

SE Comment/Analysis

HD The PAP and the people - A Great Affective Divide

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LP IT IS no secret that while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard.

It is also no secret that the Government is not much bothered by this attitude. The familiar PAP stance is: better to be unpopular and do a good job than to be popular and lead the country into chaos and ruin. At a time of peak economic prosperity and social stability, an estrangement between the government and the people must appear odd. Whence arises this Great **Affective Divide**?

TD The answer lies partly in Singapore's history. In its early years, the PAP leadership faced enormous hardships including the traumatic expulsion from Malaysia, the earlier-than-expected withdrawal of the British forces resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs, the threat of Communist influence in the unions and schools and the increasing hostility of the Chinese-educated for the newly emerging, socially ascendant English-educated. On top of all these problems was the ultimately daunting one of nature's remissness: a total lack of natural resources.

With characteristic energy and enthusiasm, the PAP leaders set about the task of taking the beleaguered country out of the woods. From the start, they decided that there was only one way to do it: establish the primacy of economic development and link it with political security to form a tight, incontrovertible equation of national survival, so that whatever fitted into the equation would be rigorously promoted and whatever threatened to disrupt it would be slapped down ruthlessly. Thus a linguistic and cultural issue - that of the English language - was resolved in its favour on the economic grounds that its adoption and use as the main language would enable the country to plug into world trade and technology. The dissenting voices of the Chinese educated were seen accordingly as subversive of the well-being of the country, and duly dealt with.

Over the years, this simple but highly effective approach has taken the country from one astonishing level of achievement to another, until today, it takes its place among the most successful nations in the world, ranking 18th among 230 countries in terms of per capita income.

Clearly, such a purposeful, uncompromising commitment to the economic imperative calls for special qualities of mind and temperament. The PAP leaders are distinguished for their intelligence, single-mindedness, sternness of purpose and cool detachment. Their methods are logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive. Their pet aversion is noisy, protracted debate that leads nowhere, emotional indulgence, frothy promises, theatrics and polemics in place of pragmatics.

This PAP approach, by reason of its amazing effectiveness, has been raised to a political credo that uniquely defines the Government.

But while the PAP ideology remains the same, the people have not. Higher education, a more affluent lifestyle and exposure to the values of the western societies, have created a new generation that is not satisfied with the quantitative paradigm but looks beyond it to a larger qualitative one that most certainly includes matters of the heart, soul and spirit. While idealism, charisma and image have a special appeal for the young, feeling in general is an essential element in everybody's life, occurring at the deepest and most basic level of human need.

The absence of this affective dimension in the PAP framework is what has alienated the people from their leaders. It is easily seen that the main criticisms levelled against the PAP point to a style deficient in human sensitivity and feeling - "dictatorial", "arrogant", "impatient", "unforgiving", "vindictive".

The Government, puzzled and exasperated by the charges, has often invited these disaffected to come forward to explain their stand clearly and support their criticism with hard data, for instance, the oft-heard complaint that the authoritarian style of the Government has denied them freedom of expression.

But the disaffection remains largely coffee-house and cocktail party rhetoric only. Singaporeans continue to prefer the cover of anonymity. One reason may be the fear that the outspoken person will be marked out and victimised; another may be the sheer presence of so much proof of concrete well-being, such as a good job, a good bank account, a comfortable lifestyle.

Whatever the reason, the negative feelings go underground. Now subterranean hostility is all the more insidious for being that, and has a way of surfacing in the most trenchant way, for example, applauding any rambunctious opposition party member in pre-election rallies. A once-in-five-years occurrence, it shows all the intensity of unbottled resentment. The most serious consequences, as the Government is very well aware, is the giving of the vote to the opposition, simply to deny the Government majority that would presumably make it more arrogant than ever.

The Great **Affective Divide** has created a model of government-people relationship that must be unique in the world: solid, unbreakable unity of purpose and commitment on the economic plane, but a serious bifurcation at the emotive level, resulting in all kinds of anomalies and incongruities. A kind of *modus vivendi* appears to have developed, by which each agrees to live with the other's preference as long as both work together for the good of the country. Hence the Government continues to say: "We know you dislike us, but ...", and the people continue to think: "We are totally grateful to you for the good life you've given us and will vote you again, but ..."

