

comment & analysis

“Our universities are the only strategic assets we have. If we fail to mobilise our universities, Singapore will quickly revert to the stagnant trade-burdened economy of the 1950s.”

NGIAM TONG DOW • 18

MAKING THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION WORK

A future of our own making

DEVADAS KRISHNADAS



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech not only hit notes of humility and sincerity, its positive reception was reinforced by his indications that some long sought-after policy adjustments, such as paternity leave, would be fi-

nally forthcoming.

This willingness to shift was underscored by the announcement of a national conversation. This is intended to feed input to the general review of policies to be headed by Minister Heng Swee Kiat. Such a step signals a new “co-creative” model of policy making.

For such a model to work, Singaporeans must play their part. It begins with participation. As one cliché

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goes, “decisions are made by those who show up”. Today, “showing up” can be done virtually as well as physically. However, participation alone is an insufficient threshold to ensure that this experiment succeeds.

It is critical that the signal-to-noise ratio in communication is well managed. If not, we will have to make sense of a cacophonous crowd rather than a sonorous symphony. There are three requirements for this to be done well.

MANAGING EMOTION

First, filters to separate picture from static. This should be the responsibility, not only of the Government but also community and civic leaders as well as responsible social media activists. Filters are needed to mediate the process of engagement and help sense of the emergent narrative.

Second, Singaporeans need to educate themselves on the issues and perceive them not through the monocle of self-interest, but with a binocular lens which balances self-interest with the larger considerations of community and nation. The focal length of these lenses must be sensitivity to the longer-term, not merely immediate preoccupations.

Third, we need to manage our emotions in this national conversation. There is considerable pent-up passion behind the varied grievances of Singaporeans. That emotional energy will need to be managed with maturity by all.

Emotion can be valid justification for a point of view. But emotion is not a good process with which to deal with it. Input should be thought through and presented soberly, with due consideration and respect to differences of view.

A WATCH NO MORE

The Prime Minister also had a sober message about being open to change.

He alluded to how radically things had changed over the past 20 years, and cast forward to how different things could be in 20 years hence. In so doing, he signalled a transition in the Government's perspective: From one that viewed society as complicat-

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ed, to one which views it as complex. Let me explain.

Complicated systems are those which may have many moving parts, but which all function together in a predictable manner — like a mechanical watch. A part of the frustration felt by Singaporeans in recent years was the sense that the Government acted as watchmakers, maintaining a society they treated as nothing more than a complicated precision watch in need of occasional tuning.

A complex system, such as a society, is one in which all the constituent entities are interdependent and interconnected. What one entity does creates ripple effects affecting all others and in difficult to predict ways. Vitally, unlike complicated systems, complex ones are capable of adaptation.

Complex systems can be unpredictable and can eventuate in large outcomes, such as financial meltdowns. This unpredictability does not mean that complex systems cannot be somehow managed. It just means that managing it is a much more involved process than that of a watchmaker tuning a watch.

In a complex system, the watch tends to have a mind of its own.

ADAPTIVE RESILIENCE

Poorly adapting complex systems not only throw up negative large-scale events but also respond badly to shocks. Conversely, a complex system that exhibits adaptive resilience thrives despite shocks, sometimes even because of them. The societies which possess adaptive resilience have confidence in their identities.

Is Singapore a poor or resilient adaptive complex system?

Our own history is strong indication that we are good at adaptation. We have thrived through tumultuous change. Just because we are getting even more complex, does not mean that we cannot match up to the higher ante of adaptation required.

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