

Chapter 11

REINVENTING SINGAPORE?

My fellow Singaporeans,

Compared to the bright sunshine of the early 1990s, the recent years look much darker ... I know that you are worried that we have lost our way.

(Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's opening lines
for his National Day address, 2003)

The problem with being at the peak of success is that every way you look, it's all downhill. That is Singapore's problem. It is a beacon for sound corporate governance in the region. Indeed, there is a view among some outside Asia that corruption is part of the Asian way; that Asians are somehow culturally predisposed to corruption. But there is an obvious flaw in the argument: Singapore. The Lion City is something of an embarrassment to the argument because it shows that it is possible to be both Asian and not corrupt.

Singapore has done extremely well. But embedded in this success are problems for the future. Singapore will continue to enjoy high living standards. But it cannot keep growing as fast as it has. Its economy is services-oriented. It fills the niches that others in the region cannot and so it is said that it feeds off the inefficiencies of its neighbours. But the competition is closing in.

I saw something in Singapore in 2003 that I hadn't thought that I'd need to see. I was about to give a speech at a marketing and advertising congress at the Suntech Convention Centre when across from the hall in which I was due to speak I noticed a seminar room in which corporate training seminars were being held. And the topic of the seminars? 'Management training on handling staff retrenchments.' So things have come to this, I thought.

Unemployment in Singapore reached a 17-year high in 2003. (This when unemployment had reached a 30-year low in the UK and a 14-year low in Australia that year, for example.) The hysteria over the SARS virus

had taken its toll, but economic growth in any event was not going to be spectacular. In fact, Singapore's economy for the year was forecast to be the slowest growing in Asia. Why? The unpalatable truth for Singapore is that it is losing its comparative advantage. The most important competitor is Malaysia.

Enter Malaysia

Singaporeans tend to be fairly dismissive of Malaysia, unnecessarily so. Its inefficiencies are derided as is its general 'messiness'. But that messiness permits a certain amount of creative thinking. There is a plurality of ideas and dynamism in Malaysia that is beginning to see its entrepreneurs kick some real goals. Malaysian politics tends to be chaotic and unscripted. The government comprises many parties and not just one. And positions within the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party and the two other leading Barisan Nasional component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), are contested fiercely. That is not necessarily the case within the Peoples Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, for which people often have to be asked to stand.

A sound rule of law and putting in place excellent infrastructure are the two things that allowed Singapore to boom. But these are two things that Malaysia has been working on. It does it with more chaos and less focus than Singapore but Malaysia is now heading in the right direction. And every Malaysian step forwards is a step back for Singapore in the race for relative comparative advantage. The business that the Singapore Port Authority lost in 2002 and 2003 to Johor's Tanjung Pelapas port is one obvious example of this. There are plenty of others.

Malaysia was hit hard by the region's 1997–98 economic crisis. But it recovered quickly and efficiently. Incompetence got Malaysia into the crisis but its recovery was managed with surprising competence. The work of Malaysia's economic restructuring agencies Danaharta, Danamodal and the Corporate Debt Restructuring Committee (CDRC) rightly received praise far and wide. The professionalism and efficiency of these bodies ensured that they will serve not just as models for the region in future but for all countries when they run into severe financial difficulties.

Malaysia now has a better Securities Law, fewer and bigger banks and stockbroking firms and better bankruptcy provisions. The work of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) in educating directors and enforcing codes for better governance has been exemplary. The fines that

it can impose on aberrant companies are too low, but the KLSE has shown that it is prepared to reprimand and fine companies without fear or favour.

Singapore remains ahead of Malaysia on all these counts. But Malaysia is closing the gap. Singapore now faces the problems that all mature economies face: how to stay ahead when its competitors can play catch-up?

