# 16
# THE TRANSFORMATION OF MERITOCRACY

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## CLASS POLITICS IN SINGAPORE?

In the 1989 volume of *Management of Success*, Ezra Vogel identified a "strong central meritocracy" not only as one of the pillars of good government in Singapore, but also as a type of government that Singapore leaders — namely, the People's Action Party (PAP) government — had historically chosen to establish.[1] Remarkably, meritocracy in the selection of bureaucrats, commonly practised among the East Asian countries, extended, in Singapore's case, to the selection of political leaders as well, with academic performance as a pivotal measure of merit. Amidst triumphant though spurious attempts to explain the East Asian economic miracle of the 1980s in terms of "Confucian" virtues such as meritocracy, Vogel could already point critically to the way that meritocracy in Singapore also emitted an "aura of special awe for the top leaders … [which] provides a basis for discrediting less meritocratic opposition almost regardless of the content of its arguments". In 1984, for instance, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew publicly compared the GCE 'O' Level results of the PAP candidate and his electoral opponent, suggesting that if the former were to lose, democracy's one-man-one-vote principle would itself need to be questioned. Articulate, confident, and energetic, political leaders in Singapore were part of what Vogel vividly called a "macho-meritocracy".

Meritocracy is an essentially unstable concept, binding aspects that work together in productive tension.[2] Over the decades, the delicate balance between the contradictory egalitarian and elitist aspects of meritocracy, preserved so skilfully by the PAP government in the decades following Singapore's

independence, has shifted towards a market-driven concern with rewarding the winners, leaving the losers more sceptical about their own prospects for upward mobility. Today, meritocracy and, in particular, its macho manifestations are coming under strain as fast-globalizing Singapore gears up to deal with new forms of national crisis, alternative sources of information and beliefs about merit, and widening income disparity, all of which the government finds itself less able to control fully. More deeply embedded in the networks and flows of globalization, Singapore is facing new forces that are threatening to pull apart and destabilize this long-standing pillar of governance.

In 2006, an eighteen-year-old school girl criticized a thirty-five-year-old man for complaining about job security and the problems faced by older Singaporeans. She wrote in her blog:

> i am inclined — too much, perhaps — to dismiss such people as crackpots. stupid crackpots. the sadder class … we are a tyranny of the capable and the clever, and the only other class is the complement … if you're not good enough, life will kick you in the balls … my future isn't certain but i guess right now it's a lot brighter than most people's. derek will read this and brand me as an 18-year old elite, one of the sinners who will inherit the country and run his stock to the gutter. go ahead. the world is about winners and losers … dear derek is one of many wretched, undermotivated, overassuming leeches in our country, and in this world. one of those who would prefer to be unemployed and wax lyrical about how his myriad talents are being abandoned for the foreigner's … please, get out of my elite uncaring face.[3]

In response to this blog entry were long threads of angry online messages from outraged Singaporeans. This young lady was a top student on an elite school's scholarship programme, recipient of a prestigious academic prize, and daughter of a PAP parliamentarian and president of a government-linked company. By most accounts, her life circumstances and qualifications would put her on a trajectory to a bright future and possibly to a place among the political elite. At roughly the same time, Singaporeans read media reports about a jobless man who, unable to deal with his financial problems, jumped to his death at an MRT station, leaving behind his wife and children. The stark contrast between the image of a cocky and disdainful youth from a privileged background on the one hand, and a helpless and desperate working man, on the other, strongly emphasized the gap between winners and losers in the Singapore system, crystallizing the mounting frustrations of ordinary Singaporeans who are

increasingly worried about their well-being and life prospects, and about a future when an elite government might turn intolerantly elitist.

Journalist Seah Chiang Nee's prediction that this episode will "threaten the PAP's long-term rule" as it foregrounds "political elitism and arrogance" that breed "resentment and friction"[4] is perhaps a slight exaggeration, but such perceptions can accumulate and mount significant pressures that have already threatened to pull apart the inherently unstable concept of meritocracy which binds together such potentially incompatible aspects as equality of opportunity, efficient resource allocation, competition, and reward. Accordingly, the government more recently has had to take a more visibly positive and active position on the egalitarian aspects of meritocracy.

