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<u>CIVIC SOCIETY - BETWEEN THE FAMILY AND THE STATE</u>

<u>Not Just a Hotel</u>

In the years to come, one of the major issues we have to confront is how to manage the phenomenon of multiple loyalties. We live in a world shrinking by the day. As our economy develops, more Singaporeans will travel overseas for work, study and leisure. Many Singaporeans will live overseas for months if not years. It is natural that some of these Singaporeans should feel attached to more than one community.

This situation is of course not unique to Singapore. Other countries also face this problem. Human talent has never been more mobile in the world. To compete for this pool of human talent, a number of countries now accept the idea of dual citizenship. The British and the Americans allow it; they adopt a practical approach. The Irish give passports to those who are only a quarter Irish to win over millions of Irish Americans and Australians. The French and the Taiwanese are liberal with those who are of French and Taiwanese descent. Despite the importance of national service, both the Israelis and the Turks have also made adjustments to changed patterns of migration. For them, half a loaf is better than no bread. Even the Swiss accept dual nationality but they are more relaxed with those who are Swiss-born. It is much harder for a foreigner to take up Swiss citizenship.

For all these countries, the rules allowing multiple citizenships are never fully publicized. Invariably, approval is on a case-by-case basis. But the way the game is being played is clear: it is to attract and to co-opt human talent. Ultimately, it is human capital which determines how strong and how competitive a society is.

Here in Singapore we do not allow dual citizenship as a rule but we are quite liberal with PRs. Recently, the suggestion has been made in Parliament and elsewhere that we should review our policy. Many Singaporeans are uncomfortable because we are still a young nation and allowing dual citizenship will dilute our sense of nationhood. This is a legitimate concern. The issues are, however, complex. We are not talking about choosing between black and white. Today, a Singapore PR enjoys almost all the privileges of citizenship so that we do in fact have a situation that approximates dual citizenship. In the same way, many Singaporeans take up PR in Canada, Australia or the US, without any intention of giving up their Singapore citizenship.

The problem is not simply one of rules and regulations. It is really one of emotional attachment. If a Singaporean loves Singapore, he will always be Singaporean whatever passport he carries. Conversely, if a Singaporean treats Singapore merely as a hotel, restricting the travel documents he carries will not help very much. When it does not benefit him, he will be off. The problem is how to make Singapore more than just a nice hotel to stay in, how to make it a home worth living and caring for.

Creating the Soul

It is therefore not enough just to improve the standard of living or the quality of life. Yes, it is pleasant to live in a city that is clean, green and safe, that has good facilities, where traffic jams are few and far-between, where the phones work and where the golf greens are well watered. But all this we can get at any five-star hotel resort. They are not enough.

What we must have is a soul - and that money cannot buy. Yet, without it, Singapore is only a hotel however well run the country may be. And we cannot make a hotel a home by preventing the guests from leaving.

How then do we create this Singapore soul? The soul of a people is an interesting subject in the study of human communities. The great mythologies offer a clue. They tell us that the soul of a people is created when they are struggling to overcome great odds. In overcoming these odds together, they develop their identity as a group, and this identity is carried from generation to generation in the form of myths. These myths may be based on actual historical experiences, but they are exaggerated to make the heroes larger than life and their exertions superhuman. For example, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata mythologized the great encounters of the Aryan people when they entered the Indian sub-continent. In the same way, the Iliad and the Odyssey described in epic form the Greek colonization of the shores and islands of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Xuan Zhuang's Journey to the West traced not only the route taken by Buddhism from India to China but also the attempts by the Han people to pacify the Western borders. In the Niebelung, we discern the rise of the German spirit as the Teutonic knights moved down the Danube.

What the myths tell us is that the multi-faceted soul of a people is forged in struggle. I am referring not only to epic struggles, but also the struggles of daily life, the totality of a people's response to a set of challenges. It is not the destination which is important but getting there. It is during the Long March that the soul in all its complexity is created and not after the arrival at Yenan.

