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Difficult conversations about cultural diversity

When it comes to multi-culturalism, Singaporeans want to go beyond avoiding riots to strive for equality. If the PAP can adjust its thinking, it is well placed to lead the way.

Ethnic relations is one area where the PAP has acknowledged a need for a more open conversation. The issue surfaced unexpectedly in the 2020 General Election, due to a heated debate over remarks by a young Workers' Party candidate, Raeesah Khan. But the willingness to rethink what should be speakable predated this controversy by many years.

In the Republic's first few decades, race and religion were basically taboo topics. You could talk about different costumes, customs and cuisines, but had to stay clear of less comfortable subjects such as discrimination. From the 2000s, though, the government tentatively opened up spaces for more challenging conversations. OnePeople.SG, launched in the late 1990s to help bridge the divide among ethnic self-help organisations, began facilitating workshops to help youths share their experiences of casual racism. In 2016, Channel NewsAsia aired a documentary hosted by junior Minister and Onepeople.sg chairman Janil Puthuchery, "Regardless of Race", which broached subjects that would have been off-limits for the national broadcaster two decades earlier, such as Singaporeans' unconscious biases. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conducted surveys to gauge Singaporeans' degree of comfort with people of different races, adding statistical weight to the anecdotes of racial prejudice that minorities share in private.

At the tail end of the GE2020 campaign, the PAP acknowledged that it might still be behind the curve in its understanding of how Singaporeans wanted to talk about race relations. Someone had dug up old social media posts in which Raeesah expressed indignation about systemic racism. Her rants included unsubstantiated allegations about the authorities' handling of religious matters. When called out, she conceded she had been insensitive and apologised. Her opponents continued to vilify her, but their attacks backfired for several reasons.

First, the Attorney-General's green light for the police to investigate a possible breach of Singapore's racial harmony laws looked unreasonable. Her offending words had led to no harm when she posted them, and were only causing a stir now because a provocateur chose to resuscitate them. Second, the lengths to which the PAP went to milk the controversy, even issuing an inflammatory and factually incorrect statement, exposed its protestations — ostensibly to protect the “fundamental principles on which our country has been built” — as a thinly disguised electoral ploy. As the counter-campaign in support of Raeesah picked up momentum, the PAP backed down. Party leader Lee Hsien Loong tried to frame the controversy as a clash over whether and how to carry out “uncomfortable conversations” about identity, which he attributed to a generation gap that Singapore would have to bridge.

Setting higher benchmarks

Singaporeans — particularly minorities — have always counted on the PAP to defend the Republic's multi-cultural character. Trust in the PAP's approach remains high. We don't need surveys to tell us this. We just need to observe how people respond to the insult or abuse they experience or witness, or to the day-to-day frictions of living cheek by jowl with difference: they call the police or complain to other authorities. Those turning to the state for resolution come from all races and religions, suggesting an across-the-board belief that the authorities will act as neutral referees. This trust was hard-earned and remains largely deserved, which is why many found Raeesah's old tweet — alleging that corrupt church leaders were let off while mosque leaders were harassed — alarmingly intemperate for a would-be MP.

Nevertheless, the PAP's approach to multi-culturalism is not where it should be. To remain the lead contractor in Singapore's nation-building project over the coming decades, the PAP will need to re-skill itself. This exercise must begin by raising the bar for satisfactory performance. Fifty years ago,

post-secondary education was such a precious achievement that The Straits Times would publish the names of every student who passed the Higher School Certificate (a list of 1,931 in 1972). Though schooling at any level is still a gift, we as a country now expect more from our education system. The same should go for multi-culturalism. In 1970, a year free of race riots was a sterling accomplishment; today, we are right to want more.

Yet national security remains the abiding lens through which the government views race and religion. There is a place for this perspective. Making sure squabbles don't escalate into racial and religious violence; that preachers don't spread religious intolerance; and that youth are not radicalised to commit hate crimes or terrorist acts — all are important policy goals. But worst-case scenarios shouldn't overwhelm more positive visions. We shouldn't be content with being merely riot-free. We should strive for justice and equality, as our national pledge demands.

