



**SEMINAR**  
**Singapore Beyond Lee Kuan Yew:**  
**Institutionalising the Singapore Way**

20 April 2009, Gallery Theatre, National Museum of Singapore

**TEXTS OF REMARKS BY SPEAKERS**

**KISHORE MAHBUBANI<sup>1</sup>**

The topic that Kwon Ping and I have been assigned, namely “Singapore Beyond Lee Kuan Yew: Institutionalising the Singapore Way”, is an obviously sensitive and charged political topic. Indeed, I can confess here that several of my close friends have questioned my wisdom in agreeing to address such a topic.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, I propose to address it by trying to answer three related questions around the topic. Firstly, is it legitimate to pose the question of Singapore’s prospects beyond Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew (MM Lee)? Secondly, what has Singapore done to ensure that the legacy of MM Lee survives after his retirement? Thirdly, what are the likely scenarios in the post-MM Lee era?

Let me address the issue of the legitimacy posed in the first question. The simple response is that this question has been raised several times and has been addressed by several of our leaders, including MM Lee himself. In 1996, MM Lee responded publicly to a statement made by Professor Samuel Huntington, a distinguished American scholar who sadly passed away recently. Sam Huntington said: “The freedom and creativity that President Lee has introduced here in Taiwan will survive him. The honesty and efficiency that Senior Minister Lee has brought to Singapore are likely to follow him to his grave. In some circumstances, authoritarianism may do well in the short term but experience clearly shows that only democracy produces good government in the long run, as in America.”

MM Lee responded to Sam Huntington’s claim by saying that Singapore would survive him but he spelled out two conditions. Let me quote MM: “Singapore

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must have two preconditions to survive: First, leaders of quality - tough minded, dedicated, determined, able and honest. Second, the people must be aware of its fundamental vulnerabilities, and willing to pull together to face challenges. We have to remain more tightly knit, better organised and more competitive, or we will eventually be reabsorbed.”

It is important to emphasise that Sam Huntington is not the only person to have raised this question. Several other people, both in Singapore and overseas, have raised it too. Hence, we should try to analyse why this question is so persistent.

Here again, the simple reason for the persistence of this question is the fact that MM Lee has been an extraordinary leader. Indeed, it is very unusual for a small island state like Singapore to produce a leader of global stature. When I served as Ambassador to the UN in New York for over ten and a half years over two terms, this point was made to me repeatedly. My American counterpart in my first term was a truly distinguished American diplomat, Gen Vernon Walters. He had worked closely with many American Presidents. He told me that during the Cold War he had once told President Richard Nixon, “Thank God, Lee Kuan Yew is the leader of a small state like Singapore. If he were the leader of a country like China, the United States and the Soviet Union would immediately reconcile and hug each other for comfort”.

It is important to emphasise here that MM Lee is admired on several counts. First, he is admired as a nation-builder. This is what moved Kofi Annan to describe MM Lee’s second book as follows: “From Third World to First, expresses an aspiration of all developing countries but so far, alas, an achievement of very few. Singapore is one of those few. This account of its first years of independence written by its founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, will therefore be of great interest to people of other developing countries and to all those who are interested in their fate.” Second, he is admired as an international statesman who has been able to provide wise counsel on some of the most difficult geopolitical challenges to senior global leaders. And MM Lee is still sought after for such advice. Third, he is admired as a leader who is able to rally and persuade people to perform at their highest levels. And the reason why the admiration for these leadership qualities is increasing is because leaders like MM Lee are increasingly scarce in the world today.

Given these extraordinary accomplishments, it would almost be an insult to MM Lee not to pose the question on whether Singapore could outlast him. His

retirement will naturally create a huge political vacuum. Hence, it is legitimate to pose the question of “Singapore Beyond Lee Kuan Yew”, the subject of our discussion today.

