

# Chapter 1

## **Politics**



## HAVING A CAPABLE ALTERNATIVE PARTY IS IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

22 November 2008

*This was a letter I sent to TODAY newspaper. It was published by the newspaper on 19 November 2008.*

I refer to the report, “Adversarial two-party system not for S’pore” (*TODAY*, 17 November 2008). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong felt that the two party system cannot work for Singapore and that we are much better off with one dominant party.

The Prime Minister’s familiar argument is that because Singapore has a small population, if we are to split our political talent into two groups, we will end up with “two second division teams”. This is akin to saying that it is better to put all our eggs in one basket, than to have two baskets with fewer eggs each. I disagree.

While the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) may have performed well over the past 40 years, past performance is no guarantee of future success, as investment advisors always caution.

Lee said that if the PAP ever becomes ineffective or corrupt, many opposition parties will spring up to take on the government. Therein lies the danger: If the PAP ever becomes corrupt, there will be absolutely no time for a viable alternative party to “spring up” suddenly, since political organisations take years to build up their capacity and capabilities. Furthermore, a corrupt government with firm controls on the levers of power is likely to use that power to entrench itself, stifling any potential opposition

from arising. This is because their corrupt leaders will know full well that they will face prosecution if anyone else takes over the government.

Singapore may then be left in a disastrous situation of having a bad government with no capable alternatives. For a small city-state like Singapore with little margin for error in governance, this could spell an unrecoverable decline leading to our very obsolescence as a nation.

It is therefore in the national interest for a well-organised, competent and morally upright alternative party to emerge, so that should the PAP falter, there will another party to take over the reins of government at the next elections and ensure that our country continues to prosper without interruption.

Obviously I do not expect support for an effective alternative party to come from the PAP, since it goes against its partisan interests. However, I hope more Singaporeans will realise that greater political competition can produce not just better governance now, but improved stability for our future as well.

## **ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP NEEDED FOR SINGAPORE'S LONG-TERM SURVIVAL**

4 April 2007

**M**inister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew told reporters in Australia on 4 April 2007 that Singapore cannot afford to have a “revolving door” style of government, but instead needs “good, competent people who will stay” in government.

Defending the million dollar salaries of Singapore’s Cabinet ministers, he said that the “cure for all this talk is really a good dose of incompetent government”, which will result in our women becoming “maids in other persons’ countries”.

Lee’s remarks reflect an unwavering confidence in the ability of the PAP to maintain its high standards in perpetuity. This overconfidence has led the PAP—and indeed many Singaporeans—to believe that the “men in white” are the only hope for our nation’s future prosperity.

“Revolving door” is a situation often seen in American politics, where elites alternate between appointments in the government and private sector, depending on which political party is in power. For example, Condoleezza Rice was a National Security Council Director under President George H. W. Bush. She returned to academia as the provost of Stanford University during the Clinton administration, and was then appointed National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State by President George W. Bush.

Having alternating teams of largely sound administrators has in no small part contributed to the

political stability of the US. Americans, and indeed the world, can be confident that no matter who occupies the White House, the US will still continue to function along the same principles that have contributed to the country's economic success and political stability for over 200 years.

The bipartisan or multi-partisan system has played out successfully not only in developed countries, but also in Third World democracies. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost power in a shock election result in 2004 to a coalition led by the Indian National Congress (Party). Nevertheless, life continued as before, and India continues to enjoy sterling growth rates under the leadership of Manmohan Singh, who was the original architect of India's economic liberalisation in 1991. Singh was the former finance minister who was relegated to the Opposition while the BJP was in power.

Outside of the political arena, having a backup or a good reserve team is seen as essential in almost every major endeavour, from computer data management to sports. In a memorable interview with the Straits Times back in 2003, former top civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow had this to say:

“..we should open up politically and allow talent to be spread throughout our society so that an alternative leadership can emerge. So far, the People's Action Party's tactic is to put all the scholars into the civil service because it believes the way to retain political power forever is to have a monopoly on talent. But in my view, that's a very short term view. It is the law of nature that all things must atrophy. Unless (Lee Kuan Yew) allows serious political challenges to emerge from the alternative

elite out there, the incumbent elite will just coast along. At the first sign of a grassroots revolt, they will probably collapse just like the incumbent Progressive Party to the left-wing PAP onslaught in the late 1950s. I think our leaders have to accept that Singapore is larger than the PAP.”

Singapore’s first team of leaders, including Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam, did a phenomenal job transforming Singapore into a gleaming metropolis. However, continuing to expect successive generations of PAP cadres to maintain and improve on Singapore’s success is somewhat akin to investing all one’s money in a single equity stock. Although the initial purchase of the stock may have been a wise decision which yielded good dividends, any investment advisor would caution that putting all our eggs in one basket, as opposed to maintaining a balanced portfolio, is a recipe for disaster.

Past success is no guarantee of future performance, is the familiar warning about investing in stocks. When our current PAP leaders boast about how excellent leadership has brought us our current success, they seem to forget that it was their predecessors, not them, who built Singapore into the success it is today.

Singapore needs an alternative leadership that is prepared and ready to take over should the “starters” falter. This alternative leadership need not reside only in opposition parties, but can be in civil society or the private sector. It is not healthy to continue this situation whereby so many vocal critics of the government—including CEOs, top academics and even popular bloggers—are co-opted to be part of the ruling party’s machinery, whether as PAP

politicians, Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs), ambassadors or scholar-civil servants.

Obviously it is in the PAP's interest to attract as many talented individuals for itself as possible. So it is really up to talented and capable Singaporeans to decide whether to allow themselves to be co-opted, or to remain free to speak and act according to their own consciences, for the good of Singapore and Singaporeans.

**THE FEAR OF THE OPPOSITION**

1 November 2008

**W**hile at a wedding dinner recently, I was seated next to an older relative when our conversation turned to politics. My relative wondered why I had not followed my parents in moving to Australia to work, and mused that he was considering moving there too. When I asked why, he cited the fear of political instability in Singapore.

That remark surprised me since Singapore is seen by many to be one of the most politically stable countries in Asia. We have had no change of government—violent or otherwise—since 1959. When probed further, he said he feared the opposition taking over in a freak election. I assured him that given the current state of the opposition, the PAP government will not be under any threat of losing an election within his lifetime. More importantly, I told him I trust Singaporean voters to be wise enough not to vote a lousy party into power.

He countered by pointing out that even when the opposition had fielded “criminals” and slipper-wearing candidates, they were still able to garner 20 to 30 per cent of the vote. I explained, from my limited knowledge of electoral sociology, that in every election, there will be at least 20 per cent of voters who are hardcore oppositionists and will vote for anyone who runs against the ruling party candidate.

However the gulf between 20 per cent and 51 per cent—the latter being the percentage necessary to win a seat outright—is huge. Even in the most closely contested constituency of Aljunied Group Representation

Constituency (GRC) in the 2006 General Election, the PAP's 55 per cent win against the Workers' Party would be considered a landslide in other democracies. Consider Britain's Labour Party, which won the 2005 election with just 35 per cent of the popular vote. Put in this perspective, the PAP's 66.6 per cent overall percentage in 2006 was a blowout victory.

My relative said he admired the PAP for what they have achieved, not just for Singapore, but for him personally. Growing up in a one-room flat, and now living in a private apartment, he has seen a dramatic improvement in his standard of living over the past 40 years. He reserved stinging criticism for some of his peers who live in bungalows and are still so ungrateful as to grumble about the government.

I cautioned him that past performance is no guarantee of future success. Just because the PAP has governed well in the past, does not mean that it will continue to do so for eternity. He agreed that no country has had one political party govern forever. In the short term however, he was supremely confident that the PAP's recruitment process will ensure that only top-notch candidates are presented in each election. In contrast, he said, the opposition was happy to take anyone who had a degree and was willing to pay the election deposit, even if they had no "track record".

"What is your definition of a track record?" I asked him. Many of the new PAP MPs don't exactly have a very long political resume either. Nevertheless, he was sure that with the many interviews they had undergone with party leaders, coupled with the background checks, PAP candidates would definitely meet the necessary criteria for political leadership.

I asked him if he would consider voting for a non-PAP candidate if he or she were more “qualified” than the PAP candidate. After initially saying he would, he later reasoned that it would be impossible for an opposition candidate to be as qualified as his PAP opponent. Firstly, the PAP’s recruitment process would throw up only the best men and women in the country, according to his logic. Secondly, anyone worth their salt, who genuinely desired to serve the people and make Singapore a better place would join the PAP instead of the opposition.

