

The Idiosyncratic Autocrat: Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore City State

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“If you can’t think because you can’t chew, try a banana.” – Singapore statesman Lee Kuan Yew, BBC, Jul 5, 2000

You never hear the end of it. The “Singapore miracle”, the fabulous Asian city state, a model of development and wealth creation encrusted with “Asian values”, corporate innovation and transparent governance. “Prosperous, orderly, clean, efficient, and honestly governed,” noted *The Economist*, though it had to concede that it was not only the work of the late Lee Kuan Yew.

The 91-year-old Lee, statesman spectacular, was the “geostrategist”, the “wise man of the East”.^[1] For many citizens, he was the “father”, a “king”.^[2] Margaret Thatcher expressed her admiration for his clarity of vision. He led Singapore at a time of crisis, having seen its eviction from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. Vulnerable to being swallowed up, devoid of natural resources, he imposed on Singapore a model of development that would make its way into manuals on economic management.

Such commemorative tributes do little to find in Lee the idiosyncratic racist, the cultural theorist, the humourless strong man of all views Singaporean – because any of his views were obviously deemed good views. (Forced laughter was always a feature of audiences listening to Lee’s at times eccentric articulations.)

Lee, in many ways, could hardly be said to be modern. His Singaporean recipe was affected by the apparatus of examining civilizations outlined by the British historian Arnold Toynbee. As his biographer Michael D. Barr notes, Toynbee furnished Lee with the concept of “challenge and response” during his time at Cambridge University. The thesis, albeit something Lee would inventively mangle, was fundamental – the “challenge” presented to a human group could be both detrimental and an opportunity; the “response” to it would be fundamental to its success and durability.^[3]

As Barr points out, Lee believed in three additional factors in his *Weltanschauung*: “medieval scientism” with its emphasis on “ductless glands in determining a person’s and a people’s drive to achieve”; Lamarck’s view of evolution; and “a belief in culturally-based eugenics and dysgenics”.^[4]

While meritocracy may well have been the most stressed feature of his policy drive, Lee did not shy away from believing in superior races and values, funnelled through his view of a racial hierarchy. “The Israelis,” for instance, “are very smart... the rabbi in any Jewish society was often the most intelligent and well-read, most learned of all.” Good genes always count. “That’s how they multiply, the bright ones multiply. That sums it up.”

Little wonder, then, that durable and prevailing Israel provided the new Singaporean state inspiration, a country encircled in a sea of hostile Arab states. "Like Israel, we had to leapfrog the rest of the region, and attract multinational companies." [5]

In contrast, the Malays were somewhat lower in the pegging order, suffering a range of cultural "deficits". They did not have, for instance, the "X-factor" in terms of development, though Lee, in the usual muddle over race and culture, decided to emphasise one over the other depending on his audience. When it came to the "Bell curve" on intelligence, he was convinced in claiming that "blacks on average score 85 percent on IQ and it is accurate, nothing to do with culture. The whites score an average 100. Asians score more." [6]

The paradox of Singaporean governance does not lie in its endorsement of freedom – repressive measures take the model and ice its functions, allowing the economic arm of existence to work the magic of numbers and gross domestic product. It rather endorses freedom in various measures, fed by way of drip and concessions, and encouragements, to the money making and investing fraternity.

At all stages, agree with the ruling wisdom of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Do not wobble – keep to the pathway of development. Avoid any nonsense about civil liberties, a distraction that will only incite suspicion on the part of the authorities. Make money. Stay open about how corporations make money. In terms of transparency and anti-corruption measures, Singapore ranks highly – placed seventh in 175 countries in terms of the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International. [7]

Lee's embrace of a Westminster model for the fledgling state in 1959 was qualified. On paper, it reeks of Britannic wisdom, with its insistence on Parliamentary power and ministerial accountability. In practice, it reveals brutal calculation on the part of the PAP to muzzle what, effectively, has only ever been a nominal opposition.

Defamation suits as a means of bankrupting contrarians was Lee's great innovation. An opposition was only ever useful to fill a few spaces on the parliamentary benches. "If we had considered them serious political figures," claimed Lee scornfully to the *Straits Times* (Sep 14, 2003), "we would not have kept them politically alive for so long. We would have bankrupt them earlier." The late J. B. Jeyaretnam of the opposing Workers' Party represented "a thoroughly destructive force" and needed to be "knocked". "Everybody knows that in my bag I have a hatchet, and a very sharp one."

Similarly, those in the press had to familiarise themselves with the view that a questioning, aggressive media would be legally bludgeoned into manageable docility. "Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media," claimed Lee in an address to the General Assembly of the International Press Institute at Helsinki (Jun 9, 1971), "must be subordinated to the overriding interests of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government."

The Singapore Lee left us would allow cyberpunk writer William Gibson to make the claim that it was "Disneyland with the death penalty." Practitioners of graffiti, as US citizen Michael P. Fay painfully discovered in 1994 – would be caned. But income levels have kept rising. The system seems to be holding.

This modern equivalent of a thriving graffiti-free Venetian city state may well have been Lee's creation, but it has come at considerable social cost. The press remains submissive,

though this is hardly a concern. The opposition show no signs of growing, living in permanent emasculation. And Singapore provides a superb fillip for authoritarians, both incumbent and aspirational, who do see in Lee's legacy something to emulate. The mix, however, is a poorly balanced one – authoritarians tend to make poor economic managers. Lee proved to be the exception, but one should be cautious making it a model to follow.

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Notes:

- [1] <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21646869-lee-kuan-yew-made-singapore-paragon--development-authoritarians-draw-wrong-lessons-his>
- [2] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/22/singapore-lee-kuan-yew-dies-91>
- [3] http://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/53053/excerpt/9780521653053_excerpt.pdf
- [4] <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan004070.pdf>
- [5] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/820234.stm
- [6] <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan004070.pdf>
- [7] <http://www.transparency.org/country#SGP>

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