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From 2011 to 2015

The PAP corrected its policies, but not its policymaking style.

On election night back in 1991, when the opposition won an unprecedented four seats, the freshly elected Low Thia Kiang proclaimed, “This is the beginning of the next lap.” Coming from a little-known politician, cheekily appropriating the People’s Action Party’s own campaign slogan, it was an electrifying sound bite. But it was not the most accurate prediction. The opposition dropped the baton after its 1991 success, claiming just two seats in each of the next three elections.

Twenty years on, Low led the Workers’ Party to another historic victory, and again declared that the opposition was on the move. On election night in 2011, he invited Singaporeans to “walk this journey together towards a First World Parliament”. Again, his words were more quoteworthy than prophetic. The opposition made no headway in the following polls. Instead, its share of the vote shrunk from 40 per cent in 2011 to 30 per cent in 2015.

The euphoria among opposition supporters after the 2011 election was understandable. Low’s achievement was groundbreaking not only because the WP won an unprecedented half-

dozen seats, but also in the manner of the victory. In the past, opposition tactics had been more opportunistic, going after smaller targets in guerrilla fashion. But in 2011, Low left his safe haven of Hougang to lead a full-frontal assault on a Group Representation Constituency, one of those multi-seat electoral fortresses that had seemed unassailable. The WP's victory in Aljunied and the opposition's national vote share of 40 per cent appeared to herald the dawn of a new era. Even the PAP could not deny that something momentous had happened. They talked of a "new normal", characterised by a more politicised and vocal citizenry.

Opposition supporters were euphoric. Online critics were further emboldened. Prophets of PAP doom predicted GRCs toppling like tenpins now that the first one had been felled. For a while, the government and PAP supporters were deflated and on the defensive. But the hype about the 2011 general election result was never totally persuasive. There were strong reasons to believe that the ruling party would survive this shock.

First, the opposition's six seats in the new parliament still amounted to a gentle speed bump, not a barrier, on the PAP's road to writing or rewriting laws any way it wished. The government had a long tradition of crafting new laws and regulations to thwart emerging political challenges (Chapter 17). There was every reason to expect that they would do the same now, especially in the area of internet regulation. Second, democratisation requires an active citizenry, and the 2011 campaign didn't show much evidence that Singaporeans were there yet. Sure, they had awakened from their stupor, and were responding positively to stimuli such as Facebook posts, opposition rallies, and souvenir WP umbrellas. But most still showed no signs of being able or willing to participate more actively in public affairs. The vast majority, I wrote ruefully in my post-election blog, would return to their private lives the next day, and continue to outsource politics to politicians.

The third and biggest flaw in the predictions of opposition growth was that they extrapolated from 2011 as if the PAP would be content to remain static. No, the PAP wasn't just going to play the

sitting duck and let the opposition take aim. The people had spoken loud and clear, and there was no doubt that the world's winningest political party would respond vigorously.

Even before election day, the PAP showed it was no longer going to deny that the public's mood had soured. At a press conference during the campaign, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised that his team would be "acutely aware that they are servants and not masters, that they are accountable to the people". He also delivered a remarkably contrite speech at a lunchtime election rally at Fullerton. There was no trace of the defensiveness we were accustomed to hearing from government leaders: *Tell us your problems and we'll show you the statistics that prove our policies are working*. Instead, Lee acknowledged that Singaporeans had legitimate grievances concerning transport, housing and other policies. He said sorry. Twice.

After the PAP's fears materialised on election night 2011, it got down to the business of remedial action. Its technocratic machinery went into overdrive, suddenly treating as matters of top priority complaints that ministers had been brushing aside for years. It was banking on the hunch that most of the voters who swung away from the PAP toward the opposition in 2011 weren't ideologically committed to a two-party system. Singaporeans were just unhappy with certain policies, which, if ameliorated, could draw them back into the PAP fold.

Some Singaporeans and foreign commentators were seduced by the grand narrative of how the global tides of liberation were finally sweeping the nation. After all, authoritarian regimes had just fallen in Tunisia and Egypt. Perhaps the opposition advance in Singapore's 2011 election was part of some internet-boostered democratic wave. But economics should be the first port of call for anyone seeking to interpret election outcomes anywhere. And economic factors—not some Arab Spring contagion or a social media revolution—offered the best explanation for GE2011. As one of the most open and exposed economies on earth, Singapore had experienced three externally triggered recessions in the previous

decade, with heady growth spurts in between. The rollercoaster ride had played havoc with the government's normally reliable planning. The volatile economy also exposed how public services had been excessively corporatised and commercialised over the previous decades, ostensibly to subject them to market discipline, but also making them less sensitive to public needs. Transport, housing and immigration policies had all come under the spell of the market logic of neoliberalism, and all became major election issues.