He was of the view that a capable person would be “out of his mind” to join the opposition, and that people who joined the opposition did so only out of self-interest or ulterior motives. Why else would someone want to oppose such an “excellent” government? Apparently he felt that joining the opposition in and of itself pointed to a character flaw. He dismissed the possibility that some principled individuals joined the opposition because they could not see themselves joining the PAP due to fundamental disagreements with the latter’s style of governance. He also did not see the price many opposition members paid for their political beliefs as worthy of much respect.

Our animated discussion went on and on. In the end it was time to go home and we had to agree to disagree.

While I was slightly dismayed to hear these words from an educated senior citizen, I have no doubt that he represents a significant constituency of citizens who have a rags-to-riches story to tell.

His point of view is particularly instructive for our opposition. From my past conversations with many opposition members, I get the sense that many of them joined because they felt a need to “check” the ruling

party—and little else. Some of them actually think that just because they are not the PAP, and they shake a few hands and show up on Nomination Day, voters will choose them over their rivals. This is a recipe for defeat—again and again, election after election.

What they fail to see is that the “swing” voters (i.e., those who may vote either way on Polling Day and who constitute a significantly high enough proportion of the voters to effectively decide the outcome of an election) are largely voting for a party to form the government, not individuals who merely snap at the heels of the PAP behemoth.

Therefore, to win their vote, the opposition parties have to prove to these voters that they are competent and honest enough to lead the whole country, not just their constituency.

The opposition has two crutches that it always falls back on: One, that the unlevel political playing field created by the PAP makes it very difficult to mount any significant challenge to it; and two, that they lack resources because good people do not step forward to join their parties.

These are both true to a great extent, but it should not stop the opposition parties from improving themselves internally, so as to present a more professional face to the voting public. People want to hear different, and better ideas from the opposition on how to run the country, not just gripes about every little fault of the PAP.

It is not unusual that many Singaporeans hold the opposition to a higher standard than they do for the ruling party. After all, the opposition has no track record of successfully running a nation, and therefore has to prove they are better than their PAP opponents before they will

earn the vote.

It is my hope that our opposition will shift to a higher gear soon, and that more good men and women will join them. The next election is due by February 2012. Time is running out, and the people's hopes are slowly getting dashed. Can the opposition turn things around and dispel people's fear of their success?

## **WILL HIGH MINISTERIAL SALARIES REALLY ATTRACT THE RIGHT PEOPLE?**

2 April 2007

**O**n 9 April 2007, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will announce in Parliament the salary revisions for himself and his ministers. There is little doubt that we will be seeing a whopping increase in their salaries, based on the current shortfall from the so-called “benchmark” against the 48 top earners in Singapore.

I highly recommend reading a *Straits Times* forum letter by Ng Kok Lim (2 April 2007), titled “Strength of S’pore rests on people not just govt”. Amidst all the self-congratulatory statements to justify the high salaries, Ng pointed out that the commendable achievement of bringing Singapore from “Third World to First” was done by the previous generation of leaders, not the present politicians who are benefiting from their million dollar salaries. He added that “paying my politician top dollar may not dent my pocket, but it angers many ordinary Singaporeans who have to pay more for everything without having the freedom to write their own pay cheque”.

I do not oppose high salaries for ministers, senior civil servants, or even heads of charities and religious organisations. I think all of them make a valuable contribution to our nation, and they should be rewarded based on their performance.

However, we need to distinguish between acceptably high salaries, and extravagant salaries. I would say anything beyond S\$500,000 a year is not fitting for a public servant whose salary is drawn from taxpayers’ hard-earned money.

The government's public line for paying its leaders such high salaries is two-fold: One, to prevent corruption; and two, to attract and retain talent. I have a slightly different take about the reasons for the extravagant salaries that our leaders pay themselves:

Firstly, it's an issue of status. In our East Asian culture and particularly among the ministers' generation, your status in society is—rightly or wrongly—determined primarily by the salary you draw. If you are drawing a high salary, you must be very important, and vice versa.

Our political leaders' paramount concern is how Singaporeans view them. This explains why they do not tolerate any slights against their integrity or their "right to govern" by opposition politicians, political commentators or the media, as this, in their view, may lower the "esteem" that Singaporeans have for them. Therefore, paying themselves salaries that are benchmarked against the top earners in Singapore reinforces their status at the pinnacle of society.