Regional HQs

Singapore has always prided itself on attracting the regional headquarters of multinationals. But Kuala Lumpur is becoming more competitive in this regard. Boeing, Lafarge and Patria have chosen Kuala Lumpur over Singapore in recent years for the location of their regional headquarters. GE has moved its corporate, oil and gas and medical systems Southeast Asian headquarters to Kuala Lumpur. BMW cars, BHP Steel and Philips Luminaires also shifted their Asian headquarters from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. These companies might represent a drop in the ocean especially given that some 3,600 international companies have their regional operations and HQ-related functions in Singapore, but then this figure shows how much Singapore has to lose.

Philips cited Malaysia's 'lower costs', 'excellent infrastructure' and 'highly trained workforce' as the reasons for its decision to leave Singapore for Kuala Lumpur.¹ Singapore has these last two factors but it's on the first that Kuala Lumpur wins. Increasingly, Malaysia represents better value for money. It is becoming more attractive as a place to live for expatriates. Its shopping facilities are just as good as Singapore's, the restaurants are comparable but cheaper and education facilities are improving all the time, to the point where Malaysia now attracts fee-paying students from Thailand and Indonesia, for example.

But Kuala Lumpur isn't the only destination for multinationals that are opting to exit Singapore. In 2003, Honeywell decided to shift its regional headquarters from Singapore to Shanghai. Honeywell's president in China said:

In addition to opening up new growth opportunities, this move will enable us to draw from a larger pool of talent for recruitment, and help our suppliers and partners support our growth initiatives.²

It's not that Singapore is no longer as good as it once was. It's more that other places no longer are as bad as they once were.

Bread and Circuses

So what choices does Singapore face? One is to drop its standards and pursue any opportunity. Elsewhere I have called this the Boat Quay option.³ By that I mean that Singapore's famous Boat Quay restaurant strip used to have a certain elegance. But as business has dropped off, gradually that elegance has been lost, as ugly bars that emit loud and competing music with girls who hang out front to push cheap beer spring up along the Quay. The quality of the food on offer has declined as the vigour of the touts has increased. Boat Quay now offers shades of Pattaya or Patpong.

A manifestation of the Boat Quay option was the proposal in 2002 that Singapore should open a casino. Another was Prime Minister Goh's announcement in 2003 that the government would permit table-top dancing in Singapore. Bungee jumping would be allowed too. And then there is the proposal to build the world's tallest ferris wheel in Singapore, akin to the London Eye. Patrons on the London Eye get an unsurpassed view over that city. Singapore's Eye promised to be unique in that patrons will be able to see other countries: Malaysia and Indonesia. They might even be able to see ships berthing at ports in Malaysia's Johor state instead of the Port of Singapore. But the reality is that such moves smack of desperation; a form of government by gimmick. They do not represent changes in 'mindset'. They happen only because the government says that they can, explicitly and on a case-by-case basis.

Let the Ideas Flow

Everyone knows that good problem-solving within a company comes from discussion, debate, canvassing all options and then letting the best idea win. Good problem-solving does not come from the founder or CEO simply dropping solutions onto the company from on high. And so it is with countries. Public debate fosters ideas and the messy process of the contest for ideas ensures that the better ones get up. To a large degree, Singapore is still being run like a Chinese family-owned and managed firm, whereby the patriarch issues edicts and the managers follow. It works when the family patriarch is unusually clever. But such unusual cleverness and benevolence often comes down to good fortune as much as anything else. The more assured way of getting good decisions is to have a marketplace for ideas from which they can originate and be tested.

And yet no other government in the world with citizens with a comparable per capita income persists with the sorts of media controls as does

Singapore's. No other government in the developed world is as paranoid about the media, information control and control in general as is this one. But to what end? At this point it is important to state that media freedom is not simply a political issue. Just as importantly, it is a business and economic matter. A strong and questioning media doesn't just act as a check on government but on companies. The threat of exposure is a valuable one. Economies that lack this are poorer for it.

Singapore accepts that free trade in goods and services is essential to having a successful economy. But that's only half the equation if a country that's rich wants to stay that way. The other half is that there must be a free market for ideas. People must feel free to offer their opinions and ideas. Markets need marketplaces and what is the most obvious marketplace for ideas, the place where they can be exchanged? It is the media.

