

Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Harvard Club of Singapore's 35th Anniversary Dinner--Building A Civic Society

By Lee Hsien Loong
Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore

Introduction

I am very happy to address the Harvard Club again. The last time I did so was in April 1985, a few months after the 1984 general election. The PAP had lost two seats to the opposition, and won a smaller share of the popular vote than expected. Everybody was taken aback, even the voters. That election triggered much soul searching and national debate as to what had gone wrong. The consensus was that people had cast protest votes just to register unhappiness with particular PAP policies, though in fact they still wanted the PAP to form the government. The popular cry was for more feedback and consultation.

Coming A Long Way

The PAP conducted a thorough post-mortem of what went wrong in the 1984 elections, and what the party should do. The report reaffirmed that we should maintain the substance of our policies. But it argued that we should depend not just on logic but also on emotions to win support for them. It proposed emphasising feedback and consensus building, so that people would feel and know their ideas have been included in new policies. I drafted that report as the secretary. I was then 33, fresh in politics, and that was how I saw it.

The party accepted our recommendations, and made major changes to its style of government. Our first step was to set up the Feedback Unit. It provided Singaporeans a forum to ask questions, offer suggestions, understand policies and participate in national debates. Over the years, the Feedback Unit has established itself as a credible agency to reach out to and engage the people.

A second major initiative that same year was the creation of the Economic Committee, to review all our economic policies and gather new ideas from Singaporeans. I chaired the Committee. We launched an unprecedented consultation exercise. More than a thousand people contributed, on the main committee and in numerous sub-committees and working groups. Soon after the Committee was formed, we found ourselves in a sharp recession, so far from doing a dry academic study we had to tackle an urgent real-life problem. The Economic Committee slaughtered a herd of fairly sacred cows. It recommended a deep cut in CPF contributions, which was previously unthinkable.

It proposed a consumption tax. It advocated wage reform. All these recommendations were accepted and implemented.

The Economic Committee confirmed that the Government was serious about consultation. It demonstrated how consultation, properly done, could help to develop important government policies, and forge a consensus on the way forward.

Since the Economic Committee, public consultation has become an established mechanism for civic participation, and indeed, nation building. For example, we had the Singapore 21 Committee in 1998, which popularised ideas such as heartware, active citizenry, how every Singaporean matters and how together we can make a difference. These catch phrases have passed into our general vocabulary, and made a lasting impact on the way Singaporeans see their role in society.

Last year, the Economic Review Committee (ERC) and the Remaking Singapore Committee (RSC) deliberated on our economic, political and social strategies. They too involved the private and people sectors extensively. The ERC changed many economic policies, and charted the way forward for the Singapore economy. Similarly, the RSC marked out new directions for Singapore's social and political development. It proposed that we should embrace diversity in order to build a more inclusive and vibrant society. Second, that Singaporeans must care deeply about what goes on around them.

If they see a problem, they need to speak up, or better still, do something. Third, that Singapore must be a country that cares for its own people both in good times and tough times, "A Home for All Seasons".

The Government accepted these ideas. The newspapers headlined our decisions to allow bar top dancing and bungee jumping, but these were only surface signs which showed that we are prepared to take the plunge, and make deeper changes in our society. We have implemented other RSC recommendations such as loosening restrictions on busking, and on the display of the National Flag. We will also be relaxing the rules to make it easier to register societies. MHA will announce the details soon.

Apart from major committee efforts, on individual policies too, the Government has opened avenues for people to contribute their inputs. For example, when we started liberalising the financial sector in 1997, I talked to many bankers, stockbrokers, and fund managers. They gave me valuable inputs and advice, and helped me to quickly get a feel of what the problems were, and how boldly to proceed. I made it a practice for MAS to conduct regular public consultations before making new regulations or laws. Other ministers have kept their lines open too. Thus MND changed its reclamation plans to preserve Tanjong Chek Jawa after nature lovers pointed out the exceptional value of the site. Most recently, we consulted the public widely before

settling the amendments to the Human Organ Transplant Act.

