

NATIONAL DAY RALLY

A timely look at those 'other' issues

EUGENE K B TAN



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong offered Singaporeans a refreshing change at this year's National Day Rally: He shared the occasion with not one but three other government leaders. Stylistically, the change in format took away the element of jaded predictability.

There was also an important signalling effect — a subtle manifestation of a more inclusive leadership style, and how different perspectives have a place under the Singapore sun.

While recent rally speeches were

gradually less heavily economic-accented, this time round the economy clearly took a back seat. Post-material concerns and aspirational issues took centre stage and, hopefully, mark definitively the first steps towards "right-sizing" our attitudes towards material and post-material aspirations.

It has never been about one or the other. More than ever, it is about how we can maintain a sustainable equilibrium between the two that unleashes the full potential and optimises the well-being of Singaporeans.

TIME FOR SOUL-SEARCHING

Leveraging on the overarching themes of "Head, Heart and Home",

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Mr Lee's speech raised a spectre of questions and concerns, including the type of society Singaporeans would like to strive towards.

Unsurprisingly, there were more questions than answers. And rightly so — a dialogue among stakeholders must ensue since consensus rather than uniformity is preferred.

"Co-creation" is the much-vaunted approach in governance today even if the modalities and expectations of government-people engagement are still being worked out. Yet Mr Lee's announcement during the rally of the establishment of two new universities from existing academic institutions, the likely introduction of paternity leave in an effort to boost fertility

rates and the creation of a new statutory board to oversee pre-school education are examples of this approach.

But one hopes that the questions, direct or indirect, will result in active soul-searching, self-reflection, and thoughtful action across the population.

NEED FOR NEW CONSENSUS

The dwelling on "aspirational" issues is not only timely but necessary.

It is clear that as a nation, we are at the crossroads. The path taken, as well as the path not taken, will impact upon the future of Singapore and Singaporeans.

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As such, there is the urgent need to forge a new consensus notwithstanding the greater diversity and complexity in our society.

Leaving it to Education Minister Heng Swee Keat and the younger ministers, Mr Lee did not say much about the "National Conversation" other than to strongly encourage Singaporeans to play an active part in the consultation process.

But the rally speech provided a visible platform to provoke Singaporeans

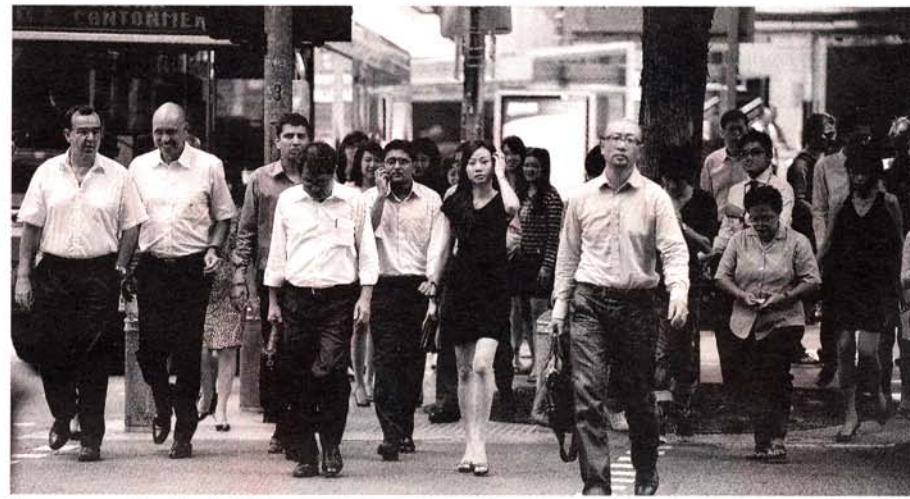
to ponder questions like "what matters to us?" and "what does Singapore stand for?"

These may appear to be esoteric topics good for a Socratic-type discussion but they are real and live issues that go to the fundamental ethos of Singapore society. They all speak to our sense of self-worth as a nation, and whether we continue to put primacy on hard-nosed pragmatism and self-indulgent materialism.

THAT IMMIGRATION DEBATE

This year's rally is refreshing for another reason. Mr Lee used his speech to chide Singaporeans for our small-mindedness, nastiness and discriminatory attitudes to fellow Singaporeans and, particularly, to non-Singaporeans.

Even if Mr Lee may appear to be



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somewhat apologetic in his gentle rebuke, the chastisement was overdue and necessary. To be sure, the Government can be criticised for its handling of the immigration issue but it does not take away Singapore's dependence on immigration to augment its population. For me, there is a larger concern at work here. One is that the children of the first-generation new immigrants will emigrate or be less than fully integrated if they do not feel welcome in Singapore.

At another level, the discriminatory attitude towards any group, if left unchecked, can easily transmogrify into discrimination against any of our long-standing minority groups.

Either way, they reflect poorly on us as a society and will undermine the social cohesion that will become increasingly important as we become more diverse. I hope that, as a society, we will continue to deal with taboo or sensitive subjects in an enlightened public discourse with a calibrated measure of candidness and sensitivity.

HEARTWARE LAGGING

There are some who feel that the post-May 2011 political climate has made the political leadership engage in the politics of appeasement. That may well be necessary in the short term, but our politicians (regardless of party affiliation) must have the moral courage to speak up when things are not right, even if the mood is not in their favour. Not to do so would be to engage in populist (not popular) tactics that might win political points in the short run but, in the long-run, do untold damage to Singapore and Singaporeans.

Listening to Mr Lee's speech, I found myself asking how was it that our "heartware", our spirit of generosity, did not develop in tandem with our rapid economic transformation.

One factor could be the overwhelming focus on materialist concerns and outcomes which has resulted in a "me-myself-and-I" egoistical mindset. A corrective of a mindset shift is needed.

This paramount concern with "what's in for me" undermines the larger relational dimension that is so crucial if a society is to develop broader and deeper bonds beyond kinship ties.

But it is all too easy to blame the materialistic mindset and economic imperatives; it was the impressive economic progress that had first enabled us to achieve handsomely in the short span of one generation.

There was something in the National Day Rally for different segments of Singaporeans. The bigger task is now for each of us to be an agent of change and make a difference for the larger good as we move into uncharted waters.

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