## THE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ASPECT

Meritocracy can be thought of as a system of selection that is blind to race, gender, sexuality, age, or class differences where these attributes should not matter. However, blindness to differences should not extend to cases where real advantages and disadvantages are ignored, where some kind of positive discrimination may be necessary. What matters is that there is equality of opportunity, at least where starting points are concerned. No one, therefore, should be systematically excluded from opportunities to pursue their life plans, achieve their potential, and profit from their success; and from basic resources such as safety, housing, education, and health that will be necessary for these.

In Singapore, the government's social policies over the decades have ensured that nearly all Singaporeans have had access at least to basic goods through the public provision of affordable and high-quality housing, health care, and education. Stridently against comprehensive state welfare, the government has developed a basic system of social security, mainly in the form of the Central Provident Fund (CPF): through individual compulsory savings that are built up by joint contributions from individuals and their employers, and through occasional government top-ups, Singaporean workers can expect to withdraw a large sum of money upon retirement. Medical and home ownership expenses can also be paid by drawing from CPF accounts. The state also provides a number of social assistance schemes, including a modest Public Assistance Scheme for the neediest Singaporeans.

"Multiracialism" celebrates a harmonious society made up of distinct "racial" communities neatly categorized as Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others that include the Eurasians. These ethnic identities and their respective practices are encouraged

to flourish in the private sphere. In the public realm, decisions, selections, and promotions are made in ways that officially do not disadvantage any particular racial community (although prejudices and biases can never be fully eradicated in practice). Focusing only on pure merit, all Singaporeans should have an equal voice as citizens to affect decisions on matters of general importance, and this equality is constitutionally guaranteed.

When differences are perceived to matter in one's life chances, efforts have been made to recognize them. For instance, when the government in the late 1980s thought that Singaporeans from minority ethnic groups could be underrepresented in a future parliament, an electoral innovation was introduced to its basic Westminster system which allowed for most of the electoral seats to be clustered into multimember teams — called Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) — of which at least one member from each had to be identified as an ethnic minority. This innovation, critics were quick to point out, gave the incumbent government more structural and tactical advantages in political elections; but, ostensibly, it was instituted in the interest of equal opportunities for political office and representation.

## THE RESOURCE ALLOCATION ASPECT

A second aspect of meritocracy relates to efficient resource allocation. Here, the focus is on "revealing" the best person for the job, rather than giving people equal opportunities. The former focuses on outcomes, while the latter focuses on fairness. Notionally, meritocracy is efficient because it identifies individuals with valuable qualities and qualifications and matches them to the appropriate roles and positions in the market and in the state.

Such a system finds an easy fit in Singapore's survivalist culture that constantly identifies resource scarcity as a key limitation on prospects for sustained survival and success. And with a population of 5 million, human capital — limited, it seems, in quantity and quality — lies at the heart of national anxieties (and incidentally provides justification for nearly all accounts of why Singapore must make itself attractive to foreign talent). Talent needs to be identified and deployed carefully and meritocracy would seem to be the mechanism for doing this. President's scholar and former top career diplomat Kishore Mahbubani observed how the nation's historical

> leaders decided that Singapore's only resources were human resources. None should be wasted. Any talent anywhere in society would have an opportunity

> to grow and flourish. Hence, with financial aid and scholarships, and through a merit-based promotion system, I escaped the clutches of poverty.[5]

The PAP government regularly insists that there are not enough good people to join the government. Meritocracy is valued for its ability to "reveal" the best people from the widest possible pool of talent for positions in an elite government. Even if candidates appear to be drawn from a range of social backgrounds, recruitment of parliamentary candidates depends principally on academic qualifications and professional achievements. But PAP politicians from humble backgrounds often make their personal success stories publicly known as this can help to generate political capital and faith in a system that not only is efficient in allocating scarce talent, but also shows signs of fairness and equality.