But not all policies are amenable to public consultation. Security issues are often by nature secret, and foreign policy is best not conducted in the public arena. Tax matters are both market sensitive and difficult to debate productively. If we ask the public whether they think the GST rate should go up, we know what the answer will be. But even in these cases, we must explain the decisions taken publicly, and make a major effort to persuade people to support the policies. This was indeed how we managed the recent changes to the CPF scheme.

I have focussed on what the Government has done to encourage civic participation. But equally important is where the government has stepped back, to give space for people to look after their own affairs. For example HDB estates all used to be administered by HDB, centrally and inflexibly. But now they are looked after by town councils, with MPs and town councillors, who are volunteers, deciding on municipal matters on behalf of residents.

And there have been independent bottom-up initiatives too, including "non-political" associations like the Roundtable, AWARE and Tangent, and eco-environmental groups like the Nature Society.

We did not have a fixed, pre-planned programme to open up our society. Instead it has been an evolutionary process, progressing through experience and establishing new norms through trial and error. When Dr Catherine Lim published a highly critical commentary on Ministers' salaries in 1994, the Prime Minister's Press Secretary responded sharply. Dr Catherine Lim then clarified that she had never intended to question the Prime Minister's fitness to govern the country. A boundary had been probed, and an out-of-bounds (OB) marker firmly planted. On the other hand, after September 11 we were able to discuss openly and maturely gut issues of race and religion, and how we could build trust between Muslims and non-Muslims. These sensitive matters were not off-limits to rational discussion after all.

We did not mark out upfront all the OB markers explicitly and comprehensively, as some civic groups and individuals wanted the Government to do. This would have been difficult in practice, and probably would not have been desirable in principle. Had we pre-defined all the parameters for discussion, civil society would have lost the spark and autonomy that allows fresh areas to be explored, limits to be redefined, and both Government and civic groups to develop a certain responsiveness to each other and move society forward by engaging each other.

Thus over two decades we have raised the level of engagement between the government and the people, opened up more space for civic groups and alternative views, and matured as a society. All in all, our civic society has come a long way.

Opening up Further

Singapore is now at another major transition point. It is not just a changing of the guard. Our world has changed irrevocably, a younger generation born after Independence is now in majority, and our strategies to grow our economy and root our people must change. Many Singaporeans ask: moving forward, will the society continue to open up?

I have no doubt that our society must open up further. The growing participation and diversity over the last two decades have been vital pluses for Singapore, enabling us to adapt to changing conditions, and to the needs and expectations of a new generation. They are key to providing Singaporeans an emotional anchor. I have pushed this process, both as a member of the team which fostered the liberalisation, and directly in many consultations, discussions and forums big and small. Looking ahead, one important task of the government will be to promote further civic participation, and continue to progressively widen the limits of openness.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, our world has become more uncertain. Technology is advancing relentlessly, markets are changing unpredictably, and we can no longer take our prosperity and security for granted. The Government has no monopoly of knowledge and ideas. To understand and tackle our challenges fully and vigorously, we need to draw on the expertise and resources of all our people.

Secondly, Singaporeans are now better educated and more informed. Their desire to be involved is much stronger. The younger generation would like more "space" and a culture which encourages them to express themselves freely, make mistakes, voice diverse views and experiment. These are positive trends.

The Government will therefore continue to do its utmost to build a civic society. We will promote a political culture which responds to people's desire for greater participation, in a manner which supports Singapore's growth as a nation. But we will not ape others blindly and do something simply because it appears fashionable.

We value diversity. As we engage one other and wrestle with our problems, we will encounter different views, but far better for us to manage these honest differences than become an apathetic society with no views. People should debate issues with reason, passion and conviction, and not be passive bystanders in their own fate. Disagreement does not necessarily imply rebellion, and nor should unity of purpose and vision mean sameness in views and ideas.

We will conduct more public consultation exercises on issues which lend themselves to them. Singaporeans should take an interest not just in areas that directly affect them, but also in broader issues such as trends in our society, our aspirations for the future, or our role in the region and the world.

