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ByInvitation

The enduring ideas of Lee Kuan Yew

Integrity, institutions and independence – these are three ideas the writer hopes will endure for Singapore.

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March 23 will mark the first anniversary of the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. On that day, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy will be organising a forum, The Enduring Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew.

The provost of NUS, Professor Tan Eng Chye, will open the forum.

The four distinguished panellists will be Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, Foreign Secretary of India S. Jaishankar, Dr Shashi Jayakumar and Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed.

This forum will undoubtedly produce a long list of enduring ideas, although only time will tell which ideas will really endure.

History is unpredictable. It does not move in a straight line.

Towards the end of their terms, leaders such as Mr Jawaharlal Nehru, Mr Ronald Reagan and Mrs Margaret Thatcher were heavily criticised. Yet, all three are acknowledged today to be among the great leaders of the 20th century.

It is always difficult to anticipate the judgment of history.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would suggest that three big ideas of Mr Lee that will stand the test of time are integrity, institutions and the independence of Singapore.

I believe that these three ideas have been hardwired into the Singapore body politic and will last.

INTEGRITY

The culture of honesty and integrity that Mr Lee and his fellow founding fathers created is truly a major gift to Singapore.

Mr Lee constantly warned of the dangers of corruption.

Speaking at the World Ethics and Integrity Forum 2005 in Kuala Lumpur on April 28, 2005, he said: "When the present Singapore Government took office in 1959, it had a deep sense of mission to establish a clean and ethical government. We made ethical and incorruptible leadership a core issue in our election campaign.

"It was our counter to the smears of pro-communist Barisan Sosialis and their unions."

Mr Lee had also said earlier, when he was addressing Parliament on the issue of the suicide of Minister for National Development Teh Cheang Wan in 1987: "The strongest deterrent is in a public opinion which censures and condemns corrupt persons, in other words, in attitudes which make corruption so unacceptable that the stigma of corruption cannot be washed away by serving a prison sentence."

Singapore is clearly one of the few corruption-free countries in the world. Yes, there have been a few recent high-profile cases of corruption. And our ranking in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index has slipped from No. 5 in 2013 to No. 8 last year. We should not, therefore, be complacent.

Many Singaporeans take this culture of honesty for granted, just as they take the clean air of Singapore for granted, until the haze comes along.

Just as we should proactively think of ways and means to prevent a recurrence of haze, we should proactively think of ways and means of strengthening the culture of honesty. We can learn lessons from other countries.

One of Singapore's biggest strengths is that we have one of the largest foreign reserves in the world. This is our ultimate insurance policy.

If things go badly, as we have no natural resources to fall back on, we will depend on our resources.

Even though most of us do not know the exact amount of all our reserves, we go to bed peacefully every night not worrying about what is going to happen to them.

We know that many honest hands are protecting them. This is an enduring legacy of Mr Lee.

By contrast, many oil-producing countries have frittered away their wealth. It would appear smug for Singaporeans to cite negative examples. Hence, I will refrain from the game of "name and shame".

Instead, I will cite an example of an oil-producing country we can learn lessons from: Norway.

It has done a spectacular job of protecting its savings. Its method of protecting these savings is to make them highly transparent.

It speaks well of our leaders and institutions that there has been no shrinking of our geopolitical space since Mr Lee's departure. He and his fellow founding fathers had generated a high degree of political confidence in Singapore's independence among our citizens.

If you go to the website www.nbim.no, you can see what is coming in and going out of Norway's sovereign wealth fund, the Government Pension Fund of Norway. The website lists all the investments of the fund, including details about equity management and investment strategy.

Quite remarkably, Jakarta intends to be more transparent than Singapore in sharing information about its Budget procedures.

Last December, Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama said: "We will also upload the detailed Budget to our website jakarta.go.id, so residents can immediately monitor our spending."

I led a group of our LKY School students to call on him on Feb 24 this year. He said that all expenditures, including those of his office, would be on the website.

Clearly, we live in a different world when Jakarta becomes more transparent than Singapore about its revenue and expenditures.

INSTITUTIONS

Mr Lee was equally committed to building strong institutions in Singapore. This meant that the prediction of famous Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington would never come true. Professor Huntington had famously said in 1995 that "the honesty and efficiency that Senior Minister Lee has brought to Singapore are likely to follow him to his grave".

Mr Lee has been gone for a year. Yet, it is almost certain that many of the institutions he built will stand the test of time.

These include – in alphabetical order and not in order of merit – the civil service, the education system, the foreign service, the intelligence services, the judiciary and the military, to name just a few of the key institutions.

The strength of these institutions is reflected in the fact that most Singaporeans wake up in the morning expecting clean and safe streets, a reliable supply of electricity and water, regular garbage clearance, good schools and universities, a strong and predictable rule of law, and no fear of a foreign military invasion. Each of these attributes is a major gift. Yet, we take them all for granted.

Still, many of our institutions can be improved. Regular readers of my columns will already be aware of my concern over the risk-averse culture that is developing in our civil service.

Our founding fathers – including ministers and permanent secretaries like Mr Howe Yoon Chong, Mr J. Y. Pillay, Mr Sim Kee Boon, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Mr Philip Yeo – were prepared to take big risks and stick their necks out with bold proposals. It is hard to find similar examples today.

At the same time, we are acutely aware that the formulae that delivered 50 years of exceptional economic growth to us may not work in the next 50 years.

We have to be exceptionally bold and try some out-of-the-box options. But a risk-averse civil service is clearly not designed to do this. How do we change this culture? It will not be easy.

History teaches us that risk-averse companies and organisations do not succeed over time. Have we therefore planted seeds that will eventually drag us down? To quote Mr S. Rajaratnam, we must "think the unthinkable".

INDEPENDENCE

Another thing we take for granted when we wake up in the morning each day is our "independence".

This confidence in our "independence" is quite remarkable. Mr Lee used to constantly warn us of the inherent fragility and vulnerability of Singapore. Yet, paradoxically, his strong personality and huge global standing significantly expanded the geopolitical space of Singapore and made Singapore look very strong and stable.

Before he passed away, I had believed that with his departure, the geopolitical space of Singapore would naturally shrink because it is unnatural for a small state of 719 sq km – one of the smallest states in the world – to enjoy as much geopolitical space as we do in the international order.

It speaks well of our leaders and institutions that there has been no shrinking of our geopolitical space since Mr Lee's departure.

He and his fellow founding fathers had generated a high degree of political confidence in Singapore's independence among our citizens. We have shown our independent streak in the way we handled former Indonesian president B. J. Habibie's dismissal of Singapore as "a little red dot".

We now wear it as a badge of pride and stick our chests out and say this little red dot will endure.

This high degree of confidence in the durability of this little red dot is inspiring. But it is also worrying.

Small states should never be too confident about their future. Instead, they should always be paranoid. This, therefore, will remain one of the eternal existential dilemmas for Singapore: We have to be both paranoid and confident at the same time.

In short, to survive, we have to be able to sustain a strange neurotic condition. If we can do this for the next hundred years, we would have demonstrated that the legacy of Mr Lee has stood the test of time.

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