

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 2 November 2022

Headline: Commentary: Dissecting Singapore's rare offer of a live TV debate to Richard Branson and what his refusal means

Commentary: Dissecting Singapore's rare offer of a live TV debate to Richard Branson and what his refusal means



After nine days of silence, British billionaire Richard Branson has turned down an invitation to a live televised debate in Singapore with Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam on the Republic's approach towards drugs and the death penalty.

In a statement addressed to the Singapore minister on Monday (Oct 31), Mr Branson said a TV debate was not a suitable platform for a complex issue like the death penalty.

He also urged Mr Shanmugam to do the "brave thing" instead by actively engaging Singaporean stakeholders on this issue and treating them as equals who "deserve to be listened to, not ignore or worse yet, harassed".

For now, the latest development puts paid to the prospect of a showdown between the two men, though the offer of a live TV debate by the Singapore Government to a critic has raised not only eyebrows but also questions that are worth examining further.

RARE OFFER

Such an invitation to a live public debate is rare despite the Singapore Government having consistently engaged its critics, local and foreign, loving or otherwise, in a variety of ways.

In 1971, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained the Government's handling of the local newspapers — which it had accused of subversion — before newspaper editors and

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 2 November 2022

Headline: Commentary: Dissecting Singapore's rare offer of a live TV debate to Richard Branson and what his refusal means

executives from around the world at the annual conference of the International Press Institute in Helsinki.

Similarly, William Safire, a New York Times columnist, turned down an invitation in 1995 to debate then PM Goh Chok Tong on various policies.

Mr Safire had objected to Mr Goh's alma mater, Williams College in Massachusetts, conferring an honorary doctorate on Mr Goh.

This time, in its invitation to Mr Branson, one reason given by MHA was that he might "demonstrate to Singaporeans the error of our ways" and why Singapore should do away with laws that have kept its population safe from the global scourge of drug abuse.

On Oct 10, Mr Branson had published an essay, "What's the matter with Singapore?" on his company's website continuing his advocacy against Singapore's anti-drug law and policy, especially the "almost stubborn use of the death penalty".

As an avowed death penalty abolitionist, it was no surprise that Mr Branson concluded that "it's time for Singapore's death penalty to go" as the system was "fundamentally broken, inherently unfair, and completely disproportionate to the challenge at hand".

Penned on the occasion of the privately-initiated World Day Against the Death Penalty, Mr Branson's lengthy and baseless attack — with Singapore clearly in the crosshairs — sought to rally business leaders to sign a declaration against the death penalty.

NOT A GAMBIT

To be clear, the debate was not about persuading foreigners about the merits of our handling of the drug menace. Singapore's approach is only for Singapore, and we have not canvassed for other countries to retain the death penalty for serious drug crimes.

Ultimately, the Government's position must prevail in the court of domestic public opinion, which has shown robust support for and confidence in Singapore's approach to drugs, including the use of the discretionary death penalty.

Some might wonder if the Government had made the offer to Mr Branson — with promises to pay for his travel and accommodation expenses — as part of a calculated move that he was likely to turn it down and would look like a cop-out, as some might view him now.

But I disagree that the move was a gambit by the authorities.

Instead, the goal should primarily be seen as such: The Government has to continue to make its case and defend its policy and approach to law and order, especially drugs and the use of the death penalty.

In his latest statement, Mr Branson continues with his ad hominem attacks on Singapore and fails yet again to provide any evidence to substantiate his assertions.

The lack of evidence and nuance in his assertions of "failed war on drugs" and to treat drugs as a "health issue" speaks to Mr Branson's penchant for seductive soundbites.

It turns a serious issue into a spectacle when he disregards his own advice of bringing "experience, knowledge and data" to the "complexity of the death penalty".

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 2 November 2022

Headline: Commentary: Dissecting Singapore's rare offer of a live TV debate to Richard Branson and what his refusal means

Mr Branson also changes tack in his latest attack saying that a “constructive, lasting dialogue” needs local voices. But in all his attacks on Singapore he never did give voice to the many victims of drug crimes.

Second, there is certainly the intent to correct the repeated and new falsehoods in Mr Branson's essay.

Mr Branson, as an iconoclastic business leader, is a seemingly high profile and influential advocate that the authorities are keen to engage with in close quarters and to expose his vacuous arguments on Singapore's drug laws and situation.

MHA had rebutted Mr Branson's criticisms in its Oct 22 media statement — the subtext of which is that he (and those who provided him with the false information) is entitled to his opinion but not the facts.

Third, the debate offer was about continuing the longstanding public engagement on the dangers of drugs at a time, when other countries have wavered on the drug scourge, in order to protect Singapore and Singaporeans.

In particular, it is about the persistent challenge to reinforce a drug-free culture in Singapore, especially among young people who, anecdotally, appear to have a more blasé attitude towards so-called “soft drugs” and “recreational” use of such drugs.

The Central Narcotic Bureau's Drug Situation Reports in recent years remind us that the drug scourge is real, not imagined.

Annually, about one-third of arrested drug abusers are first-time offenders. Among these new drug abusers arrested, about 60 percent are under 30 years old.

“NOT ANY TOM, DICK OR HARRY”

Public response to a possible Branson-Shanmugam debate was unsurprisingly mixed. The issue of footing the bill for billionaire Branson's flight and accommodation was a common refrain.

The debate offer is perhaps out of step with the Government's playbook on engaging critics.

Some might then wonder if this offer to Mr Branson would raise the tantalising prospect of similar engagements with local activists and politicians? I think not. Debates on laws and policies have generally been confined to Parliament.

This is consistent with the longstanding objective of keeping Parliament as the primary platform and process for serious debates, premised on facts and serious commitment to a political agenda and securing public support for any proposed measure.

It is the Government's prerogative on who it wishes to invite to debate. It can't be any Tom, Dick or Harry.

The Government should rightly have as much discretion and autonomy to decide who to engage and how to engage them.

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 2 November 2022

Headline: Commentary: Dissecting Singapore's rare offer of a live TV debate to Richard Branson and what his refusal means

Domestically, individuals and groups campaigning for the abolishment of the death penalty are not afforded a TV debate platform.

However, even among those here who question the need for such a debate, the view is that Singapore does not need to justify its anti-drugs regime to outsiders who have no stake in whether our approach works or not.

The ongoing international debate and pressure over the use of death penalty means such a move in engaging critics may not be the last, even though Mr Branson has declined the invitation this time.

Having rejected the invitation, we can expect Mr Branson to be a talking head, criticising and condemning from afar, rather than be subjected to close scrutiny.

It is understandable why he did not seize the rare offer of a televised debate where he and his abolitionist supporters in Singapore and abroad can make the case against the use of the death penalty in Singapore for the most serious drug crimes.

It is Mr Branson's conceit and hubris to think the proposed debate would become a spectacle unless he was only intent on soundbites rather than a serious discourse, obfuscation rather than transparency and evidence.

Ultimately, Mr Branson is never concerned about Singapore's progress in keeping her people safe and secure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament.