

The book Lee Kuan Yew asked for, but didn't live long enough to read

The author of *A History Of The People's Action Party: 1985-2021* on how the book, 10 years in the making, arose from a request from Singapore's founding prime minister



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The mic drop came one minute into the interview: It was founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew who, in mid-2011, asked Dr Shashi Jayakumar to write a book on the history of Singapore's ruling party. Given how fundamental Mr Lee was to the book, Dr Jayakumar – who is a senior fellow and head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies – felt the proper way to credit him was to state in his speech yesterday Mr Lee's key role, rather than simply a brief acknowledgement in the introductory matter.

Indeed, there is little mention of Mr Lee in the acknowledgements section of *A History Of The People's Action Party: 1985-2021*. Only near the bottom of Page 717, among a list of interviews with politicians, is there a brief entry: "Lee Kuan Yew, 28 Dec 2011". Mr Lee was in a reflective mood after the watershed 2011 General Election, and had made it clear he wanted two things: First, an academic approach to the history of the People's Action Party (PAP) compared with an earlier 2009 book, *Men In White: The Untold Story Of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* – in short, a treatment of the PAP not solely as a political party, but also the PAP in government.

Second, something young people could read. He feared they were losing their grasp of the fundamentals of what made Singapore special, and what must be done for it to continue to thrive and prosper. "He was concerned with the overall survival of Singapore, and said several times that young people may well want something else and say: 'Let's try the other side,'" said Dr Jayakumar. He added that Mr Lee did not dictate what he should write, and urged him to speak to as many people as possible, including those from the opposition. "It was very much Mr Lee's view that no view should be consciously shut out."

With its extensive bibliography of interviews, oral histories, parliamentary and party speeches, and personal correspondences with politicians and government officials – not including over 130 pages' worth of appendices and even more footnotes at the end of each chapter – the book would take another 10 years to complete. But in 2011, Mr Lee was already becoming frail, and he would not live to read it.

A 10-YEAR LABOUR OF LOVE

The book gives a dispassionate account of the party's strategies – from the use of the PAP Community Foundation (PCF) to bring people into contact with the party socially, emphasising the responsibility of running town councils so that residents would think twice about voting in weak opposition candidates; to a system of "markers" in Parliament who were assigned to rebut opposition members.

Some will remember the cuts in the number of PCF kindergarten places in opposition wards, or the votes-for-upgrading strategy in the 1990s – which the book notes were products of internal thinking at the time that those who voted for the PAP should be privileged in some way over those who did not.

Dr Jayakumar spoke of the fallibility of people's memories, the fragmentary nature of surviving documents from the archives, and the occasional difficulty of reconciling them with the details of events.

He cited an internal caucus that Mr Lee held after opposition politician J. B. Jeyaretnam won the 1981 Anson by-election – where Mr Lee had asked those MPs who agreed to hand over the community centres and residents' committees (RCs) to Mr Jeyaretnam, to raise their hands. "I talked to various people who



Dr Shashi Jayakumar, author of *A History Of The People's Action Party: 1985-2021*, before the book launch at the NUS University Cultural Centre yesterday. He is head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

were at this meeting, looked at what available documents there were, and I was able to identify more or less who had raised their hand. But when I asked them, some could not remember," said Dr Jayakumar.

In fact, Mr Lee and others among the top leadership had already thought things through. They had made the decision not to hand over the community centres and RCs, given that these were part of what the PAP had fought so hard for. But MPs were asked to raise their hands so Mr Lee could "test" them, especially the newer MPs.

There was also a group of older MPs who, having been retired during the PAP's major renewals in the 1980s, felt hard done by, by the party. "Some who had been with the party since the 1960s did not have educational qualifications at a higher, especially tertiary, level. Several were relatively young, and among some there was this feeling of being cast aside while still having something to offer. So this renewal, which is core to the DNA of the party – and it has to do that – actually cuts in another very painful way."