The second question I would like to address is this: what has Singapore done to ensure that his legacy will be protected? The simple answer is that Singapore has done a lot. It would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list in a short address like this. Let me just mention seven important measures Singapore has undertaken. First, we have developed a truly exceptional educational system. The fruits of good education will be felt over generations. Second, national service has become deeply ingrained into Singapore’s DNA. On that basis, we have built one of the best military capabilities in Asia, if not the world. Third, we have created several strong public institutions: the civil service, the judiciary, community organisations. The government has also encouraged the growth of charitable institutions. In short, we have both strong public institutions and a strong civil society. Fourth, we have a political party that has learnt the art of winning elections over time. Its name has remained the same but it has had to reinvent itself as the electorate kept changing. We have also had two successful transitions to new PMs. Fifth, we have developed an unusually strong track record of ethnic harmony. Most of the other multi-racial ex-British colonies failed to prevent ethnic discord. We have succeeded. Sixth, many of these successes are the result of a deep culture of meritocracy that has been embedded into all aspects of Singapore society and all dimensions of the Singapore system. Seventh, and finally, we have strongly institutionalised a culture of honesty in the public, private and people sectors. If we can continue to keep corruption at bay – and corruption is the single biggest reason why societies have deteriorated – the legacy of MM Lee will live on well beyond his retirement.

The third question I would like to address is: what are the possible scenarios Singapore will face after the retirement of MM Lee? Here let me emphasise one point. No one can predict the future. The future will always surprise us, especially as we move into an era when we are going to experience far greater change than we have ever experienced. This is why there is a lot of wisdom in the old Arab proverb which says, “He who speaks about the future lies even when he tells the truth.” Hence, we cannot make predictions. However, we can speculate on possible scenarios and, to make the exercise more interesting, we can try to assign a probability to these scenarios. Let me try to sketch out three.

The first and most likely scenario is that Singapore will make a smooth and seamless transition. I would give it a probability as high as two-thirds. The reason why this scenario has the highest probability is because of the deep institutionalisation within Singapore of the values of the first generation of leaders, especially the values of the three exceptional founding fathers of Singapore, namely MM Lee, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S Rajaratnam. And I have earlier given several examples of how this institutionalisation has taken root.

Fortunately, history teaches us that there can be smooth transitions into new eras after great leaders retire. The best recent case is provided by China. Deng Xiaoping transformed China as dramatically as MM Lee transformed Singapore, although in different ways. After Deng retired, it could all have been reversed. Instead, there have been two smooth transitions of power to Jiang Zemin and then on to Hu Jintao. And in the process China's economy has continued to roar ahead. Indeed, the powerful forces of modernisation and opening up to the global economy that Deng launched accelerated after his retirement. Deng's legacy has continued to grow in strength.

The second scenario is unlikely and improbable. I would give it a one-sixth probability. This scenario is one where we see a significant reversal of the legacy left behind by MM Lee. Even if it is very unlikely, we cannot rule it out. Recently, I published an article in the Singapore Straits Times on the subject of "Can Singapore Fail?" In the opening paragraph I recounted a story that Dr Goh told me: "In 1981, Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party was shocked when it suffered its first defeat at the polls in many years, even though the contest was in a single constituency. I asked Dr Goh Keng Swee, one of Singapore's three great founding fathers and the architect of Singapore's economic miracle, why the PAP lost. He replied, "Kishore, we failed because we did not even conceive of the possibility of failure"."

The lesson here is that if we want to avoid a scenario where there is a significant reversal of MM Lee's legacy, we have to consider the possibility that it may happen. Here too history teaches us that there have been significant reversals after great leaders leave the scene. Let me cite three examples. When Chairman Mao left the scene and Deng Xiaoping took over, there was a spectacular reversal of Chairman Mao's legacy. Indeed if Chairman Mao were to be reborn, he would not recognise the China of today. Virtually everything has changed, except the name of

the Chinese Communist Party. Secondly, when President Nasser of Egypt stepped down, his chosen successor, Anwar Sadat, abandoned his policy of confronting Israel (after launching one war) and flew to Jerusalem to make peace. Nasser would have turned in his grave to see his successor visiting Israel and making peace. Thirdly, when President Chiang Ching-kuo of Taiwan retired, his chosen successor, Lee Teng-hui abandoned the dreams of President Chiang Kai-shek and President Chiang Ching-kuo to reunify with China and instead stealthily set out to dismantle their legacies by pursuing a policy of independence from China. Here too, President Chiang Ching-kuo would have turned in his grave. In short, since history tells us that legacies can be reversed, we should also consider how this might happen in Singapore if we are to ensure that this does not happen.