Between the Family and the State

When we examine our soul in Singapore, we discover elements which are fully formed and elements which are still crystallizing. The ethnic and religious components have been

forged hundreds if not thousands of years ago. They will survive even if there were no Singapore. The Singaporean component of our soul is, however, still being formed.

There are two major parts to this Singaporean component. At the national level, we have created institutions which will serve us for generations to come, institutions like the Civil Service, National Service, CPF, Medisave, the HDB, bilingual education, multi-racial group representation, the NTUC and so on. These are institutions unique to Singapore, institutions created in response to the huge problems of the 60's and the 70's. At the national level, the act of creation has been largely accomplished and this is now largely internalized in the Singapore soul.

But below the level of the state, at the level of civic life, the Singapore soul is still evolving. Yes, the state is strong. The family is also strong. But civic society, which is the stratum of social life between the state and the family is still weak. Without a strong civic society, the Singapore soul will be incomplete. If the creation of a strong state was a major task of the last lap, the creation of a strong civic society must be a major task of the next lap.

To go back to the hotel room metaphor, it is not enough to have a good hotel or a well-run state. There are other well-run hotels. It is also not enough to have strong families because families can move from hotel to hotel and still remain intact. What we need lies in between. What we need are individuals and families who feel a responsibility to help build and to help run the hotel. When that happens, the hotel becomes a home.

What we need therefore is a whole array of civic organizations which anchor Singaporeans, as individuals and as families, to the country. I am not saying that direct emotional attachment to the state is not important. It is important. But

human emotions soar to such abstract levels only occasionally, and usually only during times of great crisis. Even in times of war, soldiers relate more to their peers and to their section, platoon and company commanders than they do to their brigade or division. Human beings have a strong need to belong to small groups, to little platoons, where the human links are direct and personal. These civic groups give individuals and families their sense of place and involvement in the larger community.

Religion, Education, Local Government,
Total Defence and Culture

What are these civic institutions? I would group them broadly around five major activities: religion, education, local government, Total Defence and culture.

Every place of religious worship is also a place for people to meet and to do good work. Mosques, temples, churches and synagogues are important focal points in any society. Human energies are mobilized to garner resources, to organize activities, to help the needy. In making the effort, a certain spirit develops which gives life to the particular centre and secure for it the emotional commitment of its members. Even when members live overseas, the links remain. To help Christian Singaporeans who live in Australia and Canada, for example, some churches send pastors from Singapore to minister to them. We must of course not forget that religious activities can also divide us as a people, as is indeed the case in so many countries. I would say that so long as we avoid extreme positions, civic activities organized around religious worship is a positive, not a negative, force.

Schools, polytechnics, colleges and universities should also be important centres for civic life. Now that we have good systems and curriculums in place, more attention should be given to building up the social life around each education establishment - OBAs, PTAs and associations like MENDAKI and the NUSS. It is not what the Education Ministry does that bring life

to a school. It is what students, parents, old boys and old girls do for themselves. In fact, the more they strive for themselves, the stronger becomes the school spirit or the community spirit. For this reason, it is important that our schools, especially our independent schools, our polytechnics and our universities undertake to raise a part of the funds they need.

The example of Harvard is instructive. Loyalties to Harvard are not to the University direct because the University is too big and impersonal. Instead, these loyalties are channelled through the schools - through Harvard College, the Law School, the Kennedy School, the Business School and others. I graduated from the Business School and, believe you me, till I die the School will not let me forget. Every graduating section of about 90 students in every graduating class of 700-800 appoints a section secretary and a fund-raising secretary before the students disperse. Class notes are compiled regularly and old boys are updated on each other's activities every three months through the alumni bulletin. We are tracked - from graduation to orbituary. It is interesting scanning these class notes from time to time. The new graduates talk about jobs, getting married, having children. The older ones talk about their careers, about class re-unions, about children getting married, about health problems and so on. Then when they get really old, the class notes get shorter as alumni die off. What is the objective? It is to maintain a powerful social network and to raise funds for the School. We are constantly reminded of the need to chip in. For good measure, a note goes out every year to everyone in the class listing those who have contributed and the amounts. It is quite a formidable operation. Prof Tommy Koh told me that his law class at its 25th Reunion raised US$1 million for the Law School.

