

# Let's not lose sight of the big picture



The 6m-tall steel lion taking centre stage at the National Day Parade. PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES



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Growing up in the '70s, I was not a big fan of the Lee Kuan Yew government.

I say Lee Kuan Yew and not the PAP as that was how I perceived it as a teenager.

In fact, I was quite critical about many of the policies, among them the bilingual policy.

I strongly felt that one should be allowed to choose one's second language and not be forced to study one's mother tongue.

I voiced my views at the dinner table and often got shushed by my dad.

The years went by and I continued to have issues with government policy.

When I applied to *The Straits Times* for my first job after graduation, I had to write an essay as part of an entrance test.

I wrote a scathing piece about the controversial Graduate Mothers' Scheme which gave the children of graduate mothers priority admission to schools and which was reversed a year later.

I came home and told my parents: "Don't get your hopes up, I am not going to get the job!"

To my surprise, I was called up for

an interview and to my bigger surprise, was eventually offered a job, not with *The Straits Times*, but with the soon to be launched *The New Paper*.

I took the job and later joined *The Business Times*.

Years later, I joined *Tamil Murasu*, Singapore's only national Tamil daily.

And so there I was, sitting in the editor's chair. I, who had pooh-poohed the bilingual policy, was comfortably earning her keep and not so comfortably swallowing her words. Father must have been smiling to himself.

The hard truth is, if not for the bilingual policy, I would not have been able to hone my ability to read and write Tamil effectively.

And though I lost touch with the language after leaving school, it didn't take long for me to pick up from where I'd left off, because the foundation was there. And for that, I am grateful.

Grateful too as a mother, that I am able to speak to my children in their mother tongue. They struggled with it in school but looking back now, it was worth it.

They have both spent the last few years overseas and we FaceTime a lot, often breaking into less-than-perfect Tamil because there are things we talk and laugh about that are best said in our mother tongue. It's the language of our souls. It bonds us and reminds us

of who we are.

Now, with the wisdom that comes with age, I can see the big picture.

Singapore's policies aren't always perfect but, on the whole, we get most things right.

Last Friday, I had a pass to the National Day Parade but was dreading the crowds, the queues and the long, humid wait before the start. In the end, it turned out to be a wonderful experience.

The young ushers from all races were well trained and full of energy as they warmly greeted everyone with "Welcome to the parade" and thanking everyone as they left. Everything ran like clockwork, as do most things in Singapore.

I was in awe as I witnessed the daring Red Lions dropping out of the sky, the magnificent aerial acrobatics display, the sleek tanks rolling past and that glittering Lion as it roared on the Padang.

I looked across and saw Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad taking pictures with his handphone and felt a sense of pride.

The Padang was rocking and rock singer Ramli Sarip brought on the goosebumps with his soulful rendition of *Majulah Singapura*. I waved my flag and sang my heart out.

Afterwards, as I made my way out towards Raffles City with streams of

people dressed in red and white, I was reminded of the peace and harmony we so often take for granted. The recent "brownface" incident also crossed my mind.

An E-Pay advertisement had featured a Chinese actor portraying a woman in a tudung and a man with dark skin.

People vented their anger online and two siblings posted a controversial rap video. The Government stepped in. The siblings had crossed the line.

It was a stark reminder that after 54 years of nationhood, race remains a contentious issue in Singapore.

It's something we've yet to get right.

So let's talk about it by all means, but let's do so with respect for each other's feelings lest we lose sight of the big picture and fracture the fragile peace that we have.

I was still deep in thought as I walked into Raffles City to meet my husband for dinner.

The world was in turmoil. Trade wars, airport sit-ins, suicide bombings, mass shootings, Brexit.

I am in a good zone. And this is home...

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