Stringently meritocratic, the PAP leadership selection mechanism reinforces the paternalistic strains of a culture that has been described as deferential and hierarchical. If, through a properly functioning meritocracy, the best talents are revealed and installed in positions of power, then this leadership is most capable of understanding the national interest and formulating policies that will, at least technically, be most effective in securing this interest over, perhaps, the short-term and fragmented interests of the masses. With the highly self-conscious selection of people with academic and professional credentials for a technocratic leadership, public administration aims to replace "politics", yielding what Chan Heng Chee famously described as an "administrative state".[6]

## THE COMPETITION ASPECT

Competition is a third aspect of meritocracy and one that is closely related to the question of incentives and effort. Meritocracy does not only sort out scarce talent, it also encourages talented people to compete with one another for position, reward, and prestige, and in that way to try harder than they otherwise would. Human capacities are thus developed to their potential and society can potentially benefit from the kind of competitiveness that brings out the best in everyone.

Through a highly competitive system of awarding prestigious government scholarships to students, the PAP government has been able to ensure that the best academic talents are channelled into public service. These scholarships have been more about harnessing talent than equalizing life chances, although these two objectives do not need to be mutually exclusive. But the competitive

basis on which these scholarships are awarded also means that students push themselves harder to win these prestigious awards. As "straight A" results become more common, students have to find other ways to distinguish themselves from their equally accomplished peers, which often means that achievements in sports, community service, the arts, and so on are taken more seriously.

Through a rigorous process of applications, interviews, and written tests, government scholars are selected from a pool of top students in the cohort, the best among them sent to study at well-known overseas universities, where their tuition fees and living expenses are well taken care of. A contractual bond specifies an obligation (of five or six years) to public service upon graduation, a bond which scholars have a moral (beyond legal) responsibility to honour. If they obtain good results at university and perform well at subsequent rounds of interviews, they can expect rewarding and challenging careers, especially in the elite Administrative Service, where their performance will be scrutinized and "Current Estimated Potential" (CEP) annually reviewed.[7] A number of government scholars eventually get picked, again through a stringently meritocratic selection process, to join the PAP as party candidates and, when in Parliament, may be picked to serve in the Cabinet.

The PAP government's claim to competitive meritocracy, however, has not extended into the realm of multiparty competition, a central tenet of liberal democracy. Almost half a century in power, the PAP enjoys the support, cooperation, and even obedience of the mass media, civil service, and parapolitical grassroots networks. The PAP is so deeply entrenched that Singapore's formal institutions of democracy do not present a reasonable opportunity for any regime change in the foreseeable future. From 1968 to 1981, the PAP held all seats in Parliament, and the most impressive performance by the opposition was in 1991 when four out of eighty-one seats were lost by the PAP. And the PAP can hardly be expected to make things easier for the opposition in its struggles to win even a few seats in Parliament. A widely shared belief is that Singaporeans want the opposition parties to succeed in gaining a meaningful and credible presence in Parliament as a check on the PAP government, but not to actually take over the reins of government from the PAP, a party with a proved track record. A culture of apprehension, furthermore, prevents many Singaporeans from voting for the opposition, much less coming forward as candidates of alternative political parties.[8]

The government often explains that Singapore is too small for its scarce leadership resources to be dissipated through the competitive process, arguing that competition is wasteful when it comes to multiparty or even two-party

politics where parties try to outdo one another to win popular support. Lee Kuan Yew famously illustrated the problem by suggesting that the elite, then numbering about 300, could all fit into a jumbo jet and that Singapore would be in deep trouble if it were to crash.[9] Lee has more recently revised his estimate of the elite — "the people at the top, with proven track records not just in ability, but in character, determination, commitment" — to number no more than 2,000. "[T]heir biodata", he said, could be saved "in a thumbdrive".[10] In the mid-1980s, Goh Chok Tong argued against liberal democratic practices for Singapore by pointing out, first, the difficulty of forming a good Cabinet of ministers if parties won only by small majorities;[11] secondly, that "sampan" (small boat) Singapore cannot "zig-zag" like "supertanker" Britain without capsizing;[12] and, thirdly, that the "political instability" of changing governments would have a negative impact on investor confidence, all-important to Singapore's economic well-being.[13] Liberal democracy — when framed in terms of these kinds of arguments — would seem to be opposed to, and not facilitative of, meritocracy.