Secondly, the PAP is "looking for love in all the wrong places". Its definition of "talent" is extremely narrow. PAP grassroots activists, no matter how loyal and passionate, almost never make it into the ministerial ranks nowadays, because political savvy and familiarity with the ground are not considered to be as important as technocratic know-how. In our political leaders' eyes, "talent" is defined as people who have successfully helmed large organisations, be they listed companies or government ministries (as reflected in the qualifying criteria for the Presidency), or those who are successful professionals with good academic qualifications.

For high-flying civil servants, political office is simply

the next step in one's career progression in the public service. It is not hard for them to make that transition. But for private sector head honchos, it is a different issue altogether. They may not have that same passion for public service or the experience in dealing with the government bureaucracy. They are usually already earning very high salaries, which they see as their right given their contribution to their companies' profits. So in order to woo these corporate high-flying millionaires, the PAP government is trying to lower the opportunity costs for them. It is no secret that many of today's PAP MPs are reluctant politicians.

It baffles me how someone would need to see a \$2 million dollar carrot before accepting a call (or privilege) to serve one's nation. Are these the kind of leaders we want leading our country? I sure hope that none of our current batch of ministers made their decision to enter politics based on the salary they were offered. And if they didn't, what makes them so sure that they need to hike ministerial salaries even more to attract the next generation of leaders?

## **THE ELECTED PRESIDENCY AND FUTURE NON-PAP GOVERNMENTS**

1 November 2008

The debate about the relevance of the Elected Presidency (EP) came up again recently in Parliament. With a new framework to tap investment income from the reserves, the PAP government has given the Elected President additional duties. This includes approving the Finance Minister's formula for determining the expected long-term real rates of return of Singapore's reserves at the start of each financial year. This formula will not be made known to the public and could be changed each year. The only safeguard is the President and his Council of Advisors.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, on learning that the Workers' Party (WP) voted in support of the constitutional amendment, took the opportunity to prod them to change their stand on the EP.

The WP's original stand was made clear in the party's Manifesto, released before the 2006 election. The WP opposes the EP because they feel it will take away the power of Parliament as the people's representatives.

The EP was introduced by the PAP government ostensibly as a "second key" to the nation's reserves and a safeguard against the irresponsible appointment of key civil servants. The Elected President has much greater powers than most Singaporeans are probably aware of. According to the Singapore Constitution, the President may, at his discretion:

- a. Appoint the Prime Minister (Article 25);

- b. Veto the government's choice of Chief Justice and Supreme Court judges, Attorney-General, Auditor-General, Accountant-General, Chief of Defence Force, Chiefs of the Air Force, Army and Navy, Commissioner of Police, director of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), statutory board chairmen and members, chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC), and many other key public service appointments (Article 22);
- c. Veto the appointment or removal of directors or CEOs of Government companies, namely, Temasek Holdings and GIC (Article 22C);
- d. Veto a request to dissolve Parliament, which is a prerequisite for calling elections (Article 21);
- e. Veto any proposed legislation that curtails his own powers (Article 22H);
- f. Veto the budgets of statutory boards (Article 22B);
- g. Approve the CPIB Director's request to commence a corruption investigation against anyone, even if the Prime Minister refuses (Article 22G).

In the case of (b) and (c) above, the presidential veto can be overridden with a two-thirds majority vote by Parliament.

Given the powers of an Elected President, it is no wonder that WP Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang argued in Parliament that "the office of the Elected President could be potentially crippling for a non-PAP government".

However this is the most likely reason why the PAP government introduced the EP in the first place. Surely

they do not see a need to check themselves! Furthermore, the very strict criteria for standing for election as President would, as WP's Low put it, mean that presidents are likely to come from the PAP establishment.

Let's examine the qualifications for Presidential candidates (Article 19):

- a. Has been, for at least three years, a Minister, Chief Justice, Speaker, Attorney-General, chairman of the PSC, Auditor-General, Accountant-General, permanent secretary of a ministry, statutory board chairman or CEO, chairman or CEO of a \$100 million dollar Singapore-registered company;
- b. Satisfies the Presidential Elections Committee that he is a person of integrity, good character and reputation;

For (a) above, almost all qualified persons are current or former government appointees. And there are very few \$100 million Singapore-registered companies which are not Government companies or their subsidiaries.

Who are the members of the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC)? Basically "three wise men": The PSC chairman, chairman of the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA) and a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. All these are government appointees (albeit some requiring presidential consent).

So, in summary, the field of candidates is limited to mainly government appointees. If that fails to throw up a candidate that satisfies the government, a government-appointed committee can make a subjective judgment call

on who can run for president.