The third scenario is a mixed one, where the PAP continues to rule Singapore successfully but it has to do so with a strong opposition movement. We may move from one dominant political party to two or three strong parties. In the case of Singapore, I would give it one-sixth probability, given the track record of the PAP in winning elections. However, here too, we cannot rule it out since recent history has taught us that long dominant political parties can lose their overwhelming dominance. This happened to the Congress Party in India, the LDP in Japan and the KMT in Taiwan.

Since there are several different possible combinations and permutations of this scenario, it is hard to say whether MM's legacy will be strengthened or weakened in such a scenario. Both are possible. For example, a stronger opposition could lead to sharper political debates. Debates can be enlightening. The end result of such sharp debates could be a deeper realisation by the Singapore population of how privileged they are to have enjoyed good governance for over fifty years. To the best of my knowledge, no developing country has enjoyed good governance for over fifty years. Sadly, few Singaporeans are aware of how unique Singapore's record has been. Debates on Singapore's governance may make the population more aware of the precious political legacy that they have enjoyed.

Alternatively, a strong opposition could also lead to a diminution of MM's legacy. The recent examples of South Korea and Taiwan demonstrate that when politics enter a new era, the old legacies can quickly be lost and forgotten. Many of the younger South Koreans and Taiwanese have no memories of the founding generations of leaders who catapulted their societies into the first world standards

through extraordinary leadership. In Singapore too there is some evidence that the younger generation have no memories of the extraordinary founding generation of Singapore leaders. I am frequently shocked when I meet younger Singaporeans who have never heard of Dr Goh Keng Swee. And yet Singapore would not be where it is today without Dr Goh Keng Swee.

In short, as we try to peer into the future, we should consider all kinds of possibilities for Singapore. We should contemplate scenarios of success and scenarios of failure. As Dr Goh Keng Swee has wisely told us, failure happens when we fail to consider the possibility of failure.

## HO KWON PING<sup>2</sup>

History judges great leaders by two major criteria: *first*, whether they are able to, on their own volition, engineer the personal transition *after* themselves to the next leadership. And *second*, even if they do pass the first test, whether their legacy can last *beyond* several generations, and become enshrined in lasting, sustainable institutions.

The fact that this forum's title is about Singapore *beyond*, rather than *after* Lee Kuan Yew, implies that he has already passed the first test. No doubt some critics may say that his transition from prime minister to senior minister and now minister mentor, is only a reduction of workload and change of job titles, with no fundamental letting go. But the history of other charismatic nation-founders has been far less encouraging.

The temptation of power works powerfully against voluntary retirement. Charismatic leaders seem to possess more courage than wisdom. And so, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Robert Mugabe, all diminished their legacies by failing the first test of history – knowing when to step down graciously.

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In modern history, only China's Deng Xiaoping has succeeded in passing *both* bests, by not only ensuring a smooth personal succession, but by creating a stable, sustainable political system as his legacy.

Unlike China, however, Singapore's Deng Xiaoping is still around and vibrant, though slower of gait and mellower in temperament. The question is whether Singapore can in generations hence, like China has done *beyond* Deng Xiaoping, maintain *beyond* Lee Kuan Yew, a system which is responsive to its citizens, able to deliver better livelihoods and capable of leadership self-renewal.

My answer is an obvious Yes – otherwise why would I have my family and my business here and make Singapore my home? But there are two qualifications: first, whether political renewal within the PAP can produce leaders of sufficient caliber that Singaporeans will continue to support this unique one-party-dominant system. Because if they do not, we will be sailing in uncharted waters.