Voters' appetite for more opposition had obviously grown. But there was no evidence to suggest that most were committed to the goal of neutralising PAP dominance, let alone removing it from office. It was entirely possible they were simply using the opposition to tell their PAP government to work harder. If so, Low Thia Khian's coup in Aljunied GRC succeeded in delivering the message. By gathering a slate of credible, credentialed candidates under a trusted banner and defeating a heavyweight government team in a GRC, Low hammered home once and for all that the PAP could no longer count on qualifications, party reputation or safety in numbers in order to win elections. And, above all, it could not take voters for granted.

It was in this sense that 2011 might have been a game changer, reminding the PAP that the only sure-fire formula for maintaining power was dedicated service and the humility to listen to the people. This was the great favour that Low and the WP did for the citizens of Singapore. But it was also a favour to the ruling party, which could reform and come back far stronger in the next election. Opposition politicians wanted to teach the government a lesson. They would now have to face the daunting possibility that the government actually learned it.

It would be an overstatement to say that the PAP did actually absorb all the lessons it needed to. But it certainly responded swiftly to specific problems that the election had exposed. The government increased the supply of HDB flats and made them more affordable. With its Pioneer Generation package, it rolled out a generous (by Singapore standards) healthcare subsidy scheme for senior

citizens, instantly reducing many families' anxieties over medical costs. It also introduced Silver Support, a pension scheme that does not depend on individual contributions.

Simply by altering the funding formula that the finance ministry was prepared to live with, the government was able to put more buses on the road. It intervened to get SMRT back on track, a process that would later culminate in delisting the company and effectively renationalising it. It couldn't slam the brakes on immigration—Singaporeans' number one source of unhappiness—without crashing the economy. But it did slow the inflow enough to get noticed, even at the expense of hurting businesses.

Some progressive policies predated 2011. WorkFare was an earlier response to wage stagnation and a growing income gap, and not a reaction to the opposition's advances. "The world did not start in 2011," Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the mastermind behind the PAP's most progressive moves, said tetchily. Still, it's fair to assume that the 2011 shock made the government more accepting of a leftward shift in its centre of gravity. It grew less dogmatically neoliberal and blindly trusting of the market, and more willing to intervene to regulate public services and provide social security.

In 2015, the PAP also benefitted from a wave of patriotism, partly engineered by the no-expense-spared celebrations of the republic's 50th anniversary—but mainly evoked by the death of Lee Kuan Yew. It also kept the Workers' Party busy with allegations of financial mismanagement of its town council. But the main reason why the opposition's pulling power diminished between 2011 and 2015 was probably the government's improved performance. The opposition's core constituency remained disaffected, but there were also enough swing voters who decided that the PAP was responding well to the shock therapy of 2011 and now deserved some leeway. On average, out of every ten voters, one who had previously voted opposition switched to the PAP.

The 2015 election result underlined the resilience of the PAP and

its ability to respond to electoral setbacks. It said even more about the values of the Singapore electorate. Foreign observers as well as many Singaporean liberals had long speculated that a more educated, middle-class citizenry would eventually reject the country's illiberal, dominant-party political system. But even when the economy arrived at First World levels, the promised political awakening didn't happen. The 2011 general election appeared to some like the long overdue breakthrough. But 2015 showed, not yet. And, some began to feel, perhaps not ever.

It turned out that Singaporeans' age-old social compact with the PAP still held for most people. It's based on the idea that the delivery of material benefits could substitute for Western-style freedoms—or as former *Straits Times* columnist and academic Russell Heng nailed it more than 20 years ago, “give me liberty or give me wealth”. It's true that the PAP has had to treat a more vocal population more gingerly. But its dominance was not unbearable to most Singaporeans, as long as it got basic policies right.

In this respect, Singapore may be an extreme case, but it isn't unique. Most people in the world fight for democracy mainly for the tangible benefits it promises. Democracy does have strong intrinsic worth: it's something valuable for its own sake, like love and peace, because it recognises the equal political status of every citizen. But that intrinsic value often feels abstract and remote. Instead, most people focus on democracy's instrumental value: its usefulness as a tool to remove a bad government peacefully and replace it with what they hope will be a better one.