This played out almost exactly in the 2005 presidential election, when Andrew Kuan was disqualified by the PEC on grounds that as former Group Chief Financial Officer of the \$1.9 billion JTC Corporation, his seniority and responsibility was “not comparable to those mentioned in the Constitution”.

### **Scenario: Opposition wins election**

Consider the following hypothetical scenario:

An opposition coalition wins 51 per cent of the seats in Parliament in the 2016 elections, way short of a two-thirds majority. The presidential election is not due until 2017. Therefore the Elected President is still the previous PAP government’s choice.

Come the August 2017 presidential election, the “three wise men” of the PEC are still in office, and cannot be removed without the approval of the sitting President. And so the field of candidates for the Presidency are still the PAP’s choices, and the choice of the President is a foregone conclusion at least until the 2023 presidential election.

This President exercises all the powers mentioned earlier, blocking appointments, including key security appointments of that of the Chief of Defence Force, Chief of Army and Commissioner of Police. Because the new government does not enjoy a two-thirds majority, it will be unable to override the President’s veto and will be forced to appoint the President’s preferred generals.

Even after 2023, seven years after the PAP has lost power, it may still be able to exercise its “third key”. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was quoted by Reuters on

16 September 2006, saying: “Without the Elected President and if there is a freak result, within two or three years, the army would have to come in and stop it.”

The most obvious implication of Lee’s statement is a threat of a military coup. But even without a coup, the presence of rebellious generals and police commissioners could be enough to destabilise the government and scare away investors. Add to the mix an uncooperative or adversarial Attorney-General, Chief Justice, Auditor-General and CPIB Director, the new government could be utterly crippled, not unlike the situation in Thailand right now.

For ordinary citizens who are not fully aware of the political manoeuvring behind the scenes, what they will see is a paralysed government, incapable of getting anything done. They will yearn to “return to Egypt”, or the days when the PAP was in charge. By the 2021 or 2026 election, they will vote back the PAP into power and Singapore will be back to square one (without, of course Lee Kuan Yew).

Of course, the above scenario is an extreme example. If the PAP really had the country’s interests at heart, they would not paralyse the government after losing an election. But one can never predict how political parties will act, given that their foremost objective is to gain or retain power.

### **To keep or abolish?**

I am therefore inclined to agree with the WP that the EP, in its current setup, is unsatisfactory.

However, I will stop short of calling for its complete abolition. In principle, a directly elected Head of State

would enhance democratic accountability of Parliament to the people. What I feel should be abolished is the artificially stringent qualification criteria for President.

The US Presidential candidate needs only to be born in the US, be at least 35 years old and have lived in the US for at least 14 of those years. In addition, there is a two-term limit and the Senate (the upper house of Parliament) can disqualify convicted criminals from running for President.

If the most important position in the world can be left to a democratic vote by citizens, I don't see why Singapore cannot do the same. In any case, the Elected President maintains only custodial, not executive powers.

Therefore I would like to suggest that the qualification criteria for the Elected President should include:

- a. Citizen of Singapore;
- b. Lived in Singapore for at least 35 years;
- c. Has not held the office of President for more than one term;
- d. Is subject to the qualifications as a Member of Parliament (Article 44)
- e. Is not subject to any of the disqualifications as a Member of Parliament (Article 45);
- f. Has not been a member of any political party for three years leading to the date of his nomination for election.

My main rationale for (f) is to try to minimise the number of politically-aligned candidates, since the President is expected to make decisions without favouring any political party.

I have deliberately excluded any criteria for

financial knowledge, even though a significant portion of the President's duties pertain to financial oversight. I would expect the candidates themselves to prove to the electorate their financial competence, and scrutinise each others' records. In essence, this relatively thin criteria is not to lower the bar, but to subject the candidates to the electorate's scrutiny, instead of that of members of the PAP establishment. With an educated and world-aware electorate, I trust the wisdom of our people to make the right decision.

## **NOW WHO IS THE PORK BARREL CHAMPION?**

22 October 2008

**I**t has become a familiar pattern. Whenever PAP leaders want to emphasise a point about how wise and capable they are, they cite negative examples from other countries and contrast it with Singapore.

The Parliamentary debate on 21 October 2008 was no different. Despite the PAP itself inching closer to the sacred kitty (i.e., the reserves) by increasing the proportion of investment income the government can use, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a long speech about how important it is to safeguard the reserves from “pork barrel” spending. (“Pork barrel” refers to the appropriation of government spending for localised projects secured primarily to bring money to a particular representative’s district.)