He added that while they intellectually understood the need for renewal, they felt as if they had done something wrong while still vigorous, and when they still had much to offer. "Today it's different – two terms, three terms, step down – you do not get judged in terms of public perception as having done something wrong."

PRAGMATISM

The book also touches on the themes of pragmatism, trust, and renewal that undergird a party which sees itself not just as a major political player, but possibly the only national institution capable of taking Singapore to the next level.

Freed from the shackles of ideology, successive PAP governments tackled perennial pain points such as housing, transport and education. Sometimes, the moves were spurred by the sting of election losses – from shelving unpopular policies such as the Graduate Mothers' Scheme in the 1980s, to more help for lower-income groups following the 1991 General Election, and building more HDB flats after 2011.

There was a philosophical shift over time. Take, for example, the 1989-1990 exercise to come up with shared national values. Then PM Lee Kuan Yew objected to proposed values such as "social justice" and "fairness and

compassion" on the grounds that it would lead people to believe there was an absolute standard of justice.

But fast forward to 2003 when "a fair and just society" became part of the PAP's refreshed values; and today, the Government's mantra of fairness and inclusion.

Dr Jayakumar observed that following the 1984 General Election, a key part of the PAP's post-mortem was the observation that, if left unchecked, Western-style values and the rising tide of individualism would make further inroads into society.

"So when the younger leaders enunciated (national values) then, there was always a coda or series of caveats saying they had no intention to proceed along this trajectory where the country would adopt Western mores," he said.

Initiatives such as Agenda for Action (1988) and Singapore 21 (1997 to 1999) to some degree were still top-down, and more in the vein of making sure Singaporeans understood what was at stake and had the same cultural ballast. But later iterations such as Our Singapore Conversation, he noted, were more diffuse, devolved and recognising of differences within society.

"There has been a genuine appreciation in the last 10 years of the diversity of views among the people who will take Singapore forward. If these are not understood and managed well, then identities can splinter, fray, and cause deep divisions in the social fabric."

TRUST

When he spoke to Dr Jayakumar in 2011, Mr Lee said that if there was one factor above all the others behind the PAP's success, it was "trust in the ability of the PAP to deliver what it promises". It was also his conviction, expressed elsewhere, that this was something that could not be wasted: "The next generation of PAP leaders will inherit this trust. They must not betray it. They cannot afford to squander it."

Building a "reservoir" of trust was a phrase that came up often in Dr Jayakumar's conversations with the 4G leaders. He articulated several dimensions to this: The probity and integrity of the party's rank and file and leadership; policy changes made in consultation with Singaporeans, such as those relating to foreign workers, cost of living, healthcare and retirement adequacy; and ground

engagement, whose scale, tempo and intensity, especially from 2011 to 2015, were "unprecedented".

Guiding this is the idea of servant leadership, he said. "The way we carry out retail politics has fundamentally changed. When people come across as humble and personable, it's not just much more amenable to surfacing real pressure points, but it also feeds into this reservoir of trust. People feel that the MP is actually working for them."

In good times and bad, the party can bank on this reservoir of trust to carry the ground – a key difference compared with some Western societies, he added. "You may disagree with the party, but you are prepared to be brought in under a rather broad umbrella – some of the national consultation exercises served this purpose."

"The party is prepared to reach out to anyone, even to those who fundamentally disagree. Not necessarily in an attempt to convert them, but to say: 'We come to you as Singaporeans'."

RENEWAL

Much has been written of Mr Lee's preference for Dr Tony Tan to be his successor instead of Mr Goh Chok Tong, and the series of criticisms he made of Mr Goh in 1988.

Mr Goh told Dr Jayakumar it was possible that Mr Lee was testing the waters on the issue of political succession.

Mr Goh said: "If you were to put it to the ground, Tony and myself, he might have in an election beaten me. In the party, of course, I would have an advantage, because I spent time with the branch secretaries, visiting people, dialogue sessions."

