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ByInvitation

Figuring out the right path for political evolution

Singapore needs to take a middle road of introducing gradual change and encouraging participatory politics

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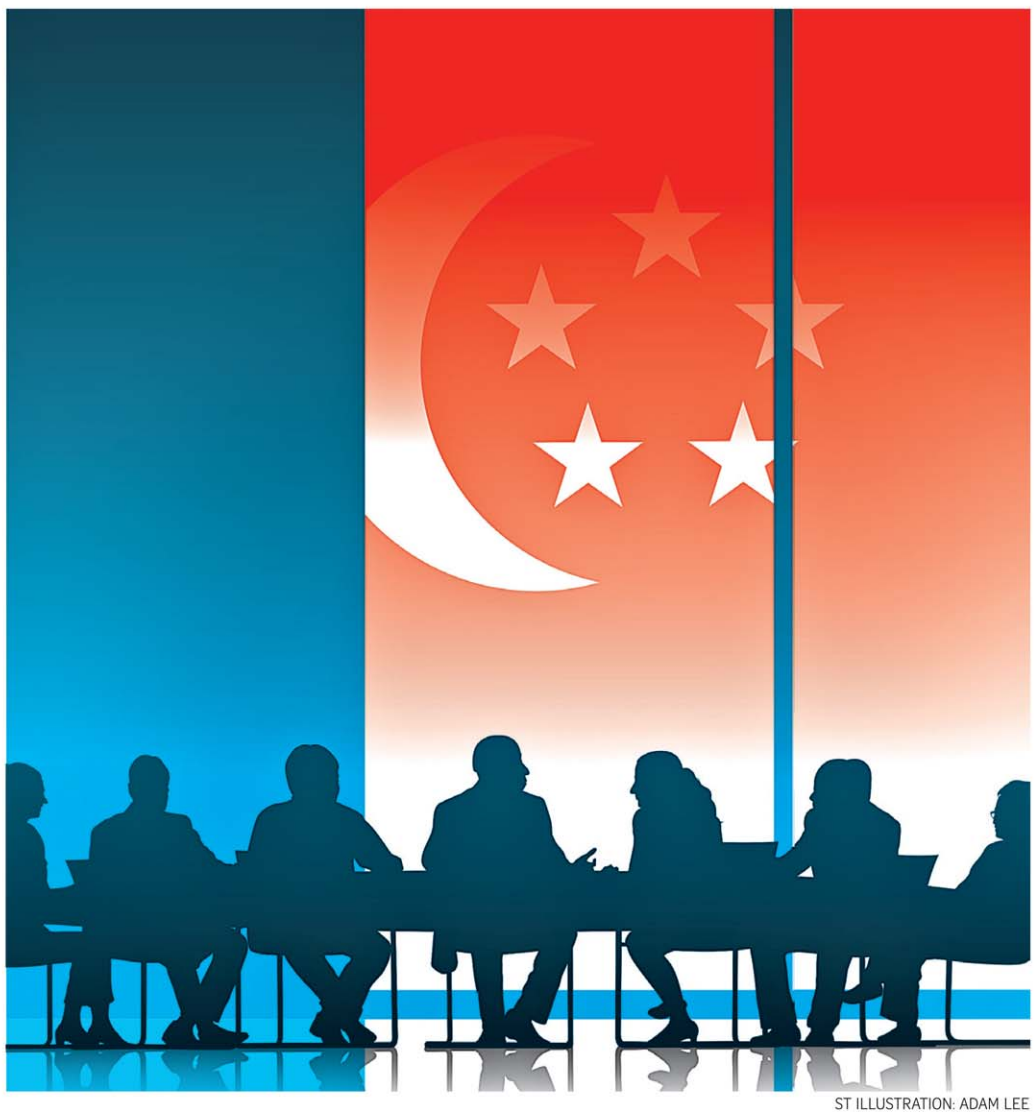
For The Straits Times



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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is part of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKY School) at the National University of Singapore. It is probably Singapore's best-known think-tank. It was set up in 1988 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who said he wanted "an independent think-tank to offer credible alternative views on government policies".

In an effort to encourage different points of view, IPS has launched a series of IPS-Nathan Lectures, delivered by the S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. So far, we have had three sets of brilliant lectures given by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Mr Bilahari Kausikan and Mr Peter Ho. Both Kwon Ping and Peter spoke about the changing political environment of Singapore.

It is natural that Singapore's political environment has to evolve. This is because we have now gone from Third World to First World, and our needs and aspirations have changed accordingly. In his third lecture, Mr Peter Ho describes well how this process happens: "As government policies lead to improvements, the needs of the people change in tandem. This is explained by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's proposition was that after the basic physiological needs of a person are met, more complex psychological needs will have to be fulfilled. At the top of this hierarchy of needs is the need for self-actualisation, which is to realise the individual's potential, and transcendence, which is helping others achieve self-actualisation.

"So, if you accept this proposition, then after government has delivered on the basic needs of food, security, shelter, transport and health, expectations of the people are going to change, not in demanding more of the basic needs, but in fulfilling their more psychic needs in the upper reaches of Maslow's hierarchy, including social, emotional and self-actualisation needs."

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, we have learnt that one of the best ways to achieve self-actualisation is to participate in the political process. As Aristotle said: "The end of politics is the best of ends." He explained that "if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good".

More recently, Dr Francis Fukuyama has also explained the importance of political participation. He wrote: "A good political system is one that encourages the emergence of political outcomes representing the interests of as large a part of the population as possible... Ideally, democratic decisions would be taken by consensus, with every member of the community consenting."

Accordingly, Mr Peter Ho suggests that the Government should "shift from the paternalistic and interventionist 'government to you' and 'government for you', to 'government with you'. The imperative is for government to move towards a collaborative approach to policymaking, and be prepared to connect, consult and co-create with the people and the private sectors".