Therefore, people fight for more democracy not mainly because of some philosophical allegiance to its principles, but because they need to substitute leaders who are letting them down. To the extent their undemocratic political system is not letting them do it, they will demand more democracy. Hong Kong youth, for example, became hyper-politicised mainly because they were being priced out of their own city, especially by obscene home prices. Their government was more interested in pleasing Beijing and local tycoons than serving the interests of ordinary residents. When the

youth realised they couldn't get more out of their leaders or change them, they took to the streets to change the system.

The PAP's traditional strength was its responsiveness to people's needs, shown most clearly in a public housing programme admired around the world. But in the 2000s, it underperformed. It allowed Singapore to become too crowded and costly, and for years brushed aside citizens' grievances. Officials in that most protectionist of sectors—government policymaking—were insensitive to the woes of Singaporeans facing economic insecurity and intense competition for jobs with immigrants.

Able to afford luxury cars, A1 medical care and multiple houses in multiple countries, government leaders seemed unable to relate to ordinary Singaporeans' frustrations with public transport, hospitals and housing. The PAP government would probably have spent many more years in denial if the 2011 election hadn't given it a good shake. Thanks to that rude awakening, it once again managed to confound the naysayers and delay its decline—for now.

To ensure its long-term staying power, the PAP's post-mortem of 2011 would have to go deeper than individual policy failures. It knows it made mistakes—but does it know why? It can't all be blamed on external economic turbulence. It had a lot to do with government leaders' collective pro-market mindset, which shut out appeals for more compassionate interventions and convinced them that their way was the only way. The remarkable thing about the 2011 election issues like housing and transport is that none should have come as a surprise. People had been complaining bitterly about them for years, but they couldn't penetrate the cabinet's neoliberal groupthink. Despite the government's extensive grassroots network and able civil service, the messages from the ground didn't register until they were translated into votes. Yes, the opposition's 2011 success woke it up. But if the government fails to analyse and address the internal systemic failures behind its policy missteps, there's a high chance it will be caught napping again.

Winter is here

Since the 2011 general election, a chill has descended on political debate.

For decades, those inclined to see Singapore's illiberal political system in a positive light would point out that things were at least on the right track. They said People's Action Party leaders were not opposed to giving more space to the people, but were just being careful about the pace of liberalisation. Sure, the country was not opening up as quickly as liberals would like, but at least there were perceptible improvements.

Up till recently, such claims were generally correct. In the 2010s, however, the reality on the ground began to deviate from the optimistic narrative of gradual political liberalisation. There were signs of a tightening up. The government's dealings with the press, the internet, academia, the arts, civil society and even its own establishment were distinguished by impatience, and an impulse to intervene and micromanage.

The regression didn't occur across the board, so I wouldn't be surprised if some readers don't recognise the picture I've sketched. For locals and expatriates who are not very interested in politics—in other words, the majority—lifestyle choices continued to expand,

especially for those with money. Measure progress by Michelin-starred restaurants, Broadway musicals and art exhibitions, and Singapore seems to keep collecting the accoutrements of a cosmopolitan world city.

Arguably, life became easier even for the opposition. After the 2006 general election, the government reduced the number and size of Group Representation Constituencies to make elections more “contestable”. Around half of Singaporeans weren’t getting the chance to exercise their vote due to walkovers in their constituencies, and the trend was getting embarrassing. By tweaking the electoral map, the government ensured that most or all seats were contested in 2011 and 2015.

PAP leaders also became more restrained in their attacks on the opposition. In the past, election campaigns were followed by defamation suits against opposition candidates, as surely as thunder follows lightning. Not so in recent elections. The ruling party’s negative campaigning became more restrained as well, probably because instant online feedback from the public showed that any bully behaviour by the PAP would backfire. In the 1980s, Lee Kuan Yew vilified J.B. Jeyaretnam, Chiam See Tong and their supporters with impunity, but when he tried telling Aljunied GRC voters in 2011 that they would “repent” if they opted for the opposition, the blowback was vigorous. Times had changed.