## THE REWARD ASPECT

A fourth aspect of meritocracy, and one which provides the incentive for competition, is reward. Reward for individual merit can take the form of social rank, job positions, higher incomes, or general recognition and prestige. But other than a prize to drive competition, reward can also be seen as recognition of talent and compensation for one's effort.

In the 1990s, Singaporeans started hearing about "bond-breakers" — government scholars who, realizing their earning potential beyond Singapore's horizons, did not want to be constrained by the obligations to work in the public sector. Some of these scholars came from families that were sufficiently affluent to buy them out of their bonds. Some were bought out of their commitments by other interested parties in and out of Singapore, an attractive deal since the costs of selecting and training these talents had already been borne by the Singapore Government. While being selected for a scholarship was still a mark of prestige worth earning, the prospects of a career in the civil service were perhaps less attractive than they might once have been, particularly as the career horizons of top Singaporeans opened up internationally. If meritocracy could not adequately reward the meritorious, then talent would flow elsewhere. Singapore could no longer expect its talented young citizens to opt for a career in the government or public sector out of a sense of altruism or passion for public service.

As the opportunity cost of choosing a public sector career began to rise, talented Singaporeans needed to be offered higher "compensation" which would also act as an incentive to join the civil service. In the 1990s, this way of thinking motivated the government to put in place higher salaries for top civil servants and ministers. The arguments for this also included the need to give civil servants fewer reasons to resort to corruption. Legislation to peg these salaries to a "market rate" was swiftly passed in 1994. Today, ministers earn salaries that are two-thirds of the median salary of the forty-eight highest-earning professionals in banking, law, accountancy, and engineering, and of executives in multinational and manufacturing companies. Singapore's ministers and top civil servants are now the highest paid in the world by far, with the Prime Minister earning approximately five times what the U.S. President does.[14]

## ELITISM

Meritocracy is a finely balanced system that brings together contradictory aspects, including an equal opportunities dimension and a reward dimension. Elitism often sets in when the balance shifts significantly in favour of rewards, particularly when the winners, fearful of competition, try to set the rules of the game in their favour so that they can continue winning and make the winners' circle more exclusive. From within that circle, the elite start to develop an exaggerated sense of superiority, overvalue their own capabilities, define merit in their own image, and treat the masses with disdain and despair. Those outside the winners' circle may start to lose faith in the system when equal opportunities and upward mobility appear to be eclipsed by a market-driven obsession with reward and status.[15]

Amidst the rising cost of living and visibly increasing disparities in lifestyle opportunities, ordinary Singaporeans have become sceptical of the reasons for increasing top-level government salaries to such phenomenal heights — as copious discussions in cyberspace would indicate — boldly questioning claims about the scarcity of leadership talent and the very qualities of the leaders themselves. Apart from responding to the government's insensitivity in raising top official salaries very shortly after raising a regressive goods and services tax (GST) in 2006, Singaporeans were also critical of the official justification of high salaries as a means of preventing corruption. At about the same time, the CEO of highly successful charity organization, the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), was being investigated for corruption, revealing in the process that he earned S$600,000 a year, travelled first class, and led an organization that used only 10 per cent of donations for the direct benefit

of its kidney patients. Singaporeans were also bruised by the reported description of the CEO's salary as "peanuts" by a senior minister's wife.