And second, should the waters ever turn choppy, can tomorrow's generation find their way through the storm, with or without the PAP? In other words, beyond the governance system, how will Singapore society and its people fare and fend for themselves beyond Lee Kuan Yew?

Let me address the first qualification.

Unlike the dynamic equilibrium of a two-party-dominant system, where the political pendulum regularly swings from one ruling party to another, Singapore's equilibrium is stable, but static. There is no process by which a ruling party paradoxically, renews itself through defeat in the polls. And by which an entire nation self-corrects by one party taking over from another quite regularly. Obama after Bush, Blair after Thatcher – these are all the pendulum swings of a dynamically stable equilibrium. Of course, as events in Thailand have so dramatically shown, a multi-party system by itself is no assurance of stability if the fundamental political fabric is already torn.

The argument adduced by the PAP for the one-party-dominant system is that Singapore is too small; there is simply not enough talent to even fill one ruling party, much less two parties capable of ruling. And, it is argued, intentionally dividing the

PAP into two sister parties taking turns at the polls to lead the country, is an artificial, unworkable idea.

For Singapore's sake, the ruling PAP had better be sustainably competent, because there is no dependable, tested opposition party as fallback for the country. The price to Singapore of the PAP's extraordinarily successful half-century of governance is that the system is now particularly vulnerable to the internal self-renewal of the PAP itself.

The only one-party-dominant system other than Singapore which has to date at least maintained internal cohesion and robust internal self-renewal is China. The Chinese system of leadership renewal is not transparent. We do not know the process by which Xi Jin Ping, a relatively unknown heir apparent to President Hu Jin Tao, was assessed, tested, and then given the mantle of succession. But a system of internal competition, evaluation, and selection clearly exists. And the system, however non-transparent, is sustainable and meritocratic – and it works.

Will the Singapore system of self-renewal work after the present generation of leaders depart the scene? The only possible answer, since we have not yet crossed that bridge, is that we do not know. But future leaders will certainly not enjoy the huge political legitimacy arising from approval by Lee Kuan Yew.

The risk to successful self-renewal in Singapore beyond Lee Kuan Yew is not only the paucity of talent and the difficulty of identifying, recruiting, and grooming leaders.

Another risk, over time, is the specter of internal schisms within the PAP. The party's extraordinary cohesion over 50 years is due not only to the PAP's compelling vision and its centrist positioning, but owes much to the forceful personality of Lee Kuan Yew. Whether factionalism can be kept in check after this present generation of leaders including its mentor, have left the scene, is an imponderable.

Perhaps it is to restrain factionalism, arbitrate disagreements, groom and assess future leaders, that the positions of senior minister and minister mentor have been institutionalized. Once derided as sinecures for Lee Kuan Yew and other retired ministers, the institution now appears to resemble a system of elders, found –

and working -- in other governance structures from the tribe to the clan to the church and temple.

Both the PAP and the CCP believe that they can buck the trends of history and create sustainable, uncorrupted, vibrant and responsive parties which can rule uninterrupted for much longer than a half century. Certainly, their track records to date give reason to take their attempts seriously, even if the weight of history is not on their side.

If they do succeed, however, they will have created a new model of political governance which will genuinely challenge the fundamental assumptions of Western liberal democracy with its requisite two-party model. Perhaps this partly explains why advocates of Western liberal democracy are so adamant that they will fail.

This leads to my second qualification. If the PAP, for whatever reason, fails to lead Singapore, will Lee Kuan Yew's legacy then unravel? Or can the people of Singapore muddle their way through even if the leadership renewal of the PAP fails to deliver what it has done for the past fifty years?

To borrow from Barack Obama, I think the answer is Yes, We Can. Lee Kuan Yew's greatest legacy, I believe, is that the Singapore which he so passionately shaped will outlive not only him, but even his own party should that ever come to pass.