But while the opposition was given more leeway, other groups were hobbled with more restrictions. It’s as if the government had decided on a strategy of lengthening the opposition’s leash, but removing the nourishment it needs to grow. Predictably, socio-political bloggers were the first to feel the government’s grip tighten. Many had clearly been rooting for the opposition. Soon after the 2011 election, they began to face the threat of defamation suits. Singapore leaders have a long history of suing opposition leaders and big foreign media, but the post-2011 “new normal”

witnessed the first individual blogger, Roy Ngerng, receiving that treatment. In addition, new laws and regulations were introduced to hem in independent public affairs websites. Fortunately, the government continued to resist the temptation—to which an increasing number of countries had succumbed—to block or filter political sites. But its 1996 promise to regulate the internet with a “light touch” was now much less convincing (Chapter 21).

Meanwhile, an already tame press grew even less likely than in the 1990s or 2000s to provide independent reportage of public affairs (Chapter 20). The *Today* newspaper, launched by state-owned broadcaster MediaCorp under the leadership of veteran editor P.N. Balji, had for a while succeeded in sounding intelligent by publishing more interpretative news stories and a broader spectrum of opinion pieces. By the 2010s, it was a shadow of its former self. When the print edition was killed in 2017, few cared. As for *The Straits Times*, its GE2011 campaign coverage was fairer and more professional than in some previous elections. Not surprisingly, chief editor Han Fook Kwang was pushed out within months of the election, and replaced by an editor so politically trustworthy he’d come close to being fielded as a PAP candidate some years earlier. Today, the national newspaper regularly adopts an unquestioning, one-dimensional approach to its news reporting that even my newsroom bosses in the 1990s—let alone editors in a free press environment—would have found problematic.

Universities in the 2010s became less hospitable to alternative and critical ideas (Chapter 22). Non-PAP politicians in institutions of higher learning—Sylvia Lim, Daniel Goh and Paul Tambyah—were not victimised, in line with what the government’s apparent policy of not martyring the opposition. But a shadowy system of political screening kept out Singaporeans and foreigners that universities wanted to hire. Historian Thum Ping Tjin has revealed that he was told by university administrators he would not be able to work in Singapore as an academic as his writing had upset certain quarters. There have been other cases of citizens and residents not appointed for non-academic reasons. The extreme

vetting took even university administrators by surprise. Duly spooked, department heads now warn faculty members not to engage in critical research about Singapore, in case they hadn't already gotten the message.

The arts is another area that hasn't conformed to the myth of steady political liberalisation. As with other sectors, artists with no interest in getting political have found their opportunities expanding over the decades. The market for their work has grown, and digital technology offers new outlets. But those whose work questions PAP ideology find bureaucratic obstacles placed in their way. Public servants dealing with the arts now don't even bother to hide the fact that their regulatory role includes discouraging politically critical work, and not just policing taste and decency or protecting minors.

A case in point was the National Arts Council's withdrawal of a grant from Sonny Liew's award-winning 2015 graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, baldly stating that it undermined the government's authority. Meanwhile, NAC's sister statutory board, the Infocomm Media Development Authority, has adopted the astonishing practice of posting consumer warnings on art with political themes. Tan Tarn How's 2011 play *Fear of Writing*, for example, is tagged "Mature Content" because "it presents the characters' perspectives on the issue of freedom of expression, with references to the situation of political apathy and self-censorship in Singapore". The Necessary Stage's *Manifesto* received a similar rating in 2016 "for its exploration of socio-political issues". So did the comedy revue *Dim Sum Dollies: A History of Singapore Part 2*, for its "satirical socio-political references".

According to IMDA's Arts Entertainment Classification Code, "Mature Content" generally refers to scenes of sex and violence. Singapore must be the only advanced country where public bodies in charge of the arts make political conformity a condition for public funding, and treat exposure to politics as if it were sex or violence.

Most of these moves haven't required new laws or regulations.

They've relied on long-established mechanisms of control that are opaque and are entirely up to the political leadership to use as it sees fit, whether it's the way media chiefs are installed or the arts are funded. Several interrelated factors account for the current cold spell. The most important is the trauma of the 2011 general election. When the PAP post-mortemed its poor performance, it did not deny it had been guilty of policy mistakes. It knew it had to fix those problems that Singaporeans were most unhappy with, like long queues for public housing and high healthcare costs for the elderly. The more difficult question for the PAP was whether it needed to address why it had made these mistakes in the first place. Some critics thought so, arguing that policymakers needed to be more exposed to open competition and on-going scrutiny so that they would detect and respond to bad news from the ground before grievances surfaced at the ballot box.

