

A36 Fed leadership debate in silly season

A37 Billionaires' latest trophies are newspapers

Keeping it real on jobs and competition

A SURVEY by this newspaper, which shows that six in 10 people think their jobs are good, reveals a high degree of job satisfaction in Singapore. The finding helps place in perspective social chatter that tends to focus on stress at work and unfair employment practices. While those concerns are not to be brushed aside, it is clear that a maturing Singapore economy has produced confident and positive workers who can work well as a team. The definition of a good job – one which offers satisfactory pay and benefits, work-life balance, good employers and colleagues, and career advancement – is a comprehensive one that encompasses almost all that an employee could ask for.

Another favourable finding – in which 60 per cent of respondents think a university degree is not needed for a good post – shows that getting paper qualifications is not the be-all and end-all of most career seekers' lives as is often believed. What would benefit the nation more, of course, is a greater emphasis on skills that a globalised marketplace needs and a good mix of talents and abilities in economic, social and cultural spheres.

Concerns expressed over the future centred on competition from foreigners and the questionable work attitude of the young. This is worrying but also ironically reassuring. Prejudice towards others and a weakening work ethic should certainly be resisted. But what is reassuring is the realism that these concerns reveal. Competition from foreigners is a fact of life and no barriers can be erected to fully insulate Singaporeans from it. The choice is between having a regulated inflow of foreigners to enhance overall capabilities and relying solely on an all-Singaporean team to play against much larger foreign competitors. Competition from both within and without can serve as an antidote for any poor work attitudes or unrealistic job expectations among younger workers.

In the final analysis, economic realism is the key attribute that younger Singaporeans will need to survive during periods of slower growth and heightened competition from abroad. The capacity to adapt to much-changed circumstances is evident in the response of several recession-hit European countries, as the International Labour Organisation notes. Wages there have been lowered through flexibility in hiring and working time, and social security contributions reduced. Europe's youth have been hit badly by unemployment, to the extent of raising fears of a "no-future generation". Younger Singaporeans can avoid that fate by not taking for granted the nation's assets and prevailing conditions. Job markets here might change as competitors acquire new capabilities or learn to do more with less.

Singapore needs a shared vision involving both its residents and its role in the world

Seizing the Singapore dream



BY INVITATION

By PARAG KHANNA
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

FOR generations, people around the world aspired to emulate the "American Dream". This fundamental ethos connotes freedom, equal opportunity and upward mobility. As the post-Cold War world became a geopolitical marketplace, however, others have begun to articulate their own visions for the future.

Soon after the launch of the euro currency, Mr Jeremy Rifkin captured the old world's ambitions for collective resurrection in his book The European Dream. More recently, China's new President Xi Jinping made global headlines by using the phrase "Chinese Dream" in his speech in March to the National People's Congress. It was an attempt to capture the national drive for sustainable prosperity and national greatness.

But large empires are not the only players entitled to dream. In an age characterised by superpowers and city-states alike, Singapore would benefit greatly from a shared vision for its residents and its role in the world. As the National Conversation sessions wind down, what vision will they offer for Singapore's next decades? How will the insights gained translate into policy? Who will be its ambassadors?

The idea for a China Dream was first developed by the Shanghai-based non-governmental organisation JUCCCE. This dynamic start-up managed a co-creation process called Dream-in-a-Box involving both officials and citizens. Indeed, even before Mr Xi's speech, the term had spread in China and inspired artists and social entrepreneurs. Beginning with a neutral facilitator, it remains a democratic flowering of ideas and projects.

China's success is not guaranteed, of course. A great many challenges lie ahead as it pursues its global agenda. But that is the point. The dream is something worth striving for. This is a good template for Singapore to follow.

Political, economic and social glue

AT A time when rapid population growth, democratic politics and a slowing economy are fuelling tension, a "Singapore Dream" represents the kind of consensus that will serve as the political, economic and social glue for the future. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has conceded that Singapore is becoming a "normal" country; a new consensus will help maintain the country's extraordinary trajectory.