A month into national independence, Lee Kuan Yew delivered a rousing speech about equality. The Republic's Constitution, he said, would draw wisdom from chief justices of other Commonwealth jurisdictions and entrench minority rights. "If anybody thinks he is being discriminated against either for a flat or a scholarship or a job or for social welfare relief because of race or language or religion, he can go to court, take out a writ; and if he proves it was because of discrimination on the ground of race, language, religion or culture, then the court will have to enforce the Constitution and ensure minority rights," he said.

This promise was only partly fulfilled. The PAP balked at encroaching too much on the private sector's liberties. Today, the lack of anti-discrimination laws means that bosses and landlords can reject prospective employees and tenants, or offer them unfavourable terms, on the basis of race (as well as gender). An IPS survey found that about one-quarter of non-Chinese had felt racially discriminated against when seeking a job or promotion. Regulatory protection against unfair discrimination would of course limit employers' freedom to hire as they please. But fears about the possible cost to Singapore's competitiveness are probably overblown. American firms show that openness to talent — enforced through equal opportunity laws and internalised through enlightened personnel policies — can be a winning advantage.

Of course, anti-discrimination laws can only do so much. Employers and landlords can concoct justifications to disguise their prejudices. But the inability to guarantee watertight enforcement has never stopped the govern-

ment from rolling out legislation against all manner of social ills and corporate misdeeds. A partial solution is better than none.

The establishment has pointed out that it is ultimately more important to change mindsets. This, though, cannot be left to individuals to achieve through quiet self-reflection. In a country dedicated to racial and religious equality, the state has a special responsibility to shape the appropriate norms, through the force of its example and what it says. Unfortunately, the PAP's rigour in dealing with diversity as a law and order problem has not been matched by vigour in playing its normative role.

It does take important symbolic steps to present itself and Singapore as multi-racial: everything from street names to Cabinet appointments are decided with one eye on ethnic representation. Representatives of Singapore's main religious communities — some so small that many Singaporeans would probably be unable to name them — stand side by side at armed forces commissioning parades, offering their blessings to the young men and women who pledge to defend the Republic. Nations are ultimately imagined communities, as the anthropologist Benedict Anderson said, and such gestures are hugely important for how we imagine Singapore. But these efforts do not go far enough. The establishment needs to include itself on the list of groups that should be open to difficult conversations about attitudes to diversity. That conversation must start with Lee Kuan Yew's mixed legacy.

Time to discard old dogmas

Lee and his colleagues certainly protected minorities from the worst-case scenario of a majoritarian chauvinist takeover that would have left our Malays, Indians and others as badly treated as minority races are in Malaysia. From the start, the PAP sought a social compact that all racial groups could feel fully invested in. Lee's approach to this goal was characteristically unsentimental. He was critical of other multi-cultural nations' well-meaning policies that had backfired, such as affirmative action that did not provide enough incentive for effort and created resentment among majority communities. Although these are real risks, Lee overcorrected for them, resulting in a system dogmatically resistant to addressing structural disadvantages faced by minority communities. To make matters worse, Lee also harboured personal views about genes and culture that were wrong (both empirically and morally), and that have contributed to an environment hospitable to prejudice.

Prominent establishment figures have voiced alarm at the protestations of

Singapore's growing number of anti-racism activists. Conservatives say that fashionable concepts and slogans are imported uncritically from the United States' very different context. Ironically, the conservatives' rhetorical counter-strategies are themselves imported uncritically from America's Culture Wars. They claim that "social justice warriors" are imposing "political correctness" on Singapore; they pine for the good old days when people could enjoy, guilt-free, innocent blackface entertainers on the *Black and White Minstrel Show*. They say that hypersensitive activists are the ones breeding intolerance, with overreactions to everything they don't like. These conservative talking points are carbon copies from right-wing and far-right groups in the US and Europe.

