

By Invitation

# The next summit in inter-ethnic ties

Singapore has prevented strife, to build a harmonious interracial society. Next is to build solidarity, so that all Singaporeans have confidence that their skills and ideas will be evaluated on merit, not based on stereotypes.



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For The Straits Times

August, the month of our independence, is always a month for celebration and reflection. We should count our blessings. We should also have a clear-eyed view of the challenges we face. The greater the national consensus on the challenges we face, the more likely we are to succeed in overcoming these challenges.

What makes Singapore unusual in the community of nations is that we have more blessings than most countries in the world, especially newly independent countries.

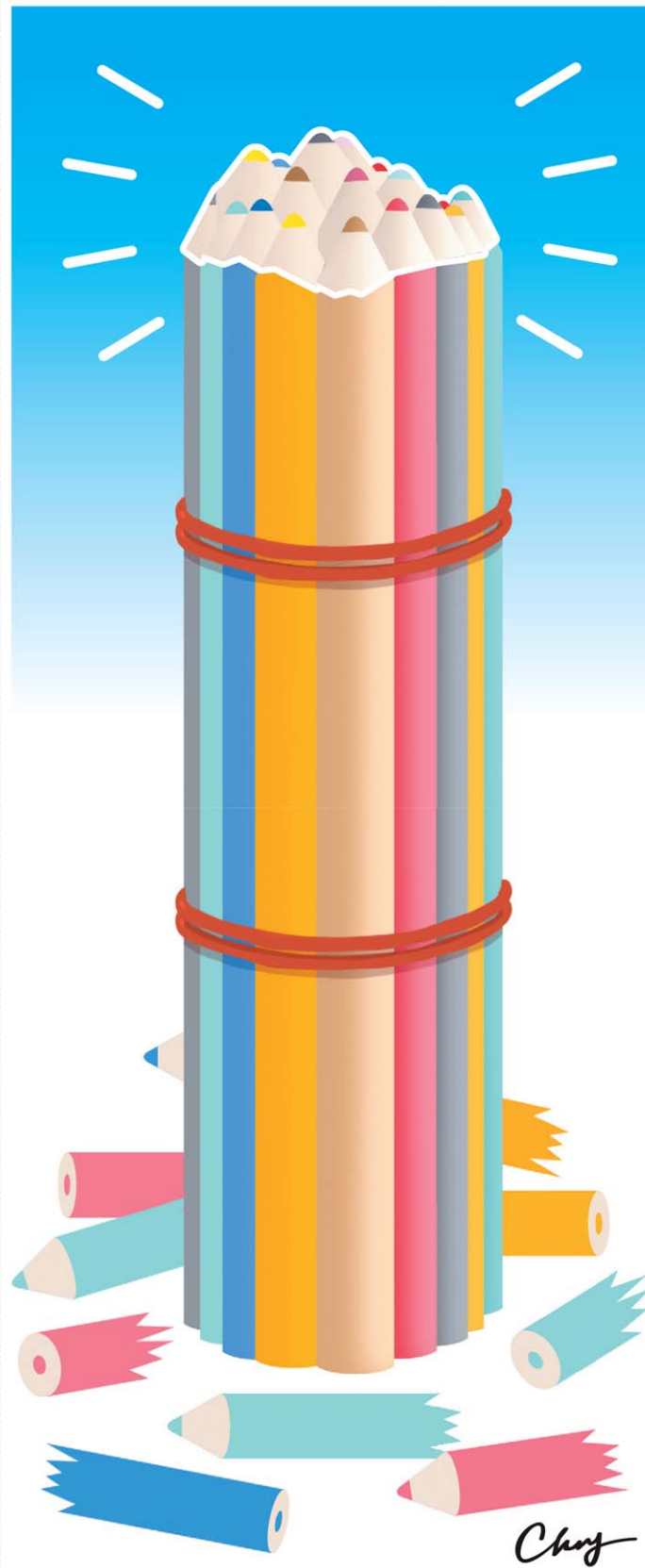
A simple test is to compare Singapore's track record with that of the other small multiracial colonies the British left behind in all corners of the world: Cyprus, Fiji, Guyana, Sri Lanka, Uganda. All of these countries have experienced civil strife in one form or another. Singapore is the only one which hasn't.

We have not just avoided inter-ethnic strife. We have outperformed all of them in economic development. At Independence, on Aug 9, 1965, our per capita income was just over US\$500. Today, it is nearly US\$53,000 (S\$72,000), an increase of over 100 times.

By contrast, the per capita incomes of the multiracial colonies have gone up as follows: Fiji by 16 times, Guyana by 13 times, Sri Lanka by 25 times and Uganda by five times.

Our economic record is outstanding. Most countries, especially the Western industrialised countries, paid little attention to environmental concerns while they were developing. London and Berlin were filled with soot during their years of rapid growth. So, too, were Beijing and Shanghai. By contrast, we never lost sight of our need to protect our environment. We enjoy clean water and clean air (except when the haze comes).

Equally importantly, we have expanded our green spaces. The preservation of the Botanic Gardens could have been expected.



The decision to build Gardens by the Bay, the world's most expensive garden, in the heart of the financial district, was a totally unexpected and absolutely brilliant decision. It sends a loud signal about the kind of society we are.

As a regular jogger in East Coast Park, I also marvel at the wise decision to preserve this long coastal park. In many other countries, developers would have intruded into such valuable land. We haven't allowed that to happen here.

While counting our blessings, we cannot ignore the most basic requirement we have as human beings: to feel personally safe when we step out of our home and walk onto the street. In Singapore, we take this for granted. In most other cities, we cannot.