We will encourage Singaporeans to participate more actively in solving their own problems, and to organise themselves to do their part for their community. An active citizenry will help us to build a national consensus, engender a sense of rootedness, and enable the Government to serve the people better.

The Government will pull back from being all things to all citizens. This is so not only in minor municipal issues, but in some far-reaching ones too. For example on questions of public morality and decency, we are increasingly guided by the consensus of views in the community. We will give weight to minority views, but we cannot move only when the last man or the most conservative person is willing to move. Otherwise we would be restricting the options open to many others in our society, and stifling the diversity that we need to be an open, cosmopolitan people. We would eventually atrophy. So we have to open up more choices for citizens, without imposing on the whole of society the choices that some citizens will make for themselves. This was the approach we took with the Censorship Review Committee, and with the recent decision to permit the Body Worlds show of plastinated human bodies.

I know that some groups would like us to open up even faster, and not just loosen restrictions but remove them altogether. But while we talk about OB markers and wider fairways, remember that most Singaporeans still do not play golf. Bread and butter issues are still uppermost in their minds. The Government must keep faith with this less articulate majority, to deliver jobs, security, and a better future for their children. The test of our policies is not how closely we approach an idealised model, but how well we move the majority forward so that we remake Singapore into a dynamic global city and the best home for Singaporeans.

To derive full benefit from civic participation, we must understand what it means, what is possible and practical, and how to make it work within the specific context of our society. After all, even during a heart-dropping bungee jump you are still attached firmly by the bungee cord to an anchor point, and proper techniques and precautions make the sport safe and enjoyable.

Let me suggest five ways to promote civic participation in Singapore, namely: guidelines for public consultations on new policies or regulations, rigorous debate, emphasis on action, a constructive media and a leading Government role.

Guidelines for Public Consultation

To have fruitful public consultations, it will help if everybody understands the terms of engagement. The RSC proposed developing a set of ground rules for this purpose. A team of young civil servants worked on it, and have come up with useful guidelines, which the Government endorses. These are not OB markers, but simply guidelines that will make our public consultations more productive and successful. Let me share them with you.

For the Government, we will uphold the spirit of consultation by doing the following:

First, clarify: We will state clearly the objective, scope and process of each public consultation exercise. We will make clear the decision-making process and the scope for change. Where an issue is not amenable to public consultation, or the Government has overriding reasons to make a particular decision, we should not go through the motions of consultation pretending that all options are still open. It is better to be honest, explain the reasons for the decision, and win public support for it.

Second, provide sufficient time for the consultation exercise before finalising the policy. It takes time to study an issue seriously and to build a consensus. But more time is not always better, and it is not always possible to align everyone to the same view. We have to maintain the momentum of the consultation and at some point, make a decision and move on.

Third, provide timely and accessible information on policies under consultation, and in a simple and concise manner. The hardest part of working out complex policies is to explain the issues simply and clearly. In an extreme case like the SARS outbreak, we even had to resort to using dialects!

Fourth, facilitate diversity of views: To gather the widest range of views, the public consultation exercise needs to be inclusive. In particular, it should include those most likely to be affected or who have the most to contribute. Simply posting a document on a website and waiting passively for inputs will not do.

Fifth, close the loop: Public inputs should be seriously considered and with an open mind. The Government's response and reasons for the final decision should be made public. This is not merely to show the public that their inputs are valued, but also to encourage others to contribute their ideas.

For the public, we hope they will observe the following to get the most out of the consultative process:

First, seek to understand the rationale and intent of the policy under consideration and their own role in the process. The public needs a good understanding of the issues at hand before they can sensibly take part in discussions.

Second, just as the Government needs to be open to different views, so too must the participants. Individuals and civic groups are entitled to expect every serious proposal to be considered, but they must also accept that not all views can be accepted by the Government or other Singaporeans.

Third, there should be mutual respect for the legitimacy and point of view of all

participants. Views should be put across constructively and civilly.