The real problem with certain aspects of the LKY perspective is not that they are upsetting, or politically incorrect. The problem is that they are irrational and irresponsible. In particular, his views about intelligence were neither credible at the time nor defensible today. When his belief in eugenics spawned the 1980s policy prizing graduate mothers' babies over non-graduates, Singaporeans were outraged and pushed back. What lingered, though, was Lee's conviction that group differences in school performance are so deeply rooted, and possibly genetic, that they are beyond repair. This attitude makes it too easy for society to wash its hands of the problem of lower-than-average scores among Malays and Indians — as if they're just born that way. For decades, Lee touted a mix of hard data and personal observations that purportedly proved the futility of pushing harder for equality than the PAP was prepared to do. His citations were selective and studiously avoided the fine print.

First, the link between race and intelligence is extremely dubious. Experts tell us that not all observed differences between ethnic groups are due to race; they are often about class. It's just tough for poorer families (among whom ethnic minorities are over-represented) to keep up with the boosters that the upper middle class gives its children. Teo You Yenn's *This is What Inequality Looks Like* has opened many Singaporeans' eyes to this reality — but many in the establishment prefer to look away. While research does show that an individual's intelligence (as measured by IQ tests) is influenced by genes, science has not established genetic differences in intelligence between populations. Perceived racial categories cannot be genetically defined, since genetic differences between races are no greater than the differences within them. Furthermore, genetic influences are probabilistic rather than deterministic. In other words, one group may have done better than another on average, but that can't predict how any individual will perform.

Second, there are different forms of intelligence, not all of which are equally influenced by genes or recognised in IQ tests (which are never culturally neutral). Different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are more conducive to different kinds of intelligence. A limited view of what capacities should be rewarded and nurtured thus ends up discriminating against certain communities. A narrow, individual-based view of intelligence and ability is hopelessly out of date for a nation banking on the talent and productivity of its people. One of the most important discoveries of the late 20th century is where intelligence actually resides. *Homo sapiens* jumped to the top of the food chain and remains there, says historian Yuval Noah Harari, not because of the individual human's supersized brain, but because they evolved the language to cooperate in extremely flexible ways with large groups of strangers. What he calls the "cognitive revolution" is a fundamentally social, collective achievement. Leading corporations have long understood that much of the intelligence that matters to them lies outside the human brain, in networks that are more creative and robust when made up of varied individuals. They try to build diverse teams, not replicate clones. Discarding Lee Kuan Yew's individualistic and narrow theory of intelligence, in addition to making Singapore a more just and equal society, would as an added bonus enable the PAP to diversify a leadership team whose main striking feature is its uniformity.

Finally, even experts in behavioural genetics stress that science alone must never dictate ethics or public policy. Even if there were proof that different intelligences are not evenly distributed across races, it would not follow that government policies should reinforce that unevenness by investing more in the genetically advantaged. That would be not only unethical but also inefficient, because it doesn't maximise the human potential available to society. Even if nature is found to have a bigger impact than nurture, we can still choose to invest more in nurture. We already take this principle for granted in health-care. For example, when the Genome Institute of Singapore works out that a disease is linked to cell abnormalities that are more prevalent in Chinese, the policy recommendation wouldn't be to tell Chinese, too bad, it's in your genes. Rather, we work on interventions in the form of early detection, prevention and treatment. It shouldn't be any different in education.

The genetic explanation hasn't hurt only minorities; it also justified an insufficiently interventionist education policy, hurting poorer Singaporeans of all races and contributing to today's socioeconomic divisions. Singapore was scandalously slow to make schooling compulsory, for example. Over the

decades, the Ministry of Education has made strides in the right direction, giving students from less privileged backgrounds more time and alternative paths to develop, and offering multiple peaks of excellence to suit different aptitudes and interests. But it's a moving target: better-off families invest ever-greater sums in giving their kids a competitive edge.

The national security lens

Another Lee Kuan Yew trait that has not served Singapore's multi-culturalism well is his dark view of the human condition. Though described as a "hard truth", it frequently slips into dogma, persuasive only because it's insufficiently questioned. It's fine to be cautious about race and religion. Taken too far, though, negativity can harden into unjustified fear and suspicion. Old Guard Minister S Rajaratnam's draft of the National Pledge urged Singaporeans to "forget" differences of race, language and religion; Lee Kuan Yew rewrote this into the less utopian call for unity "regardless" of these differences. But the unstated, *de facto* governing credo has always aimed for stability *despite* difference, based on the assumption that Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious character is more a liability than a gift.