The result of the Singaporean mismatch – a free market for goods and services and a near monopoly in the market for ideas – is that Singapore and its economy do not benefit from the vibrancy and dynamism of a free ideas and information marketplace as do other mature economies. The market for ideas which, after all, is the market for progress has become stifled. For too long, civil servants have been allowed to be the main source of ideas, the Civil Service to be the font of development and progress. And for too long, the media has been relegated to the role of simply reporting rather than scrutinising. And it is this last role that is so important in a country where the political opposition is embryonic.

But there does seem to be a growing ability to accept criticism and endure self-analysis. Some changes, though, are false starts. The most obvious is the proposal to allow a Speaker's Corner in Singapore's Hong Lim Square. Demands for free speech were taken literally. And so now, contingent on the successful application of a police permit, any Singaporean (but no foreigner) is able to go and stand in that (usually deserted) square and make a speech. It's an idea from nineteenth-century London. It belongs in the nineteenth century and is ridiculous now. Of course, London has its Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park but it is a tourist attraction. It is a venue for cranks. No-one pretends it is a venue for serious public discourse and in no way does it play any role whatsoever in public debate in mainstream British society today. In Singapore there was a contemporary problem but it received a *baba* solution.

But there are signs that the media is freeing up in Singapore. A process of developing a culture of competition among competing ideas is under way. I began to write an occasional column for Singapore's *Today* newspaper in 2003. In June of that year I wrote in a piece on Hong Kong's planned anti-subversion and sedition laws under Article 23 of the territory's Basic Law, that:⁴

Historically, sedition has been used to suppress political dissent. Many former British colonies still have it on their statute books. But it's either falling into disuse or being repealed in most modern countries. But Hong Kong is going the other way. It intends to introduce it. That will bring it into line with Singapore. And mainland China. Countries like Cuba, North Korea and Iran have similar laws.

That's right. On this matter I put Singapore in the same league as mainland China, Cuba, North Korea and Iran and it was published, by a Singapore newspaper and one that is ultimately owned by the Singapore Government.

Things are changing in Singapore. Increasingly, newspapers publish a range of views that would not have been published a few years ago. One golden rule is whatever you say, make sure that it is correct. Get it factually wrong, particularly if it is in relation to a politically contentious matter, and you can expect to face heavy criticism and possibly legal action.

Ravi Veloo wrote a piece that was headlined 'For the sake of Singapore the PAP should split' for the same newspaper a few months before mine had appeared.⁵ The headline itself would have made many outsiders lift at least one eyebrow. But what followed shows that the gap between the reality of Singapore and its image abroad increasingly has grown apart.

In relation to the PAP's unbroken rule of 44 years, Veloo said that it had done well despite the fact that, 'it faces none of the usual checks and balances, such as free and responsible media'. Nonetheless he then went on with a blistering attack on the PAP as it is today:

So strong is the conservative culture within the main ranks of the party that even the brightest, most exciting people it recruits soon echo hackneyed old lines ... Just look at the Economic Review Committee. Given the mandate to think the unthinkable, it came up with a thumping endorsement of the status quo instead, with just minor tinkering here and there.

Veloo went on to criticise the top-down approach to public decision-making in Singapore:

How did we come to this? Well, for one thing, when you crush alternative opinions steadily with a sledgehammer in the name of pragmatism and social unity, you encourage people not to have any strong opinions ... So no wonder that Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew could face hordes of our better-educated, better-travelled, better fed at a university gathering recently and lament that it was hard to find world class leaders among the 40,000 or so babies born each year [in Singapore]. The clue to the problem was right before him – not one of our students had the self-respect to stand up and correct him. The young are more dull and less rebellious than their parents – another Singapore first!

The solution, Veloo suggested, is clear:

The PAP needs a real threat to its own dominance to make the difference. It needs to split down the middle. Strategically, it would be the best legacy the founder of the party, SM Lee, could leave the country.