However, political change is inherently difficult. Once you start a process of change, many unexpected consequences arise. Hence, it would be unwise to think that change is easily managed. For proof of this, just look at the United Kingdom. It has been trying to manage political change since the promulgation of the Magna Carta in 1215. Few countries are as experienced as the UK in managing political change.

Yet, even the UK can make serious mistakes. As prime minister, Mr David Cameron initiated a referendum on Brexit to satisfy his right-wing party colleagues. This led to the disastrous Brexit decision.

His successor, Mrs Theresa May, thought she could strengthen her negotiating hand with the European Union by calling for early elections. Instead, her hand weakened.

If a well-established democracy like the UK can make disastrous mistakes like these, it would be sheer folly to assume that Singapore can manage political change easily.

FRACTIOUS OR CONSENSUAL?

Since political systems are difficult to change, we can start by changing our political culture. The same political system can have different cultures. The United States and the Scandinavian countries have democratic systems. However, while American political culture has become increasingly fractious, the Scandinavian states have retained their consensual cultures.

Our current political culture has strains of both. Prof Mahbubani experienced this at first hand after he wrote his last column, Qatar: Big Lessons From A Small Country.

Some of the responses reflected the fractious political culture of the past. Mr Lee Kuan Yew used to say: "If you take me on, I will put on knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac."

That was an appropriate instrument to use against hard-line communist opponents. If the communists had won, all our founding fathers could have gone to jail, or even been killed. Knuckle-dusters were an appropriate instrument to use in that political era.

However, as Mr Peter Ho stated, our society has changed. Knuckle-dusters are no longer an appropriate instrument to use in our current well-educated, middle-class society. There should no longer be a culture of fear dampening debate in Singapore.

The effects of a culture of fear can extend into the economic realm. We need political openness in order to have open intellectual debate. A culture of open intellectual debate allows people to take diverse viewpoints and encourages them to consider and discuss new ideas. In turn, this encourages entrepreneurship.

Both Silicon Valley and Israel demonstrate this link between political openness and entrepreneurship. That is why Singapore, which is trying hard to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, must objectively assess the current state of its political culture and how it needs to be changed to encourage greater entrepreneurship.

The many thoughtful and well-considered responses to the Qatar debate reflect the fact that Singapore society has matured. We need to encourage and strengthen this strain of civil debate in Singapore. The Our Singapore Conversation initiative was a good move in this direction, and social media provides a useful platform for such conversations to carry on.

But while it may be easy to move towards greater openness in theory, this move could well have unintended consequences in practice. As we have seen in several Western societies, free speech has also led to hate speech.

Singapore is too small and fragile to allow such hate speech.

As Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said last year: "In the US, their idea of free speech means you can burn the Quran, attack Muslims, attack others. Here we have zero tolerance for people who make bigoted, divisive statements. If a person makes such statements, the ISD (Internal Security Department) will talk to him, and where necessary take further action. You burn the Quran, or any other holy book, you go to jail – no two ways about it...

"We have built something precious, fragile but precious. And we try hard to strengthen trust, deepen understanding between the races, religions, and reject religiously intolerant teachings."

As our politics becomes more participatory, we must decide as a society what form our debate should take. We can choose whether we want to have a fractious or a consensual culture.

FACILITATING PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

Ultimately, the benefit of having an open debate on public policies is to decide which policy directions are the most appropriate in Singapore's context. Thus, a good debate would fulfil the function of assessing the policy options which have been raised. That is why it is not enough to dismiss opposing points of view out of hand, even if they are not cogently argued. Instead, it would be more useful to apply the "principle of charity", and consider the strongest possible interpretation of an argument.

Fortunately, as Singapore is a multicultural society, embracing diversity is one of our core values. We already have a good foundation for embracing diversity of opinion.

The Government's role in fostering a more participatory political culture is equally important. For example, if public debate is seen to have no real effect on policy, there may be no incentive for Singaporeans to engage in debate.

The Government can also choose to facilitate such debate. When Mr Ho Kwon Ping spoke about the need for political change in Singapore in his lectures, he said: , "A paternalistic governance culture may need to change to a collaborative model in the future. This is already happening with the abundance of debate about directions facing Singapore in the post-LKY era.

"However, such a governance culture of participatory democracy can only work if the institutions of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making. For that to happen, civil society players need access to that lifeblood of robust discussion: freely available and largely unrestricted information."

The key message of this column is that while bringing about gradual political change is not easy, we must not choose to do nothing.

The danger of "freezing up" political change is that, over time, it could create a build-up of political tensions, which could lead to a political earthquake. Hence, slow and gradual change is always the preferred option.

To help the Government achieve this, it may be useful to set up a committee of wise men and women to assess the pressures on our political culture and system for the next decade and to make recommendations for change. It should be a committee that represents all the strains in Singapore society.

Singapore has many political veterans, such as retired ministers, who can contribute their first-hand experience of politics in Singapore to such a committee. At the same time, this committee should include some of Singapore's independent political voices. Clearly, some young voices also need to be included to ensure that we understand the aspirations of young Singaporeans like Kristen .

As discussed in a previous column by Prof Mahbubani, Singapore's success "has led to a natural result of success: a culture of risk aversion... one of Singapore's biggest challenges in the coming years".

It is a fact that Singapore suffers from a high degree of "groupthink". A report which just says that we have the perfect political culture and require no changes will have no credibility. Nor would a report that says we need a revolution. In short, we need to find a delicate middle path to tread as we try to engineer gentle political change in Singapore.

Let's hope that a committee on future politics will be able to work out such a middle path for us.

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