for Singaporeans in the past, continuing to accept the right kind of immigrants will ensure our continued prosperity. Therefore, with a historical precedent, it follows that admitting certain kinds of foreigners would be a safe thing for Singapore to do. Such rhetoric repositions the security of Singapore's national boundaries as not one that should be threatened by all foreigners, but should be porous to the right (read: talented and highly-skilled) sorts of people.

This romanticised view of our immigrant history is in stark contrast to those held by leaders at the time of Singapore's founding. Strikingly, back in 1968, then PM Lee Kuan Yew highlighted the self-serving aspect of our migrant past when he addressed the nation at the National Day Rally. He believed that a society made out of migrants was not a cohesive one, and rejoiced that Singapore had left that stage behind: "No longer are we just a selfish self-seeking lot of disparate and shortsighted migrants" (Lee 1968). Leaders today seem to have selectively chosen to reiterate the benefits of a migrant past while shunning problems that an immigrant society had to struggle with. Such discourse carefully appeals to our sense of ancestry, assuring us that this path of having relatively open borders is natural. This chosen

theme, repeatedly delivered, assures Singaporeans of stability amidst the immigration reality of change.

Apart from referring to Singapore's immigrant past in encouraging the local citizenry to accept the influx of immigrants, this motif has also been employed to assuage integration tensions. In then Deputy PM Wong Kan Seng's speech delivered during the Committee of Supply debate last year, he played on this theme to urge Singaporeans to accept the different cultures of immigrants: "On our part, Singaporeans need to be more tolerant and understanding of the different habits and practices of workers from different cultures. Some of us would recall that 40-50 years ago, we shared the same habits. In the coffee shops, you would see spittoons under the table" (2010). The same gesture of highlighting our past is made; what is implied is that since older Singaporeans have shared similar experiences, Singaporeans could continue to be tolerant towards the cultural behaviours of newcomers, in a similar manner that our forefathers displayed.

Our current immigrant influx has been presented as a historical continuation of Singapore's immigrant origins. Articulated thus, the speeches have made efforts to portray migratory movements as inevitable for the country's development. These are attempts to address the apprehension of citizens as some become increasingly resentful of people who seemingly look, act and talk strangely in their communities.

Symbolic and Material Concessions to Citizens

As people become increasingly mobile across national borders, traditional notions of loyalty, membership, and citizenship are thrown into disarray. Scholars have debated how transnational migrants challenge the nexus between identities and borders (Vertovec 2004) because they often reside in a country where they are not citizens and claim citizenship in a country they do not live in. Otherwise, they may hold multiple citizenships or self-identify with more than one nationality. For instance, it is estimated that more than half a million children born in the United States each year have at least one additional nationality (Aleinikloff and Klusmeyer 2001).

While Singapore has not gone the way of countries like Australia and Switzerland in moving towards dual citizenship, the presence of the foreign-born has been sufficiently pervasive as to spawn national debate about what it means to be a Singapore citizen vis-à-vis those with other statuses. The Straits Times has featured a recent slew of articles with headlines such as "Concern about loyalty and insecurity" (Lin and Chang 2010) and "Minding the gap between the pink and the blue" (Hussain 2009). Indeed, Singaporeans are concerned that their country is treated as a revolving door for many Permanent Residents (PRs); they flock to Singapore during affluent times, only to leave the country during periods of economic uncertainty. Low explains in her article that this citizenship anxiety is especially pertinent for post-war baby boomers who cannot compete with the foreign talent based on pure competency alone. Indeed, they may "feel marginalised in socio-political terms if being Singaporean carries no added merit" (Low 2002: 420). This results in a state of uneasiness and discontentment, for they are increasingly feeling displaced from their own society.

To address these concerns, political speeches have placed a recent emphasis on the significance of Singapore citizenship, and have further bolstered the distinction between

citizens and all others who reside in Singapore by introducing tangible policies. Political speeches made by ministers have thus positioned citizenship as a zone of privilege and a status of refuge.

That citizens should be top priority has been reiterated in speeches numerous times over the past two years. In 2010, PM Lee Hsien Loong emphatically stressed this, saying that "although we will continue to welcome good quality PRs and new citizens who can contribute to Singapore, we stand by the principle that Singaporeans come first in their own country" (2010). Following this, speeches made by then Deputy PM Wong Kan Seng in 2011 also indicated that "the government has pledged that Singaporeans' interest comes first" and that the underlying principle for the government is that "Singaporeans will enjoy priority over non-citizens" (2011). In PM Lee's National Day Rally speech this year, he too, spelt out this priority out. "Whether it is houses, whether it is university, whether it is jobs," he said, "we put Singaporeans first but in an open-minded sort of way" (Lee 2011).

Besides the vocal proclamation of the protected nature of citizenship, leaders have also taken steps to introduce material concessions in their speeches to highlight the benefits enjoyed by citizens over PRs. For instance, PM Lee introduced the National Service Recognition Award in his National Day Rally Speech, which he says "is for citizens only" in acknowledgement of the "sense among Singaporeans that citizens are carrying a heavy burden" (2010). The award is worth about $9000 and will go towards the National Servicemen's education and central provident fund (CPF) account. In the 2011 National Day Rally Speech, the PM also said that universities would implement a cap on foreign student enrolment, to allow the proportion of local students to increase (Lee 2011). Such a distinction between citizens, PRs and foreigners has also been accompanied by concomitant changes in housing and health subsidies. The leaders have articulated these changes as necessary to reassure Singaporeans of their valued position within society.

Maintenance of Ethnic Balance

Furthermore, beyond emphasising stability based on the *jus soli* (Latin: right of the soil) principle, political speeches have also tried to preserve a sense of order by highlighting the maintenance of ethnic balance in Singapore. This policy is not a new one. It was also evident back in 1989 when the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong took place and many Hong Kong residents chose to emigrate, with Singapore being one of their main countries of choice. Then PM Goh Chok Tong placated worried Singaporeans by saying that the government would maintain Singapore's present multi-racial balance. If immigration from Hong Kong increased the percentage of Singapore's Chinese population disproportionately, the government would restore the prevailing multi-racial balance by increasing immigration of Malays and Indians from the region who met the same criteria (1989). More recently, in a reply made in Parliament, then Deputy PM Wong Kan Seng stressed that the government has been monitoring the composition of immigrants, careful not to allow their influx to "upset the current mix of races among our population" (2010). In a separate speech, he also highlighted the importance of "maintain[ing] stability in our ethnic mix" (Wong 2011). Thus, by articulating their intent to preserve the current ethnic composition, leaders believe they are offering citizens, especially minorities, a sense of stability. While Singaporeans may have colleagues and neighbours from foreign lands, it is suggested that their similar ethnic background could form the basis for developing a common identity and shared

understanding, which could mitigate the magnitude of change. Maintaining the status quo of our ethnic mix is also presented as crucial to Singapore's multi-racial cohesion and national stability.

Conclusion

Singapore's leaders have often couched their political rhetoric on immigration within the notions of safety and stability. By appealing to our country's immigrant past, vocally and tangibly privileging the status of citizens, and expressing the intent to preserve the current ethnic mix, leaders have sought to lay the foundations to allay the fears among citizens regarding immigration. While this piece focuses on the overtures that political leaders have made to Singaporeans through their speeches, whether or not such rhetoric has perforated the ground successfully remains to be seen. Political discourse on immigration issues in Singapore tries to bridge the chasm between change and stability, but these tensions are difficult to manage—after all, they culminate from a complex nexus where nationality influences notions of ethnicity, class and gender to shape immigration outcomes.

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The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

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