Perhaps because he is the quintessential realist with no illusions about the difficulty of creating a genuine nation out of different ethnic groups with their own traditions, and still recognizes that the fault lines of race and religion continue to lurk in the background, Lee Kuan Yew has made nation-building one of the single most critical political imperatives of his leadership. And he has largely succeeded. No Singaporean nor foreigner questions today that we have a shared identity, common values and aspirations. This is no small achievement.

And so, forty-four years after nation-hood, the acute sense of vulnerability which suffused the Lee Kuan Yew era with an urgent dynamism, is inevitably giving way to a more relaxed and confident nation. Will that translate into a complacent and cocky generation, ultimately descending into the hubris which will destroy Lee's legacy? Or will a sense of "concerned gungho-ness", shaped by the collective

memory of vulnerability but inspired by the promise that theirs is a destiny they will continue to shape on their own, define my children's generation?

Contrary to popular stereotype, young people today are not apathetic. They may be disinterested in electoral politics, but they are increasingly involved in civil society and community issues. They seek expression not in Speakers Corner but in alternative digital media and social networking sites. Singaporeans studying overseas remain engaged about Singapore issues and many are returning home, no doubt partly because of dire job prospects in the West, but also because their sense of belonging is strong.

Equally contrary to some people's wishful thinking, there is not likely to be dramatic, broad-brush social or political liberalization in the Singapore beyond Lee Kuan Yew. This is not a pent up society waiting the demise of the strongman in order to over-turn highly unpopular laws. The present government has the support of the politically critical heartland in its pragmatic approach to liberalization. Incrementalism – tweaking and fine-tuning laws to accommodate the more liberal, younger generation, while not upsetting the heartland, nor endangering the social stability which it has painstakingly achieved over fifty years – is a cornerstone of PAP philosophy which will outlast Lee Kuan Yew.

Two good examples are the government's approach to decriminalizing gay sex, and the recent Public Order Act. In the first case, the government took a cautious approach, seeking to accommodate both the gay lobby as well as conservative heartlanders, Muslims and fundamentalist Christians. In the second, the government replaced blanket controls on the right of assembly, with the more fine-tuned, so-called "move-on" ordinance. And this was targeted not so much against Singaporean dissenters, who have not even bothered to use the much vaunted Speakers Corner, but against foreign NGOs likely to swamp Singapore as it holds increasingly more international governmental meetings.

There is no evidence that Lee Kuan Yew, rather than the present collective leadership, was the instigator of these policies. An incremental approach to change, but a willingness to change policies in order to retain its highly successful centrist position, will characterize the Singapore beyond Lee Kuan Yew.

There is evidence that this incremental change *is* happening. Visitors to Singapore marvel at how we have managed fundamental diversities of race and religion so well. But now that we are a single, cohesive nation, there is a need to encourage a different kind of diversity – not in race or religion – but in outlook and analysis. Thankfully, the once-rigid Singapore system is beginning to cultivate and celebrate diversity in our schools and universities, in social and cultural life. The definition and measure of success and achievement is also broadening.

In my interaction with my own children and their friends, or with SMU students, I sense that young Singaporeans are responding positively to these trends. I do not believe that their sense of ownership over their country is any less than the youth of other countries.

In short, the Singapore of Lee Kuan Yew is changing – as it should, and as he would have wished it to. By responding to tomorrow's generation, today's leadership is ensuring Singapore's survival. Even the Singapore bureaucracy – admired for its incorruptibility and lampooned for its rigidity – is trying in its own quaintly outdated way, to be “hip”. We should at least give them credit for trying. . .

The society Lee Kuan Yew has shaped will not, as Prof Samuel Huntington predicted, “ follow him to his grave”. It may not look like the Singapore of Lee's time, nor may the PAP rule un-interrupted forever, but the people of Singapore, the nation they inhabit, and the society they continue to shape, will thrive so long as our children know that the future of Singapore belongs to them. For even Huntington would agree that there is nothing stronger than the sense of ownership. And what you own, you defend.

Thank you.

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