

From emotions to shared values

A year of anxiety and compassion in 2013 may need to give way to a year when Singapore talks about shared values and principles.



BY
 INVITATION

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 FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR many Singaporeans, 2013 has been a year of emotions.

There was compassion and relief associated with the shifts in social policy on education, health care and housing.

But there was also anger, anxiety and disappointment associated with the population debate.

The strong reactions to the Population White Paper released at the start of the year influenced subsequent discussions on all issues related to housing, transport and employment.

The year closes with the shocking riot at Little India, which triggered emotions ranging from discomfort to fear.

Perhaps it is the power of the negative and its contagion – it appears that negative emotions, rather than positive ones, have dominated much of 2013. But the negative emotions have also yielded some good. It is useful to reflect on some positive outcomes that resulted from the negative emotions and contemplate how we can move forward as a country.

Negative emotions, positive outcomes

STUDIES have shown that negative emotion can impede good judgment but it can also lead to positive outcomes. The narrative that emotion is a beast to be tamed by rationality is scientifically inaccurate and politically self-defeating.

Emotions are not just natural consequences of events or instinctive reactions to them.

People experience negative emotions when the progress towards their goals is being obstructed, or when they think their important concerns have been trivialised. Conversely, people experience positive emotions when they are making progress towards their goals, or when what they consider important is given high priority.

This means emotions can be effective signals and springboards to help policymakers diagnose problems and formulate solutions. To do this, one needs to understand and address emotions by linking them to the concerns, aspirations and goals in various segments of the population.

For example, the strong negative emotions experienced and expressed in the population debate have surfaced many deeper issues concerning sustainable economic models, urban planning, manpower

management, fair employment practices, social mobility and social cohesion.

As a result, it has become clearer that policies must not be formulated narrowly as singular solutions to isolated problems. This is especially when problems are inter-related and a narrow solution to a problem may create more serious problems and unintended negative consequences.

Systems thinking and strategic-futures thinking are needed to formulate and implement integrated policies – policies that address multiple goals in a complementary manner and anticipate alternative scenarios.

So, in retrospect, 2013 may be characterised as a good year of emotions for Singapore despite the dominance of negative emotions. This is because critical issues that used to be latent were made explicit in public debates and policy discussions.

Some may describe the often-contentious discourse as a wake-up call or political crisis.

But I see it as an opportunity to understand the various economic-social linkages and develop constructive responses to them.

Emotion can yield positive outcomes but it cannot be the foundation of a society's future. For society to progress, we need to address public emotions in context. This context is provided by values regarding what is important, and principles for guiding actions.

To translate affect into action, there needs to be some consensus on what is important to be actualised and how to do so. As a country, we need shared values and guiding principles to evaluate policy and public actions.

Shared values

WHAT might be some values that we are likely to achieve consensus on and perhaps deserve more public discussion in the year ahead? I suggest three values – integrity, fairness and social harmony.

■ Integrity requires individuals and groups – be they in public, private or people sectors – to be impartial and non-corrupt. This often refers to personal character but it also involves how breaches of integrity are handled.

Wrongdoing must be reported and pursued, regardless of the position of the individuals involved or the political or public embar-

assment that may result.

Public agencies must remain impartial – both actual and perceived – when carrying out their functions. Public trust in the integrity of public institutions is critical when dealing with contentious issues in an environment of increasing political contestation.

■ People are sensitive to fairness in the distribution of outcomes and fairness in the processes leading to those outcomes. Fairness is also critical in the treatment of the individual, whether it is in the rewards given or help offered.

How we evaluate and therefore

treat an individual should be based on two considerations. The first is the objective evidence of the individual's performance. The second is the individual's access to opportunities to perform.

Taken together, these multiple dimensions of fairness – outcomes, processes, performance and access to opportunities – provide a more holistic value-basis for actions to address issues of employment discrimination, development of local talent, social inequality, social mobility and compassionate meritocracy.

■ Social harmony should underline Singapore's efforts to address

challenges of social cohesion and manage social integration. Social harmony is consistent with good interpersonal and inter-group relations, and ultimately individual well-being. Social harmony is not just merely a practical means to achieve political stability and economic prosperity. It is a desirable end in itself.

When social harmony is a shared value for individuals, groups and society, there is a common basis to discuss and negotiate issues of individualism versus collectivism, inter-group competition versus cooperation, and sectorial versus national interests.

Guiding principles

VALUES are convictions of what is important and beliefs of what ought to be. But how do we translate these abstract statements of convictions and beliefs into policy and public actions? I suggest we organise and direct our translation efforts around three guiding principles – rule of law, accountability and "people-centricity".

■ The rule of law translates values to actions in two ways.

First, the rule of law directly upholds the values of integrity, fairness and social harmony by maintaining law and order.

This is done by having the law define offences and prescribe deterrence for issues relating to corruption, partiality, discrimination and violence.

Second, the rule of law provides a principled and objective basis for decision making, especially in areas where personal bias and vested interests may influence the management of disagreements and resolution of conflicts. The content of laws may evolve over time. But as a principle, the rule of law must be maintained, without fear or favour.

■ Accountability has a legal or regulatory basis but it also has moral dimensions. Unlike responsibility, accountability cannot be shared with or delegated to others. Accountability is about being ultimately answerable for actions and outcomes.

As elected representatives and stewards of public funds, the Government is expected to be accountable to the people but accountability also applies to financial institutions and non-profit organisations.

Accountability is applicable to all people. For example, freedom of speech and individual discretion should be accompanied by personal accountability of what is said and done.

When individuals and organisations are accountable for their actions and results, it helps preserve the values of integrity, fairness and social harmony.

■ The third principle is people-centricity. This involves a focus on citizen well-being, human dignity and respect for diversity across individuals. In policymaking, this means serving the interests of citizens and effectively enhancing their well-being.

People-centricity also means treating all people with the dignity and respect they deserve, regardless of their nationality or differences in background. In this regard, there is a need to improve the treatment of low-skilled foreign workers in Singapore in the areas of workplace safety, living conditions, salary payment and provision of social amenities.

As the year of emotions comes to a close, I wish 2014 will turn out to be the year of values and principles. It is probably idealistic to expect our society to achieve consensus in public values and principles in a year. But much common good can be achieved if we focus more on issues of shared values and guiding principles.

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