Rigorous Debate

The second way to promote civic participation is to debate policies and national issues rigorously and robustly. Some people are afraid to speak up for fear of saying the wrong thing, or being taken to task. But for debate to be fruitful, it has to be rigorous and not held back out of concern for egos or sensitivities. It has to be issue-focussed, based on facts and logic, and not just on assertions and emotions. The overriding objective is to reach correct conclusions on the best way forward for the country.

Coffeeshop talk is helpful for sensing the popular mood, but it cannot be the basis for deciding on national policies. The national debate is a serious matter, which should be taken seriously by all. If a valid point is raised, the Government will accept it and modify its position. But equally if a point of view is mistaken or at odds with the facts, it is the Government's duty to point this out.

The Government's approach sets the tone of the public debate. How it responds will depend on the spirit of the criticism. The Government will not view all critics as adversaries. If it is a sincere contribution to improve Government policies, but one which we do not agree with, then our response will be dispassionate and factual, pointing out where we think the criticism is mistaken but encouraging the critic to continue to stay engaged or even counter-argue.

But a criticism that scores political points and undermines the government's standing, whether or not this is intended, is another matter altogether. Not everyone joins the public debate merely to help the government to govern better. For example, when the opposition criticises an action or policy, the purpose is usually to show that the government is not providing good leadership or making good policy. They are fully entitled to do so, but the Government has to rebut or even demolish them, or lose its moral authority. Anyone entering the arena should understand that these are the rules of the game of politics everywhere.

The best example is the ritual of Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons, when the Leader of the Opposition and MPs grill the Prime Minister. Their aim is not to obtain any information or enlightenment, but to trip up the Prime Minister, make him look foolish, and establish that the Leader of the Opposition will make a better Prime Minister than the incumbent. The British Prime Minister responds in like spirit. It is a gladiatorial contest for political dominance.

Action Above Words

The third way to promote active civic participation is not to stop at words, but to act on them. We will never build a civic society if people merely air their views and criticisms, but leave it to others actually to do something. Civic participation involves many helping hands in many areas.

Activism need not be confined to high policies or grand schemes. It can be in social work, self-help groups, the arts, or our daily lives. For example, we want people to shape the character and life of the place they live in. Even voting on what colour to paint their HDB blocks is useful. Beyond that, Singaporeans need to want to do their part and put things right. It can mean keeping an eye on your neighbour's house when they are away, or stepping forward to be a witness in a traffic accident. It can be informing the town council when the lift is broken, or completing feedback forms to help improve service in government departments. In these small but tangible ways every one of us can participate, and in the process build a civic society.

There is more civic activism today than in the past, but it still tends to be along religious lines or to a lesser extent along racial or interest groups. At the local community level, grassroots organisations have done good work, but we still need to get more people actively involved. When people know and look out for each other, we will strengthen the sense of bonding with our neighbours, regardless of race, language or religion.

The US has a very active citizenry, always ready to organise themselves and solve their own problems, without waiting for the Government. In Singapore, the American community gets together to raise funds for charity, and to produce newsletters to help new arrivals settle in. One American even left US\$1 million in his will to the Singapore Botanical Gardens, to help us develop our Garden City.

Singaporeans who have worked and studied in the US pick up some of these values and norms. The Harvard Club itself is very active. Your members help to raise funds for the college, and interview and recommend potential candidates on behalf of the colleges. The Club also emphasises contribution to society. The "Harvard Club of Singapore Distinguished Alumni Award" recognises the most deserving alumnus, and this year it is being bestowed on Chief Justice Yong Pung How, whose public service exemplifies the active commitment we are looking for in every Singaporean.

Singaporeans are less active in organising ourselves than Americans. Perhaps our Government has taken on responsibility for many things which citizens should really deal with themselves. Whether it is a ceiling leak, a mosquito nuisance or a troublesome neighbour, usually the first question which people ask is: what will the Government do about it?

In one meet-the-people session, a constituent complained to me about mosquitoes in his flat. To prove his case, he showed me the dozens of mosquitoes he had killed over several nights, neatly laid out, dated and photocopied on three A4 sheets of paper. As a good MP, I dutifully got the Town Council to do something about it.