Some of the buzzwords that can bring Singapore to the next level are already widely debated. These include productivity, sustainability, innovation, liveability, diversification and creativity. In terms of infrastructure, a new port is under construction, and a high-speed rail will connect Singapore with Kuala Lumpur. The MRT network is also expanding, fibre-optic coverage is nearly complete, and Jurong Island is being upgraded. There are also new commercial hubs under development from Jurong to Seletar.

On the softer side, health-care coverage is expanding, while new universities and training institutes have been launched. The housing market is also being refocused on access for the majority, and a reformulated social contract is being devised to bridge inequalities.

All of this is laudable and necessary, yet bold decisions still have to be made: What strategic sectors can generate large-scale employment in the next economic master plan? Should there be a minimum wage? What is the most appropriate immigration policy? Which additional protections and services are immediately necessary for the retired and elderly? What should be the obligations of Singapore's many wealthy foreign residents?

Answering these highly political yet socially fundamental questions is essential to achieving the Singapore Dream.

To my mind, there are at least three fundamental pillars that should be pursued.

Importance of diplomacy

THE first pillar is diplomatic. Singapore must be seen as the capital of Asia. Switzerland, Singapore's counterpart in Europe, has deftly used neutrality to thrive as a functioning democracy for more than 700 years.

There is no doubt that Singapore is Asean's beacon, but for 30 years it has also been China's. The coming decades will be different. Singapore no longer holds iconic status in China's eyes. China has already studied Singapore thoroughly and now has many friends, investors and mentors. This puts a premium on the diplomacy of multi-alignment in which Singapore must continue to attract and build strong relationships in all directions more cleverly than far larger nations.

Singapore will have ample opportunities to prove itself. These include spearheading commercial strategies across the region, helping to resolve the South China Sea dispute and hosting a potential Asian central bank to coordinate currencies. Nobody will bestow the title "Capital of Asia" on Singapore; it must seize it.

Demography and global city

THE second pillar is demographic. Being the diplomatic heart for half the world's population is possible only if Singapore embraces the responsibilities of being a global city as well.

New York and London are multinational melting pots in addition to being global financial centres. Singapore in fact has an even higher percentage of foreign-born residents, ranking only behind Dubai and Toronto. Dubai is already a place with far more international residents than domestic citizens, that is, people who have voluntarily moved there and planted roots.

Singapore is undeniably Asia's premier destination for a high quality of life. It also seems certain that it will reach a population of about eight million people in a generation, at least half of whom will be non-Singaporean. Rather than struggle against this trend, Singapore should embrace it and build for it.

Indeed, this means it could pioneer a model of stakeholdership beyond citizenship that confers obligations on all residents irrespective of their national origin. Then Singapore would truly be a leading global city, a microcosm of global society with a sense of unity despite diversity.



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A generative city

THE third pillar involves Singapore becoming the world's most generative city. This means leveraging on technology to promote innovation, sustainability and inclusiveness. The sensor networks being deployed in Singapore will eventually constitute an "Internet of Things" that manages traffic and buildings to reduce energy use and emissions, potentially even allowing for an island-wide driverless car network.

But there is also the "Internet of People" emerging by which we can geo-locate potential professional partners and tap the expertise of others far more efficiently. Enabling widespread people-centric networks will become even more critical as rates of telecommuting increase in the coming years. Broadband connectivity is becoming universal and Singapore's towns are becoming larger, more robust full-service, mixed-use communities. In a generative city, citizen-citizen and citizen-government relations are mediated equally by data and democracy.

Singapore is widely praised for being a "living lab". It is using itself as the site for grand experiments still unfolding at the intersection of technology and governance. It is an open economy in a hyper-competitive market and has a delicate balance between domestic and foreign stakeholders. Let us not forget, however, that as evidence is gathered, experiments yield results and conclusions.

Singapore became what it is today through big and risky initiatives but, equally importantly, through bold decisions. Decisiveness is the difference between policy and mere politics, between professionalism and populism. Singapore cannot sacrifice the former for the latter. America has done this, and the result has been an erosion of the American Dream.

The current National Conversation is off to a productive start. But it has brought Singapore only to the midpoint. Between now and Singapore's 50th birthday in August 2015, everyone associated with Singapore should deliberate and develop their own Singapore Dream.

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