This tendency has hurt Singapore's Malays and Muslims. They are unfairly saddled with the burden of proving their loyalty, on account of sharing aspects of their heritage with Malaysia's majority race and being co-religionists with the world's most prominent networks of international terrorists. Fortunately, after the 9/11 terror attacks of 2001 and the subsequent, shocking discovery of a terrorist cell within the country, the government did not fall into the trap of treating Singapore's Muslim population as the enemy. Compared with most other countries threatened by Islamist terrorism, Singapore's response was level-headed. The government understood from the start that the social division that might follow such an attack would cause more harm than the attack itself. It swiftly invested in shoring up social resilience, to build up people's trust in fellow Singaporeans who happened to be Muslim. By reassuring Muslims of their secure place in Singapore, it was able to enlist their help in fighting extremism.

But these positive messages were not the only ones circulating. Terrorism — by definition and by design — cultivates more panic than the objective facts justify. Part of that irrational fear is translated into unwarranted suspicion of Muslims in general. This is amped up by anti-Islam propaganda exported by American organisations, such as pro-Israel Christian lobby groups.

Lee Kuan Yew didn't help when he identified as a danger sign the growing number of Singapore Muslims declining alcohol and non-halal food. Sure, Muslims don't aid their case when they go beyond what faith requires, like refusing to sit at the same table where friends are drinking wine, or convincing themselves they're not allowed to greet non-Muslims on their respective holy days. If, however, the government wants to concern itself with attitudes and behaviours that stand in the way of social interaction, the conduct of a minority within a minority is hardly the place to start. The single most pervasive exclusionary habit — so common an experience that most minorities take it for granted — is some Chinese Singaporeans' tendency to slip into Mandarin in mixed company, indicating to others present that they are not worth the bother of using a common language.

Furthermore, rising religiosity, including in exclusionary forms, is a worldwide phenomenon, not confined to Islam. Some Hindus turn the Brahmanic injunction against eating beef into a litmus test of religious loyalty; in India it's even become an excuse to lynch non-Hindus. In Singapore, it became common to see Christians invoking the name of Jesus when commenting on the Prime Minister's Facebook page, in a way that would set off alarm bells if they were Muslims mentioning Allah. It's only Muslims' outward piety that's viewed as a security risk, and security is the main lens through which multiculturalism is viewed.

Concessions to racism

Post-LKY, the PAP's abiding negativity has surfaced in its reasons for discounting Tharman Shanmugaratnam as a possible successor to Lee Hsien Loong. PAP leaders assert that Singapore, 70 percent Chinese, is not ready for an ethnic Indian premier. They have cited a 2016 IPS survey suggesting that only six in ten Chinese would accept an Indian PM. But anyone working with survey data knows they can mislead. The way a question is phrased, and what was said immediately before, can skew answers this way or that. In this case, respondents were asked to react to a hypothetical, nameless, faceless candidate. The only biodata presented was the person's race. Other questions in the survey also highlighted race. Respondents were thus primed to focus on that single dimension. The set up was bound to activate latent prejudices and stereotypes in an artificial way.

In real life, people are presented with more cues; there is a higher chance that they will consider dimensions other than race. Of course, some hardcore

racist voters may not see past a candidate's colour. But many will be drawn to other salient traits, such as personality and track record. Thus, in the real world, there's no contradiction between harbouring generalised prejudices against a particular ethnic group and feeling positively towards specific persons of that very race, saying that they are not 'that' kind of Indian or Malay. People routinely manage the inconsistency of holding on to their racial prejudices even as they respect and admire specific members of a community.

In the case of Tharman, this contradiction is not hypothetical. We know for a fact that his race does not hamper his ability to lead. The same year as the IPS survey asked Singaporeans to react to a hypothetical Indian PM, a poll commissioned by Yahoo asked them to react to the actual person of Tharman, as well as to his Cabinet colleagues. The Yahoo poll showed that seven in ten Singaporeans would "support" (not merely "accept") Tharman as their next Prime Minister — twice as many as would support his fellow Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean, who came in second. In the 2015 General Election, Tharman outperformed everyone else, including the Prime Minister, in the popular vote. He outperformed the PM again in 2020. No matter how racist Chinese Singaporeans may be, there is no evidence that this compromises Tharman's ability to rally the ground.