"So I think (PM) was trying to change things. In other words, this is my public assessment, if there is a rejection of me by the party members, by the MPs, then well, Tony would have to serve."

But whatever his personal preferences, Mr Lee had specifically directed that his successor be chosen by peers. He accepted the choice and stepped aside.

Citing Plato's *The Republic*, Dr Jayakumar noted the philosopher Socrates' observation that the proper motive for ruling is that one is compelled to rule, lest someone worse ends up the ruler. "Plato is not saying that the ruler who thinks he can do the job is necessarily a bad ruler," he said. "But he is saying that the best reason for wanting to be a ruler is

necessity, and not because one is grasping for it."

He was struck by this point when examining the 1984 succession. No one was grasping for the job. Mr Goh got the job through consensus by his peers, and he agreed to do the job because he knew he would have his peers' support.

But what does this mean for the 4G leadership? He declined to be drawn into a discussion on who will be the next PM.

A major factor contributing to the party's longevity, he said, is its "obsessive" search for the best people and the battery of tests it puts them through – from tea sessions to background checks, psychological tests and personal statements, after which one can still fail to make the final cut.

"I don't think any other party in Singapore is like this. And this is somewhat tied to the late Mr Lee's belief that once you start to get mediocre people, you start a slow slide down from which Singapore can never recover."

But the search for talent, never mind a leader, started to become more difficult by the 1990s. At least one former minister told him that if he had to go through the "circus" that younger candidates go through now, he might have thought twice about joining.

Dr Jayakumar cited the example of Ms Tin Pei Ling, who was an object of mirth and mockery early in her career but went on to become a well-loved MP. "Your life, your family, what you've done – and for men, what you did in national service – it's picked apart ruthlessly."

"In terms of recruitment, the needle that the party has to thread is probably narrowing, but it is not necessarily an impossible task," he said, noting the party's strenuous outreach efforts and attempts to cast the net wider.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The PAP's internal bodies dealing with new media have gone through periodic rejuvenations. But to some extent it has had to play catch-up – because there is something deeply embedded in the nature of social media which aids the counter-establishment, the sensational, and the kinds of forces which want to overturn orthodoxy, he said.

There is also the question of whether the pro-PAP Internet brigades (IBs) have really helped the party's cause, something which he left to the experts to decide.

The party, he noted, has said that these pro-PAP IBs are not for the party – and so they should be cast as people who decided on their own to rebut falsehoods about the PAP. But it may be true that some Singaporeans see them as being associated with the party.

Then there is the need for the PAP to call out falsehoods and inconsistencies by the opposition, both in and out of elections. But it comes up against the issue that some voters have, which is that they think the party has to be "fair" all the time – exacerbated not just by the fact that the PAP is the incumbent, but also that it is seen to be "above the fray" when it comes to politicking.

Will the PAP face the inevitable second-act trouble that plagues many others around the world?

The book notes that the party leadership, in its GE2020 post-mortem, has not come to a fatalistic appraisal concerning the irreversible tide of PAP decline.

Nor do most PAP leaders think that the task has fallen on the party to ease Singapore into a two-party system featuring a strong opposition. Education Minister Chan Chun Sing, who was interviewed in 2016, said "it is for the PAP to lose rather than opposition to win".

Dr Jayakumar pointed out that the party's reaction to stress and even election setbacks, especially in 1984 and 2011, has not been to turn inward and become insular, but to accelerate renewal.

He thinks the party will speed up its candidate search for the next election. "It will look for people who are willing to serve in this febrile climate, rejuvenate the various party internal bodies, make sure that they are in shape, and at the branch level, get a sense of the grievances on the ground."

"We've lost those days where there were halcyon periods when GRCs and old wards were not contested for years at a time," he said.

He added: "And when those elections did happen, you actually had the luxury of redistributing resources and assets – not just from party headquarters itself, but also on the part of candidates who were not contesting, to go around and help others."

"From here on, it's all hands on deck."

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