Detractors and even some admirers of the PAP government would not deny that some of their political leaders have often shown themselves to be arrogant, insensitive, and lacking in compassion when they dismiss the problems and concerns of ordinary Singaporeans as irrational, self-serving, and irresponsible. Novelist Catherine Lim was rebuked severely by the government in 1994 when she ironically pointed out in a commentary published in the *Straits Times* that the government was gradually losing the affection of ordinary Singaporeans even as it continued to provide for their material well-being.[16] The government's style, Lim asserted, was "deficient in human sensitivity and feeling — 'dictatorial', 'arrogant', 'impatient', 'unforgiving', 'vindictive' ". More than a decade after these observations were made, journalist Seah Chiang Nee noted that only "a few newer MPs are social workers or people with good community links, but compassion, charity and humility generally rank low in priority in a candidate's qualities".[17]

In Singapore, the disintegrative effects of elitism have not fully set in, but the finely balanced meritocratic system is almost certainly coming under strain. The rest of this chapter will explore how the inherent contradictions bound together in meritocracy are being disarticulated by three sets of evolving circumstances that are all in some ways related to globalization: more complex national problems, more alternative world views, and a wider income gap.

## MORE COMPLEX NATIONAL PROBLEMS

In the most recent general election in 2006, the PAP won 82 out of 84 seats in Parliament and garnered 66.6 per cent of the votes, winning a very convincing popular mandate by international standards. The government's considerable authority has been largely supported over the decades by the widespread belief in the value of meritocracy and that PAP leaders embody these meritocratic ideals, not only in their displayed credentials, but also in their ability to actually solve Singapore's problems, ensure the nation's survival, and deliver material success.

1985 and 1997, however, were two critical years when Singapore's open economy was hit by a world recession and a regional financial crisis, respectively. In both instances, the Singapore economy stood resilient and emerged stronger since the crises provided occasions for implementing necessary but painful restructuring policies. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, ordinary Singaporeans

were exhorted to rally behind their government, whose wise policies, they were conditioned to think, had built a fundamentally sound economy that could weather the storm: the government, it seemed, was their best hope for survival and so they endured retrenchments, pay cuts, and reductions in employers' contributions to their CPF, all calculated to keep the economy attractive to foreign capital. Sim Soek-Fang interviewed thirty-two Singaporeans in 1997–98 and observed that

> The PAP was so ideologically successful that its citizens, despite believing that the crisis was "regional" and thus beyond the PAP's control, also believed that the PAP was the only option to lead Singapore out of the economic storm. This is a remarkable feat because it is tantamount to an ideological short-circuit: if the crisis is regional and beyond the control of the state, how can it be conquered by the PAP or by any government? Not surprisingly, the converse question of "if the government is so good, why did the crisis happen" was a thought that none of my interviewees articulated.[18]

Such ideological short-circuitry is possible as long as the technocratic government is able to keep problems more or less under control and, through the assistance of the national media, manage its public communications effectively. But as Singapore embeds itself more deeply in the networks and flows of globalization, national problems are becoming much more complex, compounded, unpredictable, perplexing, and out of any one government's control. It is too early to provide a deep and comprehensive analysis of the political impact of the current global economic crisis, but most accounts — expecting it to be long and deep — point to this as the worst that the world has ever faced. Problems of the global economy have been further compounded by the impact of natural disasters, environmental hazards, energy security issues, the global transmission of disease, and terrorism. Set deeply in all of this, the utopian project that was Singapore is transforming into a well governed but much more "normal" developed society where things cannot be perfect and a government cannot be expected to guarantee perfection. Ironically, it is the PAP government's impressive ability in the earlier decades to provide the "right" solutions, the sign of meritocracy at work and the basis of government legitimacy, that will make it harder for Singaporeans with high expectations to accept the inevitable and costly policy inefficacies and mistakes that a new security environment posing more difficult dilemmas will almost certainly bring.