Of course, he could not have been referring to pork barrel spending by the ever-prudent PAP, could he? He charged that “opposition parties often demand that the Government spend more, particularly near election time” but they don’t “explain where the money for their programmes will come from”. He could have been implying that if Singaporeans elected any opposition party into power, that party would squander all our hard-earned reserves.

Lee cited the examples of Norway and Australia, which according to him both came under populist pressure to spend their reserves during the heat of elections. In Australia, he said, candidates John Howard and Kevin Rudd had promised multi-billion dollar packages if elected, so much so that major newspapers started a “pork-o-meter” to keep track of the cost of campaign promises. In Norway,

Parliamentarians set the rules then subsequently “broke the rules” on spending caps on their reserves.

I wonder why the PM decided to stick his foot in his mouth when Parliament had already voted unanimously for his government’s proposed spending increase. Did he not realise he sounded a tad hypocritical?

Since the 1991 election, the PAP has used pork barrel promises in the form of HDB flat upgrading to further its political objectives. They declared that they were completely justified in upgrading the flats of constituencies that voted for them, and bumping opposition held wards to the end of the queue—a truly *non sequitur* kind of logic.

In the last election, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong promised \$180 million to upgrade Hougang and Potong Pasir flats, without even thinking through how the government was going to fund that spending, as he admitted months later. How about the \$2.6 billion “Progress Package” dished out days before Polling Day? Does that smell porky enough?

It is amusing that he cited Australia as a negative example. Kevin Rudd actually proposed less spending than John Howard—and won. The newspapers there came up with a “pork-o-meter”. Well at least they were educating citizens about politicians’ populist proposals. I don’t recall our local papers pointing out that selective upgrading promises were pork barrel spending, or that election cash giveaways could be considered vote-buying in many developed countries.

## LOWER VOTING AGE TO 18

17 November 2009

**D**uring the Parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom (UK) House of Commons on 4 November 2009, a backbencher MP asked Prime Minister Gordon Brown if the British government would consider a proposal from the Youth Parliament to lower the voting age from 18 to 16. Brown replied that he was personally in favour of the idea.

The UK is not the only country that is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. Austria and Brazil have already lowered their voting age to 16. For the vast majority of democracies in the world, the voting age is 18. Singapore is part of a small and shrinking club of stragglers that still require their citizens to be 21 to vote. These include Cameroon, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Gabon, Malaysia and Oman—all bastions of freedom and democracy! It truly irks me that we are so behind the rest of the world.

In January 2009, Non-constituency MP and Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim asked in Parliament whether the voting age could be lowered from 21 to 18. Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee said that the current approach is “pragmatic and sensible”. He added that Singapore takes elections very seriously and “there is need for a voter to have the necessary maturity”. A 21-year-old, he said, would often be working or pursuing tertiary studies, which would put him in a better position than an 18-year-old to assess election candidates and the national issues at stake.

I cannot accept the argument that a working person would be in a better position to assess election candidates than an 18-year-old JC or poly student, or full-time NSman (NSF). But even if a 21-year-old is more mature, who is to say that an 18-year-old is not competent enough to assess candidates and understand national issues, and therefore should not be given the vote?

In Singapore, we can try 16-year-olds in court as adults, give 18-year-old soldiers assault rifles and grenades, and teach them to kill people, and allow them to drink alcohol and watch strip shows. Eighteen-year-olds are considered mature enough to start a company and invest in stocks, but not mature enough to vote. This policy is clearly inconsistent.

I would attribute the PAP government's reluctance to reduce the voting age to two factors: Political self interest and inertia. Political self-interest because they know that 18 to 21-year-olds are much more likely to vote for change than older voters. Inertia because they know they can just refuse to do it and not suffer any consequences, since this is not a bread and butter issue.

Lowering the voting age will have many positive effects on society. It will immediately expand the number of voters and give more Singaporeans the responsibility to directly decide their country's future. Along with this greater stake in the nation, we might see more young people getting interested in politics and national issues at a younger, more impressionable age, which they will likely carry into adulthood.

Most importantly for 18 to 21-year-olds, it will force political parties to look more seriously into the issues that affect their lives, because they will need to be courted for

votes.