Judging by the results, it is not too bad an arrangement, and many governments who were wildly popular one year and fell the next must be envious of the PAP for being returned to power at each election by a people who allegedly don't like them. The conclusion is that in the large equation of Economic Prosperity and Party Continuity, the factor of feeling cannot be a significant one.

Or can it? Is the equation as stable as it looks?

Concerned Singaporeans must be aware of the emergence of a secondary equation that could bust the major one and create a whole range of unexpected problems. It is the equation of the PAP with Singapore. While in other countries, political parties come and go, but the country remains the rallying point for the people's feelings, in Singapore, the Government has become synonymous with the country. Indeed, Singapore is often seen as the creation of the PAP, made to its image and likeness. Hence, dislike of the PAP, even though it does not translate into dislike of Singapore, effectively blocks out any spontaneous outpouring of patriotic emotion. The best evidence is in the attitude towards the national flag. Singaporeans continue to be reluctant to put it up in their homes on National Day for fear of being thought PAP supporters and sycophants.

If loyalty towards the country is blocked, it has to be directed elsewhere.

In Singapore, it is directed at the good life which the country has come to represent. Hence, the object of the people's fervour is not the Government, nor the country, but the good life made possible by the first in its successful leadership of the second. There is by now an almost adulatory quality about the attachment of Singaporeans to the affluence which their parents never knew and which came their way so quickly. It has been wryly described as the new religion of "moneytheism".

This kind of loyalty is, of course meretricious. It changes with its object. Hence, when the good life diminishes, so will it. When the good life disappears, so may it. But the most insidious aspect is its mobility. It will uproot and move with the good life. Hence, if economic prosperity is no longer in Singapore but moves to Canada, Australia, the United States, China, it will re-locate itself accordingly. This is already happening, say some cynical observers: the current buying up of properties and businesses in other countries by the more affluent Singaporeans may be more a quiet preparation for this eventuality than a straightforward investment.

Such a volatile, mobile loyalty is of course a travesty of the patriotism it

has displaced and a mockery of all the earnest effort that the Government and the people have put into the building of the country over three decades.

Even if such a sinister scenario does not arise, a growing emotive estrangement between the Government and the people is not a healthy thing. It could create a schizoid society where head is divorced from heart, where there is a double agenda and double book-keeping with people agreeing with the Government in public but saying something else in private.

Neither side of course wants this to happen. Both want this discomfiture to go away. The slogan of "a gentler, wiser society" borrowed by the Prime Minister to signal a new dispensation of greater sensitivity, concern and communication, reinforces an earlier one of "gracious society". The new concern with the aged, the handicapped and the destitute is clearly an attempt to put a human face on public policy that is often accused of being elitist. The new encouragement of the arts is an acknowledgement that man does not live by bread alone but also by creative expression, energy and passion. In the process of narrowing this **Affective Divide**, the Government will learn that lecturing and hectoring are sometimes less effective than a pat on the back, that mistakes may be just as instructive as success and are therefore forgivable, that efficiency and generosity of spirit are not mutually exclusive, that compassion is not necessarily a sign of effiteness.

The people, on their part, will learn to praise and commend as readily as they are to criticise and complain, to appreciate the hard work of the leaders and possibly the personal sacrifice and frustrations that must lie behind some of the achievements that have contributed to the good life and above all, to realise that whatever the Government now says about its accepting the fact that it does not have the people's regard as long as it has their respect, it needs and wants both.

The Great **Affective Divide** is an incongruity, to say the least, at a time of

phenomenal achievement and intense awareness of the need for a national identity. If openness and tolerance are to be the new temper of the times, they must, first and foremost, address this problem, a definite thorn in the side of the body politic.

The writer is the author of 10 books, the most recent of which is The Best of Catherine Lim published by Heinemann. She contributed this article to The Straits Times.

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