So there you have it. The PAP is conservative, turns new recruits into hacks with hackneyed old lines, crushes dissent with a sledgehammer, has led to young Singaporeans having insufficient self-respect and being dull and should be split in two. And all that published in a Singapore government-linked newspaper. Clearly, change is afoot. But does this journey have a predetermined destination? Journeys in Singapore usually do. But this one might be different.

Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall

But it's not quite a Prague Spring. In October 2003 I wrote another column for *Today*. Again, I took advantage of what appeared to be Singapore's new *glasnost*. The newspaper gave it the headline 'Is Singapore being paranoid?'⁶ To provide a flavour, here are several paragraphs from that piece:

Why does the Government still feel the need to license newspapers and other media outlets? Why do editors feel the need to self-censor? Granted, the list of 'sensitive' topics appears to have grown shorter. So, why maintain the old fashioned, out-moded trappings of a Third World dictatorship? What does Singapore have to hide?

For too long, civil servants have been allowed to be the main source of ideas. To their credit, their professionalism has got Singapore to where it is. But now, such control threatens Singapore's prosperity.

I accept that the media has become more open in recent years. *Today*, for example, publishes challenging opinion pieces increasingly of a nature that would have been unthinkable several years ago. But five minutes of sunshine does not make a sunny day.

The Government should abolish the system of annual licensing and editors should have greater independence. Instead, what reforms have been made in the direction of liberalism? Bungee jumping and bar-top dancing.

I was walking along Boat Quay recently and saw four ladies standing on a bar in a pub, each writhing to music in a sexually-suggestive manner. This is not reform.

This is not liberalism. This is sleaze. And sleaze should not be equated with freedom. The most important aspect of freedom, which is aligned to the freedom of the media, is the freedom to be wrong. And it's that freedom that Singapore needs to cultivate.

Many outsiders were stunned. They were amazed that a Singapore newspaper would publish such remarks. One said to me that I'd never be allowed into Singapore again. Another inquired, half in jest, where he should send the wreath. An expatriate reader in Singapore wrote to the editor to say that he was 'simply floored' when he read the piece and he offered his congratulations to all concerned.

Many Singaporean readers wrote to express their agreement with the sentiments that I'd expressed. In all, about 20 letters were received and only one was not supportive. Such a reader response to a serious opinion piece is almost unheard of in Singapore. But there was one other letter. *Today* was obliged to publish it. It was from the press secretary to the minister for information, communications and the arts. She was not happy. Of course I had it all wrong she said (as did presumably the Singaporeans who had written in support of what I'd said). She finished by saying that, as a foreigner, I was entitled to my views but I had 'no right to campaign for them [in Singapore] or to change our system to something else that he prefers'.⁷ This last remark attracted more letters in my support from ordinary Singaporeans. One reader said that it contradicted all that the Singapore Government had said about the country's need to attract foreign talent.

The letter was followed up by a speech a few weeks later. Dr Lee Boon Yang, the minister for information, communications and the arts, said in an address to a Singapore press club luncheon attended by around 100 journalists and other people involved in the media that by 'attacking' the government's media policy and urging the adoption of the Western model I had 'clearly crossed the line and engaged in our domestic politics'. He also described how the government had issued more media licences since 2000 and defended the government's role in censorship. When asked in the Q&A session what the government would do if another article like mine appeared in Singapore, Lee said: 'If any newspaper, whether it is *Today* or some other newspaper, persists in publishing such articles, we will certainly take it up.' Ironically, the topic of Lee's speech was 'Towards a Global Media City'.⁸

That same day, the *Today* newspaper ran another of my columns but, unusually, did so on page one. The following day, its front page was devoted to Lee's speech. And so I was in the odd position of having written what turned out to be the newspaper's lead story on one day and

then being in it on the next. But the fact remains that *Today* had published my offending column and it is a government-controlled newspaper. Presumably, the editors at *Today* would not have published if (a) they thought that it was outside the government's boundaries and (b) if they were unsympathetic towards it. Indeed, if Dr Lee's boundaries are so clear, why did a Singapore newspaper publish my column in the first place – a newspaper that is ultimately owned by a government holding company headed by the wife of the deputy prime minister? The boundaries are not clear and that seemingly is their point. They encourage the erring on the side of caution.