I have talked about civic institutions formed around religious worship and education. Let me now cover the other three briefly - local government, Total Defence and culture.

Local government should be progressively extended. This has been difficult in the past because of the physical re-development of our island over the last 25 years and the need for central direction. Constituency boundaries had to be re-drawn every few years to keep up with the re-location of population centres. But this process will slow down. As the population becomes more settled, residential areas will mature and towns will become more important. Each town will then have its local character, the kind of character which can be found today in places like Serangoon Gardens and Katong. The older housing estates like Toa Payoh are also becoming more interesting. Town councils will help us create a network of local government which Singaporeans can relate to more intimately. By local government, I refer to both political and non-political civic agencies - mayors, town councillors, justices of the peace, CCCs, RCs, community centres, management associations, rotary clubs, charity organizations, trade union co-operatives and so on. A country like Luxembourg, which is much smaller than Singapore in population size, has a more developed structure of local government. When local residents do things for themselves, they feel a greater sense of ownership, responsibility and control.

Like local government, we need also to create civic organizations around Total Defence. In the last lap, Total Defence concentrated on the build-up of the SAF and Civil Defence, particularly the establishment of operational units and training systems, on the hard parts as it were. Now we must also give emphasis to the soft parts, and get regulars, national servicemen, reservists and volunteers to organize more social activities for themselves and their families. When there is a crisis, like the Hotel New World disaster or the hijack of SQ 117, deep emotions are aroused which bond Singaporeans to Total Defence. I remember attending a meeting in MINDEF chaired by Dr Yeo Ning Hong the morning of the successful storming of SQ 117. I felt like shaking hands with everyone wearing a uniform. But crises are rare and thankfully so. We cannot depend on crises to forge all our emotional links to the state. Here again, we

need local organizations. SAFRA, for example, will try to work at a more local level and facilitate the organization of family-based activities. The Police and Civil Defence are also organising their own reservist associations. Look at the Swiss. This year they are celebrating their 700th Anniversary. Even when they are overseas, they feel a strong affiliation to their operational units. We are only 25 years but we should know where we are heading.

The last group of civic organizations I want to talk about are the organizations concerned with culture and the arts. Some, like the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, have a long history. Others, like the Sub-Station, are comparatively new. Over the last few years, there has been a general blossoming of the arts which augurs well for the future. The great majority of our art organizations are, however, still struggling to be viable. All are competing for support, for state, corporate and individual support. At the risk of being misunderstood, let me say that this struggle is a good thing, not a bad thing. Without struggle, the soul will never grow. It is because of struggle that fierce loyalties develop. Of course the Government must offer a helping hand if the arts are to flourish at all but this helping hand must not create dependency.

Pruning the Banyan Tree

This leads me to make a general point about community self-help and the Singapore soul. For our civic institutions to grow, the state must withdraw a little and provide more space for local initiative. If the state is overpowering and intrudes into every sphere of community life, the result will be disastrous. All of us are then reduced to guests in a hotel. By arrogating to itself all powers, Communism, especially Soviet Communism, created an immoral system. By making everyone dependent on the state, the system destroyed the soul of the community.

In the case of Singapore, we went through a centralizing phase because we had to build a nation. Under the British, there

were independent schools, community hospitals, clan associations, and so on, but they pulled our society in different directions. The British were not interested in creating a nation. As was the case elsewhere in the Empire, British policy was to divide and rule. When Singapore became independent, the creation of strong national institutions was therefore of overriding importance. To provide the basics quickly, we built state systems for education, health, housing and so on. Schools and hospitals were virtually nationalized. Because racial and religious harmony was paramount, chauvinism of all kinds had to be restrained. To defend ourselves, NS was introduced. To house the population, the Government built up the HDB and the CPF. These centralized programmes made possible the remarkable achievements of Singapore in the first phase of our national development.

The problem now is that under a banyan tree very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow. You know what our friends in Hongkong say of us: we take care of our people so well, our people have become soft.