When Singapore was a colony the immigrants had a strong self-help spirit, supporting

one another through clan and religious groups, because the colonial government left them to fend for themselves. If we want a more participatory citizenry, the Government will have cut the apron strings and leave more matters to the private and people sectors. Nanny should not look after everything all the time.

A Constructive Media

The fourth way to build a civic society is for the media to play a constructive role in nation building. This is vital if freer debate is to lead to consensus and understanding, instead of cacophony and confusion. The media should report news accurately and fairly, in order to inform and educate the public. It should adopt a national perspective on issues, educating Singaporeans on the reality of global competition, or the need for healthy habits during the SARS outbreak. But it should avoid crusading journalism, slanting news coverage to campaign for personal agendas. This way the media helps the public to decide and judge issues for themselves, and provides a valuable channel for them to voice views and opinions.

As Singapore has opened up, so has our media. Our newspapers and TV stations present a wider range of issues and views. Newspapers publish scoops based on their own sources. Journalists write op-ed pieces arguing for and against government policies. In the internet age, our media have held their own as credible, objective sources of news.

The quality of readers' contributions too has gone up, as seen in the letters columns. The writers do not just raise municipal issues, but also policy matters and special interests. Government departments track these letters closely, and reply promptly to those which need answers.

More encouragingly, the letters pages no longer just consist of the public questioning and Government departments responding. Singaporeans are now debating with each other, advocating their respective positions. Often I read letters that need a proper reply, but before the department has drafted one some other member of the public has published a good rebuttal. This is a very positive sign. When citizens debate issues among themselves, they begin to understand and take ownership of the policy dilemmas that Singapore faces, but without the Government becoming the proverbial "bad guy" or wet blanket.

So we are making progress. But ours is a different model from the US media, which uses its powerful position to set the national agenda, champion policies and pass judgment on the country's leaders. We have developed and refined our model over many years to suit our own circumstances and needs. We should not abandon it, or unconsciously drift towards the American model. Within our framework there is space for the media to evolve, for excellent professional journalism, and for debates and contending ideas to flourish.

A Leading Government Role

The final way to build a civic society is for the Government to continue playing an active and leading role in taking Singapore forward. We will expand the opportunities for the public to give inputs, develop a more vibrant media, and pull back the Government from more areas, but the Government cannot abdicate its responsibility to lead from the front. A small and vulnerable state in a challenging and turbulent environment cannot fly on autopilot. Our Government's ability to seize the initiative and anticipate events is a vital survival trait and competitive advantage for Singaporeans. In a crisis, like during the SARS outbreak, it makes all the difference.

Civic participation must not degenerate into government by opinion polls. The Government will seek inputs actively, but it cannot only do things which are popular. Singapore cannot be governed by referendum, unlike Switzerland. And even some Swiss are tired of too many referendums and question if their Government should not be deciding on more things. After all the consultation and participation, ultimately it is the Government's duty to do what it considers right for the country, even if this should be unpopular. The Government cannot seek to be popular all the time and on every policy. It is held accountable at the end of the term, in the general election, when its policies have shown results.

Conclusion

This is how I see us building a civic society in our next phase of development. Others may see the path forward differently. I accept that as part and parcel of the process. Just as we did not pre-plan it over the last two decades, it is not possible to do so going forward. We will have to feel our way forward, crossing the river stone by stone, to use Deng Xiaoping's phrase. But the strategic direction is clear.

I look forward to working together with all Singaporeans and with a broad spectrum of civic groups to grow our civic society, strengthen our sense of pride and ownership, and draw us closer together as one people. But remember that unity, pride and ownership depends also on a sense of common goals and shared visions. In Singapore, after independence our national goal was to survive, prove to the world that we could make it, and make ourselves a first world country. That powerful drive united and motivated a whole generation of Singaporeans to achieve the vision within one generation. Now on the threshold of a new era, let us allow diversity to flourish, while remaining united in purpose. Let us build a vibrant civic society, and by doing so make this the best home for all of us.

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