I did email the minister's office to say that everyone would be helped if what constitutes 'politics' was defined by the Singapore Government and then codified. It did not occur to me that I had written about domestic politics but rather about Singapore's institutional arrangements. But on that point I received no reply. The government's position is evocative of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – nothing more nor less', said Humpty Dumpty to Alice. The Singapore Government's position also runs counter to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of that Declaration states in its entirety:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The global media city seems a long way off.

Dr Lee's singling me out with the claim that I had 'crossed the line' was reported across the region in newspapers in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Brunei and Taiwan and on several wire services. It was also reported in the *International Herald Tribune* ('Singapore calls article on politics out of line'). But arguably most damagingly for Singapore, it was the subject of an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* in the US and in that newspaper's European and Asian editions ('How does an authoritarian government get its journalists to toe the line without having to micromanage them?' it began).⁹ How all this promotes Singapore as a global media city isn't obvious. Of course it doesn't. It does the opposite.

Dr Lee's remarks even managed to propel me (and him) onto the well-known satirical website TalkingCock.com. The piece – a spoof of an interview with the minister – sat alongside another that called for a 'national day of civil disobedience' in relation to the Singapore government's ban on oral sex unless such sex leads to full intercourse. There's probably no

need here to go into what form the suggested civil disobedience should take. Singapore's Court of Appeal had upheld the oral sex ban in 1997. The court referred in part in its decision to an Indian case that dates back to 1817 in which a man was charged with having intercourse with a buffalo's nostril. The Singapore Government's preference for control and the self-defeating contortions and absurdities to which that leads was highlighted once more.

In any event, the Singapore Government is not above intervening in the domestic political processes of foreign countries itself. It retains a range of lobbyists and law firms to push its case in the US, for example. One firm that it retains is Washington-based APCO Worldwide Inc. The firm describes itself as 'a global communication consultancy specialising in building relationships with an organisation's key stakeholders'. In short the company works as a political lobbyist. According to US Department of Justice records, Singapore's embassy in the US paid APCO US\$50,441.53 in the six months to September 30, 2000 alone for 'strategic advice and counsel ... concerning trade and foreign policy issues. [It] also contacted Singapore Government officials, *and* members of Congress concerning the interests of positive US/Singapore relations.'¹⁰ APCO is still in the pay of the Singapore Government. So, it seems to be a case of do as I say, not as I do.

Finally it needs to be asked why does Singapore need the position of information minister in the first place? It is not a position that rich, successful and modern countries have. For example, the US, Britain and Australia do not have the need for an information minister. But Iran, Zimbabwe and Burma do. And, famously, Iraq used to have one. The trouble is, rarely is the position of information minister about giving out information but about controlling it. It's a coveted post for governments that like to control. It was no accident that in November 2003 when Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga suspended Parliament and seized power from the elected prime minister unilaterally she also took control of the Ministries of Defence, Interior *and* Information in addition to remaining president.

Once more, it needs to be remembered that media freedom is not simply a political or social issue. It is a business issue. Having a free media, a media that doesn't only report but also scrutinises and questions, is consistent with having a strong economy. A free media is consistent with good government and nation building. A shackled media is certainly not consistent with the aspiration to be a global media city. And importantly, calls for a free media should never be dismissed as meddling in politics. How the media is regulated is as much a business issue as it is about politics.