When the legendary Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington came to Singapore, he spotted a lone Caucasian woman walking alone on a dark road after dinner. Professor Huntington was shocked by the sight and worried about her safety. I assured him that she would be okay. Our police force doesn't get enough credit for the remarkable job it does in keeping Singapore safe. It should be counted as one of our biggest blessings.

## FROM CHALLENGE, COMES OPPORTUNITY

Of course, Singapore is not a utopia. We face challenges. Some of the challenges are visible; some are not. On the economic front, despite our exceptional track record, we face the same challenges as other advanced economies. Jobs are melting away.

Here is a commonly cited example: in 1998, Kodak had 170,000 employees worldwide and sold 85 per cent of all photo paper worldwide. Within just a few years, its business model disappeared and it became bankrupt.

It was, therefore, wise to set up a high-powered committee chaired by Minister Josephine Teo to support professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) by matching them with jobs in five growth sectors which are likely to be affected by disruptive technology. "Even against global headwinds, these five sectors in Singapore are growing and creating new jobs for PMETs. Our goal is to help Singaporeans access these opportunities," she said.

Jobs will disappear in many sectors. Soon, we will not need taxi drivers any more. Indeed, none of us will need a driving licence. This is how Forbes describes the vision of entrepreneur and CEO Udo Gollub on the future of cars:

"Self-driving cars will soon be available to the public. Disruption of the auto industry has already begun. You won't need to own a car any more. You will call a car with your phone, it will show up at your location and will drive you to your destination. You will not need to park; you will only pay for the driven distance and you can be productive while travelling. Our kids may never get a driver's licence and never own a car. This will change cities, because they will need to contain far fewer cars. We can transform former parking space into parks. Currently, more than 1.2 million people worldwide die in car accidents every year. While we currently experience one

accident every 60,000 miles (96,500km), with autonomous driving, this rate will drop dramatically, saving perhaps a million lives each year worldwide."

This development provides both bad news and good news for Singapore. The bad news is that taxi drivers will lose their jobs. The good news is that this will enable the fulfilment of the zero-car ownership dream for Singapore that I spelt out in my column in this space on Dec 12, 2015 ("The road to a car-less Singapore").

Just imagine how much more beautiful Singapore would become if the total car population on our tiny island were to shrink from one million to 300,000 (an MIT study reports that this is possible with a shared fleet).

Imagine converting all the parking spaces in Singapore into either green parks or free multi-storey playgrounds. Imagine streets with no parking space allotted to them. Every street in Singapore could have designated bike lanes. Personal mobility devices need no longer dangerously compete for space with pedestrians on walkways. The moral of this story is a simple one: every challenge also comes with an opportunity.

## FROM PREVENTING STRIFE TO CREATING SOLIDARITY

The same is true with another challenge we face. As stated earlier, we have been extraordinarily successful in preventing inter-ethnic strife. But we have not been equally successful in creating a deep sense of inter-ethnic solidarity. We live in peace as fellow Singaporeans, but we still don't have a deep understanding of each other's cultures.

Just last year, Channel NewsAsia commissioned a nationwide survey on race relations in Singapore, in partnership with the Institute of Policy Studies. The survey found that many racial minorities in Singapore have faced negative treatment based on race, and that "about 60 per cent of respondents across races had heard racist comments".

Indeed, recent events have illustrated such racial insensitivities. In April last year, Sarah Carmariah described her experience of employment discrimination at Prima Deli. At a job interview, a head of department at the bakery told her, "You Malay, I think you cannot lah". Thankfully, when this incident came to light, Prima Deli took it very seriously. This year, actor Shrey Bhargava described his experiences at a movie audition, in which he was asked to perform exaggerated racial stereotypes.

A 2015 study in the *Journal Of Social Issues* found that "shifts in the quality of any minority representations (in popular media) can have implications for the majority group audience's attitudes towards the minority group".

Stereotypes, whether negative or positive, limit our understanding of individuals based on our narrow perceptions of the group which they belong to. In contrast, a deep understanding of another culture includes recognising its great diversity.

To us, the fact that Singapore is a highly diverse multiracial and multicultural society is one of its greatest assets, and one of the most important aspects of Singaporean identity.

While Singaporeans have many shared experiences, the differences in our backgrounds also give each of us a unique perspective. This means that we have a larger pool of ideas in all aspects of life, from entrepreneurship and public policy to philosophy, food and art.

But if we are to benefit from this diversity, we need to make sure that every Singaporean has confidence that his/her skills and ideas will be evaluated on merit, not based on stereotypes. Every Singaporean must have confidence that in our society, his/her unique identity – including race, language, religion and gender – is a valued asset, not a limitation. When this happens, it will be the mark of true social solidarity in Singapore.

It helps to have success stories from all communities. They serve as "heroes" who can inspire young people in each community. Quite remarkably, from the very beginning, we had outstanding individuals emerge from each community. The three key founding fathers we had were Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S. Rajaratnam. The first president we had was Mr Yusof Ishak, whose face still adorns all our currency notes. Our second president, Dr Benjamin Sheares, was from the Eurasian community.

It helps that four out of seven of our presidents since Independence have come from the minority communities. This deeply enhances the sense of ownership of Singapore among these communities.

We will have a fifth president from a minority community this year. If Madam Halimah Yacob runs and wins, she will also become the first tudung-wearing and first woman president Singapore will have.

Madam Halimah's life story is also an extraordinary Singaporean success story, demonstrating that the remarkable Singapore track record of social mobility is alive and well.

This is why many nations around the world continue to admire the Singapore success story. We are truly blessed that we have a lot more to celebrate each August than most countries.

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