

By Invitation

The day I lectured on Marx to Goh Keng Swee

Intellectual curiosity, coupled with ruthless realism, was a trait shared by three of Singapore's founding fathers: Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam



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When Singapore turned 50 in August 2015, I wrote a column for the Huffington Post to say that Singapore was the most successful nation in human history. Surprisingly, this column was not challenged. What I could not do in that column was to explain why Singapore was extraordinarily successful.

The answer is quite simple. By a sheer accident of history, we ended up with exceptional founding fathers, perhaps as exceptional as those of America. The three most outstanding were Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S. Rajaratnam.

However, it must also be quickly noted that there were other important leaders in the team, including Mr Lim Kim San, Mr Eddie Barker, Mr Hon Sui Sen and Dr Toh Chin Chye. One real tragedy of Singapore is how little most young Singaporeans know about them, even the three most outstanding. This is why I want to write a book about them.

The best way to begin writing a book is to start the process of thinking and talking about the subject as soon as possible. This is the real goal of this column. I want to begin the process of putting down my preliminary thoughts on what made these three men truly great. My hope is to get a lot of feedback from friends and people who have also worked with these three great men. I have a few good private stories to share. I hope to get a few more stories in the hope of producing rich, three-dimensional portraits of these three men.

Let me emphasise that the three men were very different in many ways. Those who have worked with them can attest that Mr Lee could be fearsome, Dr Goh could be gruff and Mr Rajaratnam could not be more affable.

Their minds were also different. Mr Lee was one of the shrewdest political creatures to be born on planet earth. Dr Goh was a brilliant economist. Mr Rajaratnam had a

literary bent. One of his short stories was published in *A World Of Great Stories: 115 Stories*, *The Best Of Modern Literature* alongside the works of such luminaries as Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Yet, despite these great differences, they shared some key qualities. Let me mention three.

INCESSANT CURIOSITY

What I remember best in my encounters with all of them were the questions they would continually pose to me. All three seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of questions. It reflected the curious minds that all three had. Mr Lee was at his best during the brainstorming sessions he would invite us for, at meetings or over lunch, in the Istana.

In the mid-1990s, after Mr Lee had stepped down as prime minister, he would invite Professor Tommy Koh, Professor Chan Heng Chee and me to the Istana every few months for lunch. The lunches would last a long time, partly because Mr Lee enjoyed consuming a lot of fruit after lunch. One of his favourite fruits was pomelo from Thailand.

At these brainstorming sessions, Mr Lee would ask a lot of questions about international developments. There was no doubt that he was well-informed. However, he always wanted to hear alternative views so that he could double-check.

One of his most memorable statements, which I have quoted often to my staff at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, was: "Before I do something, I check, double-check, triple-check, and then I check again."

The mid-1990s was also the period when Singapore lost its easy access to the White House. I was present when Mr Ronald Reagan warmly welcomed Mr Lee to the White House. I was also present when his successor, Mr George H. W. Bush, told a private gathering in St Petersburg, Russia, that the greatest leader he had ever interacted with was Mr Lee.

However, the young Bill Clinton had little interest in Singapore or its leaders then. So we did our best to try to understand him.

One of the first things Mr Rajaratnam told me when I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1971 was: "Don't tell me things you think I want to hear; tell me things I should hear, even if they make me uncomfortable."

Mr Lee adopted the same attitude



in private sessions.

Dr Goh demonstrated his curiosity in an unusual way. In the mid-1970s, after Vietnam had fallen to the communists, Dr Goh, as defence minister, initiated a course on Marxism for all senior Mindef officers. Since I had just done my master's degree in philosophy, specialising in Karl Marx, at Dalhousie University, Halifax, in 1975, Dr Goh invited me to fly down from my post at the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur once a week to deliver a lecture on a different aspect of Marxism for six weeks.

Dr Goh would sit in the first row and listen to me, together with more than 100 officers. It was an intimidating sight. As I pranced all over the stage, I noticed Dr Goh frowning more and more as I kept talking. Fortunately, my permanent secretary, Mr Chia Cheong Fook, was in the room. When I asked him after the lecture why Dr Goh kept frowning at me,

he replied: "Kishore, that is a very good sign. When he frowns, it means that he is listening carefully to you."

I was relieved.

RUTHLESS REALISM

Another quality they had in common was a ruthless dedication to finding the real truths, the hard truths. They were acutely aware that as a small state, Singapore would get its head bashed very quickly if it nurtured any illusions about the world. Hence, they were very careful and deft in managing relations with great powers.

After Vietnam fell, Singapore, like the other non-communist founding members of Asean, was deeply concerned about the aggressive spread of communism in South-east Asia.

This is also why Dr Goh initiated the series of Marxism lectures. At the same time, Singapore did not want to pick any unnecessary fights

with the superpower patron of Vietnam, the Soviet Union.

Mr Rajaratnam visited Moscow in 1976. I was happy to go along as the most junior member of the delegation, which, by a strange coincidence, included two men who would subsequently become presidents of Singapore: Mr Ong Teng Cheong and Mr S R Nathan. Mr Rajaratnam was received warmly by the legendary foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Mr Andrei Gromyko.

If my memory is correct, Mr Rajaratnam told Mr Gromyko that while Singapore was anti-communist in its domestic policies, it was not anti-communist in its foreign policies. It wanted to have friendly relations with all powers. Singapore welcomed American naval vessels. It also welcomed Soviet naval vessels. Indeed, the Soviet Union probably did more trade with Singapore than with any other Asean member state. Maintaining

good relations with all great powers was a key precept of Singapore's foreign policy.

PRAGMATISM

It is well known that none of these three men were religious. If there was any trait that they worshipped, it was the culture of pragmatism. Dr Goh demonstrated this best with his study of the Meiji reformers who had pragmatically transformed Japan and led to its emergence as the first great Asian power. Dr Goh admired these reformers immensely, as he noted in his Harry G. Johnson Memorial Lecture, which he delivered on July 28, 1983, at the Royal Society, London, on the topic Public Administration and Economic Development in LDCs (least developed countries).

This is what he said of the Meiji reformers: "The country having been temporarily pacified, Iwakura (Tomomi) set off in 1871 on a two-year world tour with 54 proteges. They all knew they had to come to terms with the West and they decided to see at first hand how things worked there. What they saw astonished and impressed them. They understood that what was necessary was a total overhaul of their society... On the whole, the Japanese chose Western gurus wisely. Their education system was modelled on the French centralised system, but it was combined with American methods of curriculum development... They also adopted the German system of civil-service recruitment through examination. They undertook a thorough study of Western systems of jurisprudence and constitutional law before formalising their political system in the Meiji Constitution in 1889."

Mr Rajaratnam was equally pragmatic. At a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Foreign Ministers' Meeting I attended in Luanda, Angola, in 1985, the Malaysian delegation – at the instruction of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad – wanted the NAM to come out with a common position on Antarctica.

In principle, Tun Dr Mahathir's position was correct. The untapped natural resources of the vast Antarctic should belong to humanity, not to the great powers which had the means to tap them. As a matter of principle, we should have supported Dr Mahathir.

However, Mr Rajaratnam gave strict instructions to our delegation to remain silent. Looking back, Mr Rajaratnam's pragmatism was wise.

These are only a few stories, from personal experience, which illustrate the incessant curiosity, ruthless realism and pragmatism of these three great men. There must be hundreds of similar stories that others who worked with them would have. It would be a tragedy to lose them. I hope that readers who have similar stories will come forward with them. Many future generations of Singaporeans could learn valuable lessons from these stories. They will also help to explain why Singapore was extraordinarily successful in its first 50 years.

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