Evolution not Revolution

But Singapore *is* changing. These combative opinion pieces were after all published in Singapore. Singaporeans are learning to criticise. Not for its own sake but because it is constructive: it helps the government and leads to better policy outcomes. The challenge for the Singapore Government is not to see such criticism as a loss of face. The odd PAP Member of Parliament has begun to be more vocal in criticism. Tan Soo Khoon, a former speaker of the House for 13 years and an MP for 25 years, began to subject Singapore to a degree of self-analysis that it rarely has heard. In a speech to Parliament on April 4, 2002, Tan let fly with a series of criticisms. The government had called an election in 2001. It was called before the government's current term had expired but the government said that it wanted to go to the people to renew its mandate in the face of all the problems the world was facing and in the face of Singapore's own difficulties.

Tan said in a speech to the Parliament:

So it did somewhat baffle me that while we went out to seek a new mandate from the people very quickly, it took almost five months for Parliament to be convened for the representatives of the people to meet and discuss the issues that are so crucial to Singaporeans and our future.

The former speaker went on to express a number of other dissatisfactions at how the government and most particularly government ministers conduct themselves:

It is indeed a rare occasion in this House where a minister accepts changes to be made to his Bill, except as one minister puts it: 'I guess I can live with the changes if they are just commas and full-stops.' ... Much buzz is now given to the lifting of the Whip. [The Whip is the process whereby all government MPs are required to vote with the government regardless of their personal views on a matter:] MPs of the ruling party may ask for permission to vote freely on a case-by-case basis, except for some crucial areas. And the Whip will be lifted for all matters of conscience and selected issues. So what's new? I still have to get permission to disagree. Matter of conscience? It's a term that has never been clearly defined. And as if to show how generous we have been in lifting the Whip, we always take a kind of skewed praise in parading, as an example, our lifting of the Whip during the debate on the Abortion Bill. But that was 33 years ago!

Tan's criticism grew more specific the following month. Speaking in the government's budget debate, he referred to the 'seven wonders of Singa-

pore'. It has become something of a modern classic in Singapore and had those few Singaporeans who bother to watch local politics smirking in the coffee shops, for Tan's seven wonders were all new government offices. His list included the offices of the Ministry of Education, the new Supreme Court building and the Foreign Affairs Ministry, which Tan observed sits on 'choice district 10 land'. He said that he could remember when government offices had 'the Spartan look'. But not any more. 'I think there must be a competition among them ... to see which can look better than the Four Seasons Hotel.' The nation of immigrants had become decidedly comfortable.

Tan also complained that too much public money was spent by government departments to produce glossy flyers, colourful charts and fancy name changes. For example, the Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board had become Spring Singapore and the Trade Development Board had been renamed International Enterprise Singapore. Who would now know what Spring Singapore actually did? Tan joked that it 'sounds like the name of a nightclub'. For all the money spent on renaming the boards and then telling people about it, 'at the end of it all, you're still doing the same things but nobody is any wiser what you actually do or how to look for you'.¹¹

Of course it's not true to say that Singapore is a one-party state. Voters are given the choice to vote for parties other than the PAP, but by and large they prefer the PAP. It is a preference that is genuine. But a government that espouses free trade because competition helps manufacturers to be more efficient cannot deny that political parties also need effective competition. In a sense, the PAP has become a victim of its own success. Singapore now does seem starved of sources for new ideas and creativity when it comes to public decision-making. There might not be a dictatorship politically, but to a degree there is a dictatorship of ideas, if for no other reason than because alternatives are not offered up. As the joke goes, 'we in Singapore are very lucky because we don't need to think. The government does it for us.' Ordinary Singaporeans have opted out of the marketplace for ideas by and large. They have done so for good reason.

Some quip that Singapore is not so much a one-party state as a one-family state. It is true that relatives of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew now hold key positions of power in Singapore. His sons Lee Hsien Loong and Lee Hsien Yang serve as deputy prime minister and head of Singapore Telecom respectively. Lee Hsien Loong's wife, Ho Ching, is the head of Temasek Holdings, the government's principal holding company. Sister-in-law Pamela Lee has served as a senior director at the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. Kwa Soon Bee, the brother of Lee's wife Kwa

Geok Choo, is a former permanent secretary of health and a member of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. Even Wee Kim Wee, former president of Singapore, is a cousin of Lee's late mother. It's said that when Lee resigned as prime minister, he did not so much step down as step aside. And then there is Lee himself. Since 1990 he has served as the senior minister in the prime minister's office. He also serves as chairman of the all-important Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC).