## MORE ALTERNATIVE WORLD VIEWS

Singapore is today the most internet-connected country in the world. As a media hub, its people enjoy enormous access to the world's news sources. Traditional media restrictions and censorship practices, although they continue to be exercised by the government in its more authoritarian moments, cannot completely isolate Singaporeans from alternative, mainly online, news originating abroad. Online forum discussions and the "citizen journalism" of bloggers, although often criticized for lacking credibility, professional standards, and editorial review, are real competitors to mainstream state-influenced media like the *Straits Times*, *TODAY*, and MediaCorp News. Through these alternative sources, Singaporeans gain access to a range of viewpoints, ideological positions, and critical vocabularies that may not sit comfortably with Singapore's official rhetoric, including the belief in meritocracy and its practice in Singapore.[19] Alternative political websites from around the world can re-politicize the citizens of this administrative state, providing them with ideas and resources through which they can reinterpret and articulate their condition and propose political changes more effectively and forcefully.

One aspect of Singapore's practice of meritocracy that may be challenged by these alternative world views is the very notion of "merit" itself, which to the PAP government is best signalled by academic and professional credentials. In 1997, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew described the PAP's slate of MPs as "the best since the PAP first fielded candidates in 1955".[20] The twenty-four new "third-generation" leaders were all graduates, a third of whom were prestigious government scholars, including three President's scholars. The humble backgrounds of several of these new candidates were highlighted in the media; as were the various explanations given for entering politics as a moral obligation to repay society.[21]

In this administrative state, meritocratic government is conceived of mainly as a technocratic one, where leaders should have technical and specialized knowledge to deal scientifically with a modern and global society's problems whose high levels of complexity will diminish even further the usefulness and legitimacy of more widely democratic (and non-expert) involvement in national decision-making and effective policy-making. By limiting the policy-making roles to a proficient and bureaucratic elite of professionals and specialists selectively recruited and earmarked in some cases for political leadership, the administrative state strives to depoliticize policy practices in the belief that this will make them and their outcomes more "rational".

However, as government technocrats, no matter how expertly qualified, find themselves making mistakes more frequently in a less controllable global environment, and as alternative media makes these mistakes more difficult to deny or put a positive spin on, the government's political legitimacy will come under pressure. Its uncompromising claims about the need for high salaries to attract the best talent for government, for instance, will become less convincing; pointing instead to the stereotype of arrogance and insensitivity. These salary claims will also become more grating in an environment where the rising cost of living, the ostentatious lifestyles of an exclusive (often "foreign") elite, and the greater obstacles to upward mobility are transforming meritocracy into elitism, largely by silencing its egalitarian aspect. Catherine Lim's and Seah Chiang Nee's criticisms of the government's lack of empathy, compassion, and connection with ordinary people, as well as the outraged reactions of Singaporeans towards the arrogance of the privileged schoolgirl and the corrupt behaviour of the NKF's former CEO, all reflect a wider sense that merit must include more than just academic intelligence and career success.

## A WIDER INCOME GAP

In 1996, Minister George Yeo reminded the PAP to "remain true to its origins as a mass movement, inspiring and uniting all segments of our society regardless of race, language, religion, intelligence, age or gender".[22] One of the PAP government's greatest achievements was to turn the working-class masses into a middle-income society, all within a couple of decades after independence. Singapore is today popularly described as having developed "from Third World to First" and, by 1987, Lee Kuan Yew was able to describe 80 per cent of Singapore's population as "middle-class".[23]

But in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, this assertion of classlessness could no longer be sustained: the stratification of Singaporean society that was exacerbated by globalization and economic development had to be acknowledged so that it could be dealt with decisively. In a speech in 2000 to the trade unions, for instance, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted that the income gap was widening as elite and mobile Singaporeans could earn internationally competitive salaries, whilst the wages of less skilled Singaporeans were depressed by competition from the surrounding region's army of low-waged workers.[24] The hardest hit by the 1997 crisis were lower-skilled Singaporeans who also made up the majority of workers who were retrenched during the period.[25] Singapore's Department of Statistics reported

that the incomes of the lowest 20 per cent non-retiree households had generally declined from 1997 to 2005 and that the Gini coefficients among employed households had increased after 1999.[26]

TABLE 16.1
Gini Coefficients Among Employed Households

| *Year* | *Gini Coefficient* |
|---|---|
| 2000 | 0.442 |
| 2001 | 0.455 |
| 2002 | 0.455 |
| 2003 | 0.458 |
| 2004 | 0.463 |
| 2005 | 0.468 |
| 2006 | 0.472 |

*Source*: Singapore Department of Statistics.