Mystifyingly, though, Lee and his colleagues have declined to express such confidence. "I think that ethnic considerations are never absent when voters vote," Lee said when pressed by the BBC about whether Singapore was ready for an Indian Prime Minister. Indeed, perhaps Tharman would be even more popular if he were Chinese; we will never know. What we do know is that any points he loses for being Indian are more than outweighed by the points he gains for other qualities people see in him.

It is quite possible that Tharman was sidelined for other reasons, related to his policy positions and political style. Even if race was just an excuse, though, the message sent to minorities across the country — especially those outside the elite — was devastating. Many already face a real or perceived glass ceiling on account of their race. The PAP's position, that there is only so much it can do to correct prejudices, is a disempowering message for minorities trying to get by.

The PAP's refusal to accept that Singaporeans can open their hearts and minds was institutionalised in its decision to reserve periodic Presidential Elections for minority candidates. The official justification for this major move was to revive the old convention of rotating the presidency among Singapore's

different races. If the government had worked minority representation into the original 1991 amendments that turned the head of state into a popularly elected office, Singaporeans would not have blinked an eye. At the time, everyone took for granted that the President had the important symbolic function of representing a multi-racial Republic.

Imposing this idea on the public in 2016, though, was an entirely different proposition. Many had been looking forward to Tan Cheng Bock running again in 2017. He had lost by less than 1 percentage point to the government-backed Tony Tan in 2011. By denying Tan Cheng Bock the chance to run in 2017, the change in election rules became Singapore's most politically contentious constitutional amendment of the 21st century. For the government to back Halimah Yacob as Singapore's first Malay woman presidential candidate was splendid. Pushing Chinese contenders out of the way was not. It showed a lack of faith in the Chinese majority's willingness to look beyond race — a judgment that was especially suspect considering that half of Chinese are women, many of whom would probably have seen Halimah's gender as more salient than her race.

Reserving the election for Malays also smacked of tokenism, which is probably why many Malays themselves did not embrace Halimah's candidacy, questioning her Malayness and calling instead for more tangible measures to uplift the community. Worst of all, the constitutional amendment risked intensifying anti-Malay sentiment among those Chinese who already harbour racist ideas — those who believe that they would have been better off without brown-skinned minorities holding the country back. They are the ones who think that Malays and Indians who complain about structural disadvantages are not grateful enough for what they have been given in a prosperous Chinese country. Fortunately, such majority resentment is neither extreme nor widespread. But the manner in which Halimah became President feeds a tendency that we should be trying to starve. To racists within the majority community, the presidency was stolen from a Chinese candidate to pander to an ungrateful minority group.

Re-angling vigilance

All this is water under the bridge. History can't be rewritten — but the PAP can resolve not to repeat it. Fortunately, it can still rely on some strong foundations. There remains a large reserve of trust in the party's desire and ability to treat all races and religions fairly. While the economic pie is not growing like

it once did, there is enough in the larder to ensure that various communities don't have to fight over every crumb. Most importantly, the vast majority of Singaporeans — even if their appreciation for diversity is not as deep as it should be — simply cannot imagine a Singapore that is *not* multi-racial and multi-religious.

The PAP's vigilance is another strength. Its instinct to look out for danger is reassuring. But vigilance also requires that it look in the mirror. The PAP needs to shed its self-image as a protective parent whose main job is to yank its children out of harm's way. It needs to balance this security role with a keen awareness of the good — and bad — it can do through the force of its example. It needs to shift from 'do as I say' to 'do as I do' as its main mode of communication on matters of race and religion, making sure that its communication and conduct models the nation's multi-cultural aspirations. Like it or not, that's the level of responsibility that comes with being a dominant party.

The run-up to GE2020 clearly exposed this blind spot in the PAP's approach. An ethnic Chinese political office holder complained on the party's website that a prominent ethnic Malay artist was critical of Singapore, even though the country had given him "an education and a living that is denied to many minorities in the region", implying that our minorities should be more grateful. This is an argument usually associated with out-and-out racists, who were bound to be encouraged by seeing it validated by the PAP and uncritically amplified by the national media. When this was criticised, the party responded with 'whataboutism', asking why the critics were not equally upset when PAP politicians were targets of nasty attacks.