If we want the state to be less intrusive, we must do more for ourselves. This means taking the initiative, running around, raising money which is never pleasant, and suffering all manner of inefficiencies to get a job done. We all know that the politics in civic organizations can sometimes be very petty and very complicated. But when the job is finally done, the satisfaction is sweet precisely because everyone contributed to the final product.

In a book called 'In Pursuit: Of Happiness', Charles Murray made the point repeatedly that good government leaves plenty of room for local loyalties to develop. Edmund Burke said that '.... to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we

proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind'. Mencius stressed a long time ago that governing a state is like frying small fish; it must be lightly done. De Tocqueville wrote in 'Democracy in America' that 'the township is the only association so well rooted in nature that wherever men assemble it forms itself. Communal society therefore exists among all peoples, whatever be their customs and laws. Man creates kingdoms and republics, but townships seem to spring directly from the hand of God'. De Tocqueville added that 'it is in the township, the centre of the ordinary business of life, that the desire for esteem [and] the pursuit of substantial interests .... are concentrated; these passions ..... take on a different character when exercised so close to home and, in a sense, within the family circle .... Daily duties performed or rights exercised keep municipal life constantly alive. There is a continual gentle political activity which keeps society on the move without turmoil.'

In other words, it is civic life which creates 'public affections' and the soul in our society. It is civic life which holds a democracy together. We have to make the effort ourselves. The Government can help but the Government cannot build up civic life from top down. For example, I understand that the NUSS will be organizing a lyric theatre company which, as minister for the arts, is a project I support and applaud. The initiative comes from the NUSS and its success will depend on the exertions of the NUSS. MITA will help here and there, the way we help others, but that's all. I am sure you will succeed and the NUSS will be the better for it. In the same way, the Government can spend money to build more halls of residence in the University but whether they develop strong traditions will depend on students and faculty. We need strong halls because they underpin the civic life of a university. It is through the halls that students develop lifelong loyalties towards the University.

Let me add that there has to be a proper balance between

centralization and de-centralization. We have to prune the banyan tree, but we cannot do without the banyan tree. Singapore will always need a strong centre to react quickly to a changing competitive environment. We need some pluralism but not too much because too much will also destroy us. In other words, we prune judiciously.

A New Pattern of Competition

The livelier our civic society, the more varied our civic organizations, the more points of emotional attachment there will be to Singapore. Then it will not matter whether Singaporeans are in Singapore or overseas. However attractive other cities may be, this will always be home because this is where the heart is. The fact that Singaporeans overseas are becoming more keen to organize themselves is a very good sign. We should encourage them and help them to help themselves.

The international competition for human capital is really a competition for hearts and minds. All along the Pacific Rim, vigorous Asian communites are forming. Because of high population densities in Asia and low population densities in North America and Australasia, the flow of Asians to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver, Perth, Sydney, Auckland and Wellington will continue well into the next century. These Asian communities will never be fully absorbed into American, Canadian or Australian society. They will remain partially Asian at least and retain economic, cultural and family ties with cities in East and Southeast Asia. All along the Pacific Rim, Asian communities will be in communication, co-operation and competition with one another. This pattern is not unlike that of the Greek colonization of the islands and coastal areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea over two thousand five hundred years ago. Because of over-population on the Greek peninsula, many Greeks left their city-states to found colonies which then became independent. They traded with each other and met for the Olympic games. We are witnessing an analogous phenomenon on the Pacific Rim. In the next century, we in Singapore will be one

of many dynamic Asian communities on the Pacific Rim. We will have to compete for our share of human capital, especially for Asian hearts and Asian minds. And if we are only a hotel, we will fail. The simple fact is that to win minds, we have to win hearts.

The 21st Century

I therefore come back to the starting point of my argument. If we are not to be only a hotel, we must have a soul. To develop that soul, we need a lively civic society. The State must pull back some so that the circle of public participation can grow. When Singaporeans in their little platoons struggle to make life better for themselves and for their fellow countrymen, they develop the affections and traditions which make our hotel a home. Then it will not matter so much whether they live in Singapore or overseas. We will then be able in the next century to take our place as one of the more remarkable communities on the Pacific Rim.

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