We need more political parties, civil society activists and youths to take up this issue. I hope the government can revisit this issue and do the right thing for Singapore by reducing the voting age to 18 before the next election.

## COOLING OFF A PROBLEM THAT DOESN'T EXIST

2 December 2009

When I first read the lead story in *TODAY* newspaper this morning, I thought to myself, “Oh no here they go again.” True enough, the “proposal” (read: decision) by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to allocate a day before Polling Day as a “cooling-off period” had all the characteristics of a typical PAP election engineering hit job: Conjure up a problem that doesn’t exist; come up with some pleasant sounding proposal to “solve it”; play on the fears of Singaporeans; and then fix the Opposition while making it sound like it is fair and square because “the same rules apply to everyone”.

Lee said that, in addition to Polling Day, the day before will also be a campaign-free day—no campaigning except of course “news reporting” by the state-controlled media duopoly.

We all know what “news reporting” our mainstream media is capable of during the election period. They blanket the headlines with the ruling party’s accusations against designated opposition candidates, quoting the caretaker ministers verbatim as if they were proclaiming oracles from heaven.

Lee wants voters to “reflect rationally on issues and arguments” before voting. How nice to know I will have one extra day to clear my mind of the “nonsense” that opposition candidates were sprouting the previous nine days, and for one full day reflect on the rational and objective rebuttals by the government (but not the PAP) disguised as news, the day before Polling Day.

Of course, Lee has the safety and security of Singaporeans at heart. He recalled occasions of “pushing and shoving at election rallies”, explaining why we must have a longer cooling-off period *after* those rallies. It makes no sense: Tomorrow is cooling-off day, so I won’t shove you today?

When I get on the train in the evenings after work, I often encounter a lot of pushing and shoving. Maybe we should designate every other day as cooling-off days. That way commuters will reason that tomorrow is “cool”, so no need to push today.

I feel honoured that the PM thought it necessary to make special mention of bloggers, especially those who have the habit of “putting things up” in their own name. How nice to know that I will be relieved of the responsibility of blogging about issues affecting our lives before Polling Day!

But seriously, why does this government have so much time on their hands to solve non-existent problems? When was the last time we had anything close to a riot on Polling Day? Not that I know of in the last 50 years. But perhaps our far-sighted government is preparing for a “freak event”.

You see, we can’t build “huge canals” to prevent our cars from turning into submarines during once-in-50-years heavy downpours, but we must change the Constitution to make our already-quiet elections even quieter.

## STOP COMPARING SINGAPORE WITH THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES

5 November 2009

It never ceases to amaze me the kind of examples some people will use to drive home their point that the PAP is the one and only party capable of leading Singapore now and in the future.

In a letter to the *Straits Times* forum yesterday titled “PAP’s self-renewal a boon for the nation”, Jeffrey Law praised the PAP’s efforts at “self-renewal”, and in the process took a swipe—or rather three swipes—at neighbouring countries for their far-from-perfect political systems.

He started by saying: “It can be disquieting to know that some politicians in the region indulge in money politics and resort to buying votes.”

Was he referring to politics in other countries or in Singapore? In the last three elections since 1997, the PAP has been dangling multi-million dollar HDB upgrading programmes in front of voters, telling them if they voted for the PAP, they will get lifts on every floor and nicely spruced up estates. If they didn’t, their estates would become “slums”.

During the 2006 election campaign, the PAP promised a total of \$180 million to Hougang and Potong Pasir voters in an effort to get them to vote for their candidates instead of the incumbent opposition MPs. \$180 million! That’s \$4,540 for each of the 39,647 voters in those two wards—way more than the \$3 legal spending limit per elector under the Parliamentary Elections Act.

And that was not all. Just 5 days before polling day in the 2006 elections, the PAP government released \$2.6 billion in cash—euphemistically called the “Progress Package”—to the electorate. Back in 2001, three months before the elections, the government also released \$2.7 billion in “New Singapore Shares” to Singaporeans.

There was never a repeat of cash giveaways of this scale in between elections. These giveaways way exceeded the amounts used to buy votes in other countries. So tell me, who really is engaging in money politics?

The author then went on to lambaste the Philippines because former president Joseph Estrada is planning to run again for President. Perhaps he is not familiar with the concept of a proper democracy whereby any citizen can run for President, subject to minimal eligibility hurdles, and it is up to voters to choose the best man or woman. This is not the case in Singapore, of course, where the presidential candidates are subject to ridiculously stringent eligibility criteria and are chosen by a group of Establishment figures in an opaque selection process.