Malaysia's former Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, someone for whom Lee has expressed considerable respect, said to me that, although Lee is no longer Singapore's prime minister, it was his view that no-one should 'doubt' that Lee still 'runs the place'.

The problem, though, is not that the Lee family has deliberately moved its members in place to exclude others. The members who have won prominent positions have done so on merit. The Lees genuinely are an exceptional and talented family. It's also the case that Singapore is small, with a lot of demand for talent but an insufficient supply of it. Ho Ching's appointment as executive director of Temasek was a classic case. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong acknowledged the apparent conflict of interest inherent in the appointment but said that it was the result of Singapore's small talent pool relative to the demand for talent. 'It is awkward, we know that,' said Goh exhibiting his typical flair for sounding reasonable. 'There is some conflict, but you know, we work for the larger good.'¹²

Goh made it very clear in his 2003 National Day address that Lee Hsien Loong would succeed him as prime minister and that Lee was his choice. But he also astonished Singaporeans by breathing new life into an old rumour:

You may have also heard this old story about [Lee Hsien] Loong. Back in 1990, Loong had a quarrel with Richard Hu [the then finance minister]. Dhanabalan [the then minister for national development] sided with Richard. Loong lost his temper, reached across the table, and gave Dhanabalan a tight slap! The whole Cabinet was thrown into commotion. I then forced Loong to apologise. I must be suffering from amnesia. I just cannot remember this incident!

Raising the matter was an extraordinary thing for Goh to do. Particularly in what is considered to be the prime minister's most important speech of the year. And notice how he did not say that the incident did not happen but rather that he could not remember it. Singapore was abuzz with the story and theories as to why Goh had brought it up. Someone even developed an email attachment that was quick to do the rounds, showing action figure toys including a BG GI Joe doll with one arm in a slapping position

(‘comes with special slapping action to bring critics to their knees’). At its feet was a doll on its knees, on which Dhanabalan’s face had been transposed. (BG stands for ‘brigadier general’, Lee’s last post in the army, and not for ‘baby god’ as some quip.)

But ultimately, the real problem with fostering a culture of debate and the free flow of ideas is that Singaporeans (and foreign writers) don’t yet know where the boundaries are. And if the boundaries are unclear, the best way to avoid crossing them is to remain as cautious as possible. In mid-2003, a government subcommittee charged with examining ways to make Singaporeans more creative in their thinking said that the idea that ‘out-of-bounds markers’ exist in Singapore was having a ‘dampening’ effect on people voicing their views. The committee recommended that various forums be set up in which various strata of the community could voice their views. Young Singaporeans could air their views in a national youth forum, for example.¹³

Would that work? Of course not. The media is the means by which ordinary people voice their concerns in other modern countries. And that’s how it needs to be in Singapore. There has been greater public debate in Singapore’s media of late. But people still tread with caution.

I say things in Western newspapers in ways I feel I could not in Singapore’s media. But then I might be wrong. I don’t know. No-one knows. And yet my Singaporean friends regard me as outrageously outspoken. But then when I did write an outspoken piece that I genuinely did believe to be permissible, as did the newspaper’s editors, we all later found out that it wasn’t.

The political culture in Singapore encourages self-censorship and that constrains the flow of ideas. But ideas are a middle-class consumption good. Revolution is not. And Singapore, thanks to the success of its government, is overwhelmingly middle class, the first such middle-class country in Southeast Asia. So what is the danger? Why the phobia of criticism? Ideas and creativity are good for business and good for the economy. How dangerous to Singapore can freethinking be? The place is an outstanding success. Its story is an excellent one. It is a story that can stand up to scrutiny. And it can do so without the clutter of outmoded media licensing laws and other restrictions that suggest otherwise.