A *Sunday Times* feature in 2007, titled "We can barely stay afloat, say low-income folk", reported a sixteen-year-high inflation rate of 3.6 per cent, a 20-per cent rise in the price of food staples, and rising petrol and electricity prices owing to "soaring" oil prices. It also reported that the monthly wages of cleaners and labourers had dropped from S$860 to S$600 since 1996.[27] In 2001, the Department of Statistics explained that the lowest 10 per cent of households "are not necessarily poor".[28] Nevertheless, the perception that conspicuously lavish global city lifestyles are out of reach of average Singaporeans can evoke a wounding sense of relative deprivation, exacerbated by their memories of having supported the government over the years and made sacrifices for their nation, including doing national service. Today, even expatriates — including the foreign talent whom the government has been eager to attract — are affected by rentals that have risen by 32.2 per cent in 2007, making Singapore the ninth most costly Asian city for expats that year.[29]

As globalization and economic development cause the income gap to widen, ordinary Singaporeans (and not just the poor) will feel relatively deprived, discontented, and even envious. Failure to address the rising cost of living will be perceived as policy ineffectiveness or even as a mistake, a perception that can eventually erode confidence in the government's ability and the purportedly meritocratic basis of this ability. Liew Kim Siong predicted, already in the early 1990s, that "the welfare question will dominate the next stage of Singapore's development, as the citizens of this got-rich-quick nation try to imagine a sense

of community".[30] As Singaporeans become more exposed to a wider range of world views, including praxially renewed ideologies that promise a viable "third way" between capitalism and socialism, the idea of state welfare can no longer be uncritically demonized.[31] In fact, Yeoh Lam Keong, a director in the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, explains in an article published by Singapore's Civil Service College why the government must rethink its "paradigm for social security": Yeoh makes some compelling welfare policy recommendations and offers reasons why Singapore has a good chance of successfully implementing them.[32] Already strained, the government's anti-welfare position shifted slightly when, in 2007, it very modestly raised the monthly public welfare allowance from S$260 to S$290 and introduced the Workfare scheme to top up the salaries of gainfully employed Singaporeans over thirty-five years of age whose salaries were S$1,500 or less. These gestures, along with monthly food handouts and occasional cash rebates are, however, still only a very basic and limited welfare provision that may not properly address the emotive concerns of Singaporeans who feel relatively disadvantaged and sceptical of meritocracy, or at least of its equal opportunities aspect.

## CONCLUSION

Meritocracy is a desirable practice that brings together the egalitarian concerns (associated with traditional socialism) with concerns about efficiency, competition, and reward (associated with traditional capitalism). The PAP government's ability to maintain this difficult balance has been challenged in recent years by a more profoundly globalizing Singapore. As policy dilemmas become more perplexing, as informational sources become more diverse and difficult to manage, and as rising income inequalities create a politics of envy and discontent, merit will be much harder to define, reward, and promote legitimately. But the government will have to find skilful ways of managing expectations and turning elitism back to meritocracy so that faith in meritocracy can be renewed as the foundation of its authority.

## NOTES

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3. Derek Wee's and Wee Shu Min's posts are reproduced on "The Hubris of a GEP student at RJC", discussion archived on Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop, <http://forums.delphiforums.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=sammyboymod&msg=121090.1> (accessed 1 November 2007).
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12. Goh, *A Developed Ecnomy*, p. 16.
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