

Back to a focus on the long-term future

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Some weeks back, a colleague cracked a pithy joke in a meeting. He asked: “What is the point of doing research in ageing if we are all going to be underwater soon?”

He was, of course, being facetious (though not by much, I think).

In any case, given that the climate crisis took centre stage at this year’s National Day Rally speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, my colleague proved to be quite prescient.

Putting the climate crisis – and the catastrophic consequences such as extreme weather, rising sea levels, pandemics, climate refugees and so forth – on the national policy agenda, as well as committing the not inconsiderable sum of \$100 billion to mitigate and adapt to the crisis, albeit over the next 100 years, struck many people as surprising.

It might even be seen as misplaced, given the real and pressing short-term problems such as disruptions from the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the proverbial and perennial “bread-and-butter issues”.

Let me say that I am not privileging one over the other; we have to somehow manage both. It was also a surprise to me as one who works in the field of futures thinking and scenario planning, though a welcome one.

It was a surprise not because the climate crisis actually made the national list of “Really Urgent Things To Do”, but because it took that long to make the list. It is even perplexing, given how practised the Government is in thinking for the long term.

But despite being a “future-oriented” society – as Mr S. Rajaratnam put it in a 1979 speech – we have tended to define the “future” in a particular way, and almost exclusively in economic and materialistic terms.

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space. There was, frankly, no other way to see it. The optimism that the future is a blank slate on which to impose our design and apply our energy was precisely the right galvanising force for a country embarking on a trajectory of economic and material progress.

But as sociologist Barbara Adam puts it in her book *Future Matters*, perceiving the future as an open space is to also see it as “emptied of content and extracted from historical context”.

She points out that there is a dark underbelly to this sort of unbridled yet narrowly applied optimism. The future ends up being a resource that we in the present commandeer and use without compunction. She writes: “We can forget that our future is the present of others and pretend that it is ours to do with as we please, with our imagination, creative skills and technological prowess.”

I might add that, in nations’ drive for development, moral responsibility to unborn generations to care for the planet often falls by the wayside.

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PM Lee’s speech is a reminder that our present is the discounted future of our progenies, born and unborn, exploited for our benefit in the here and now. The climate crisis drives home the inconvenient truth that the open future was always a fiction; there was always to be a reckoning and a price to pay.

To be sure, I expect the Government to draw criticisms for according the climate crisis such attention. The charge will probably take the form of being blind to the present material challenges of modern life, that it is an indulgence in idealism or even of being in thrall to some Western liberal green agenda.

It is nothing of the sort. It is, in fact, pragmatic and not anti-materialistic at all.

The point is, even though Singapore is often described as materialistic, I do not think we have done materialism well at all.

If we – not just Singapore but as a human species – were truly and properly materialistic, we would not be treating our environment, our finite resources and our bodies the way we do, but according much more respect to all things material.

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