But the government chose the psychologically more comfortable path, of reforming policies—but not itself. Thus, the post-2011 playbook included significant humanising of social and economic policy, but also a hardening of its posture in political and civic space. If the government had been in the mood for internal reform, it might have concluded that alternative and critical voices, no matter how irritating and even misguided, would help dissipate its groupthink and sharpen its arguments. Instead, journalists, academics, artists and activists who showed the slightest disrespect came to be treated as proto-opposition, and threats to PAP dominance.

Politicians are only human, so it shouldn't come as a surprise if some of them, after being viciously and vulgarly trolled online, equated freedom with anarchy. The internet is usually regarded as a liberating force. Ironically, though, the PAP's encounter with the online world may have contributed to its new intolerance (Chapter 21). Politicians in most other countries reach the top only after long years of callus-forming battles against strong opposition, adversarial media and outspoken constituents. In contrast, candidates for high political office in Singapore are plucked from

the more protected environs of the civil service and military. Most would have been psychologically unprepared for the online vitriol. The experience may have persuaded the leadership to write off Singaporeans who want more political space as unreasonable and impossible to please.



As for the 2015 election, the results might have given the PAP the confidence to loosen up. It had the opposite effect. It was seen as vindication of the government's post-2011 clampdown. PAP hardliners felt they'd won the bet that most voters aren't bothered by strictures on civil society, journalism or other democratic institutions, as long as you look after their practical needs.

Personality may have been another factor. Singapore's current prime minister has very different instincts from his predecessors. Lee Hsien Loong is certainly not as ruthless as Lee Kuan Yew, but neither does the son relish political debate the way his father did. He seems happiest tinkering with policy details. Lee Hsien Loong's 2017 National Day Rally speech was symptomatic of his aversion to politics. In an unusually turbulent political year—marked by the Oxley Road and presidential election controversies—his English speech focussed on diabetes, preschool education, and information technology. These are the kinds of safe causes that governments delegate to monarchs and first ladies who need to be publicly visible without being political. Lee's aversion to politics may have contributed to his government's tendency to treat any contention as a threat. As for Singapore's second prime minister, Goh Chok Tong was a more natural consensus builder, but also more inclined to set limits for his own team members. Lee Hsien Loong gave individual ministers more leeway to fight political battles, allowing hardliners to set the tone.

The external environment is another factor. Granted, the Singapore government is less susceptible to foreign pressure than many others, since it is not dependent on outside aid or formal

defence treaties with big powers. But it is not impervious to global political currents. The 1990s, the end of the Cold War, were an age of democratic advance; non-democracies were on the defensive. The 2010s have been very different. The world now prizes order above freedom. What's more, so many leaders have upped the ante in autocratic behaviour—Najib Razak in Malaysia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Xi Jinping in China, Vladimir Putin in Russia and Donald Trump in the United States—that it's become much harder for soft authoritarians to look bad. They can act dictatorially with little risk of international condemnation.

It's not just the liberal fringe that is having a harder time in this repressive climate. Career diplomat Kishore Mahbubani—who has done as much as any other public servant to sell the message that Singapore is no pushover—was basically accused of letting down the country for publicly urging that our foreign policy be more measured when dealing with China. Nobody in the establishment would have failed to see the flashing red lights warning that the leadership is in no mood to be questioned about the way it's adjusting to a rising China.

According to government ministers, there is more than enough debate within their ranks. But this claim is contradicted by signs of growing insularity. The most worrying indicator is cabinet's failure to induct Singaporeans from the private sector. I don't mean individuals from closed-shop professions like law and medicine, who are well represented, but people who have spent their careers in typical firms that have nowhere to hide from merciless global competition. In 2017, the 22-member cabinet included only a few who came close, and all were from government-linked companies. There was a time when government leaders said recruitment from the private sector was a top priority. They have quietly dropped the subject from their major speeches.

It can't be that the need for private sector inductees into government has abated. On the contrary, global competition has intensified and change has accelerated. Cabinet needs more than a

few ministers who have faced these forces directly and daily, and have developed the instincts to respond creatively to economic crises. Rather, the main reason that private sector recruitment has been de-emphasised is probably the problem of fit. Most corporate types and entrepreneurs are culturally incompatible with public sector traditions.

If the government considered it important enough, it would adapt its culture to ensure a better fit. At least, that's how a talent-driven private sector corporation would think: the operating environment determines manpower needs, and the organisational culture must adapt to the required manpower. The government, unfortunately, would rather maintain its culture than adapt to those who don't understand it, whether they are potential ministers, bloggers or artists. Faced with Singaporeans who don't appreciate its way of working, the PAP's favoured response nowadays is to resist and repel, not reform.