Even more alarming was the party's official statement denouncing Raeesah Khan during the campaign. After she apologised for her social media posts, the PAP inaccurately stated that she "admitted to making highly derogatory statements about Chinese and Christians". In fact, her posts had lashed out at the authorities, claiming they treated Muslims unfairly; she did not insult the Chinese or Christian communities. The misinformation was bound to activate latent Islamophobia among some Chinese and Christian voters. When the recklessness of such politicking was pointed out, the PAP did nothing to walk back the statements or repair the damage. Partisanship took precedence over principle.

When Raeesah's team won Sengkang GRC, some Singaporeans celebrated it as a victory for multi-culturalism against politicians playing the race card. That is a premature assessment. Social media sentiment analysis by Blackbox

Research found that Raeesah's "negatives" were almost double Chee Soon Juan's, despite the quarter-century of vilification directed at the Singapore Democratic Party leader. This suggests that the anti-Raeesah smear campaign worked — just not enough to overcome the popularity of her teammates, especially Jamus Lim. An unscrupulous political strategist could clinically conclude that this confirms in Singapore what populist parties around the world have established: that racial and religious fears are easily mobilised for electoral advantage. Tight races can be decided by swaying just two or three out of every 100 voters with such messages.

This was not the first time the party stoked fears of racial or religious radicalism in the midst of a tightly contested GRC battle. The biggest victim of this tendency was not a minority candidate but Tang Liang Hong, who stood alongside JB Jeyaretnam in the 1997 race for Cheng San (a now-defunct GRC that, coincidentally, included the HDB new town of Sengkang). Tang was a vocal champion of Chinese language and culture who threatened the PAP's most vulnerable flank — its relationship with the Chinese-speaking ground. The PAP dredged up stray comments from his past, in which he protested that Cabinet was dominated by English-educated and Christian elites, at the expense of the Chinese ground. The PAP used these statements to brand him a Chinese chauvinist too dangerous to be elected into Parliament. Tang was forced into exile in Australia. He still holds the record for the largest libel damages awarded against any opposition politician.

At least the PAP is colour-blind when it plays the racial harmony card against political opponents. But this is of limited comfort. Sensitivity towards Singapore's delicate racial and religious politics requires that those occupying positions of influence — especially in government — exercise care in their choice of words. There shouldn't be room for poetic licence in, for example, equating criticism of the state's racial policies with criticising a race. But the PAP seems so convinced of its own indispensability as the keeper of racial harmony that maintaining power justifies it in compromising the norms that the rest of society needs to observe.

In no other area is a dominant party capable of doing more good than in managing multi-culturalism. Dealing with diversity in times of economic crisis and political polarisation is less about law and order — as riots in the United States show, no amount of firepower can repair broken trust — and more about setting norms. Parties in more competitive systems, constantly watching the polls, tend to respond to identity politics in kind. Thus, for example, even

moderate parties around the world have shifted to the right to compete with anti-immigrant or chauvinistic populist parties. A dominant PAP — as it will remain for a while — has a unique opportunity and responsibility to resist populist intolerance and set the tone for how citizens deal with one another. This requires a PAP that wants to lead, not just rule.

The PAP could opt for business as usual. It can continue to let its trolls set the tone whenever it is asked to be better — spouting ‘whataboutisms’, complaining about political correctness, and even hinting that minorities should be more grateful. Declining to take the high road is politically expedient in the short term. But over the long term, this route will weaken its ability to induct Singaporeans of capability and. If the PAP treats itself as just another group of politicians, it should not be surprised if that’s exactly how Singaporeans come to treat it. This will weaken the PAP’s moral authority in helping the country cope with the inevitable frictions of multi-cultural living. Singapore would be the poorer for it.

This essay draws upon “Justice and Equality” and “The power of symbols” in Singapore, Incomplete (2017), and “Singapore’s mystifying political succession” in New Mandala (2018).