He then gave a supposedly negative example of how it was common for six or seven candidates from different political parties to compete for a *wakil rakyat* (people’s representative) post in a small district in Indonesia. What’s wrong with several candidates competing for one post? What is the ideal number then? One? Like in most constituencies in Singapore?

Finally, he did a survey of one person, who remarked that politicians (in Indonesia) were more interested in gaining power and wealth than looking after the welfare of the people. How is Law so sure that this applies to all politicians in Indonesia? And how does he know that it

doesn't also apply to some of our politicians? After all it is not the Indonesian ministers who pay themselves multi-million dollar salaries.

But even if all the above are true, why are we, a developed country, being compared with Third world countries all the time? It's like comparing apples with oranges. Shouldn't we compare ourselves with other First world countries like South Korea, New Zealand, Denmark and Netherlands?

**THE PLEDGE IS NOT AN ASPIRATION OR IDEOLOGY  
—IT'S A PROMISE**

24 August 2009

I have been following the recent debate in and outside Parliament about the National Pledge and how it should be applied to Singapore's laws and policies. The debate was sparked off by a motion and a speech on 18 August 2009 by new Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan, and amplified when Lee Kuan Yew weighed in the next day with his views.

The original motion read:

That this House (i.e., Parliament) reaffirms its commitment to the nation building tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge when debating national policies, especially economic policies.

Viswa, in his speech, said:

But if we examine our National Pledge closely, it is our national ideology—a set of inalienable values, precepts that demand adherence in the face of the lure of pragmatism. It is designed to serve as the moral compass for us as a people—we lose it, ignore it, or misabuse it to our peril.

This provoked a strong response by Lee, who said:

I think it is dangerous to allow such highfalutin ideas to go undemolished and mislead Singapore.

and

He (former Foreign Minister Rajaratnam) was a great idealist. His draft came to me; I trimmed out the unachievable, and the Pledge as it stands is his work after I've trimmed it. What is it? An ideology? No, it's an aspiration. Will we achieve it? I do not know. We'll have to keep on trying. Are we a nation? In transition.

I thank Lee for increasing my vocabulary with that one interesting word “highfalutin”, but I disagree that Viswa's ideas can be characterised as such. I think they resonated strongly with many Singaporeans. It is unfortunate that Lee jumped on just one point about equality and used the existence of Article 152 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup> to explain why we can never be an equal society<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 152(2) states: “The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.”

<sup>2</sup> Lee said: “We explicitly state in our Constitution a duty on behalf of the Government not to treat everybody as equal.”

The crux of the disagreement was that Viswa said the Pledge was our national ideology, while Lee said that it was more of an aspiration which we might never realise.

I disagree with both of them on this point. The Pledge is neither an aspiration nor an ideology. It is a promise made by all Singaporeans, to their fellow Singaporeans.

Let's examine the statement that all young Singaporeans recite every day in school:

We, the citizens of Singapore pledge ourselves, as one united people regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.

The first line is just a statement of fact. The last line is the expected result of building a democratic society based on justice and equality.

Where then is this promise in the Pledge? It lies in the second line alone: "To build a democratic society, based on justice and equality".

So in my view, to the extent that we Singaporeans are not doing our part to build a democratic society based on justice and equality, we have not been fulfilling the promise we made in the Pledge.

I hope that every Singaporean, particularly those who recited the Pledge at 8:22pm on National Day, would renew their commitment to what they promised in the Pledge.

We cannot possibly be committed to building a democratic society when we say that democracy need not involve the presence of a political opposition, as one PAP

member wrote recently.

We cannot say we fight for equality, when we close our eyes to the growing income divide in Singapore. We cannot claim a commitment to justice, when we dismiss the injustice that 22 social activists suffered back in 1987 when they were detained for several months without charges under the Internal Security Act.

Of course, this is not to accuse Singapore of being completely undemocratic, unjust and unequal. We have clearly made some progress in all these areas. But it is definitely not enough in some aspects, particularly in the area of democracy and equality. Lee's statements only underline this government's half-hearted commitment to these ideals.

I don't expect this government to give their full backing suddenly to democracy and equality any time soon. But I hope that ordinary Singaporeans from all walks of life would reaffirm themselves to those goals.

Democracy, justice and equality alone will not bring about happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation, but they will certainly go a long way to achieve those noble ideals.