

Opinion

By invitation

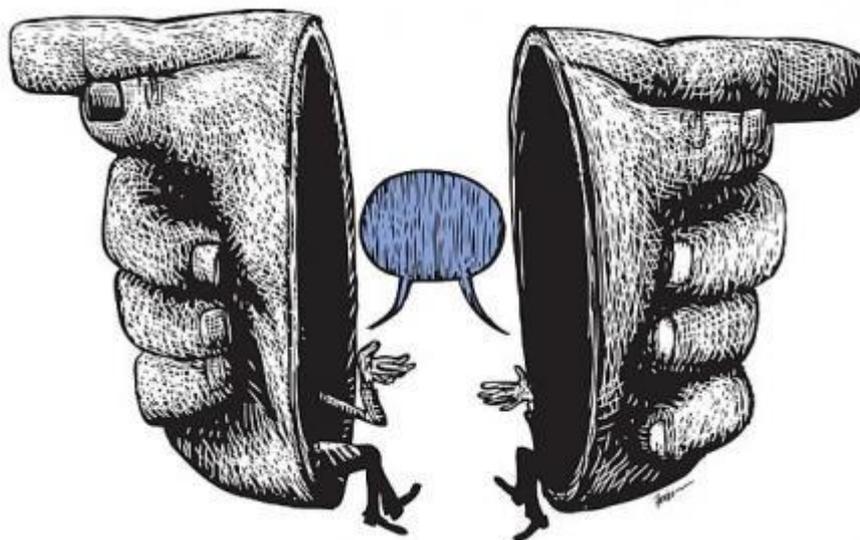
Nurturing the art of compromise

Stresses from globalisation and political transition make it essential for Singaporeans to build consensus.

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-- ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

BIG IDEA No. 8 is a difficult one: Develop the art of compromise.

Let me begin with a bold prediction about the future: As a society, Singapore will face a whole new lot of stresses and strains. There will be more fissures within Singapore society.

Some have already emerged. Hence, if we want to ensure that Singapore thrives and prospers over the next 50 years - as I do, which is why I am writing this series of articles on Big Ideas to guide Singapore into the future - we will have to develop within Singapore society the rare and difficult art of finding compromise between radically opposing positions.

There will be at least three major sources of stress for Singapore society.

The first will be the natural inflow of global stresses and strains. Our world is now experiencing greater political and economic shifts of power than it ever has in history. You

may want to read my book *The Great Convergence* to understand the scale and speed of these global changes.

Sources of stress

SINCE Singapore is one of the most open and globalised societies, it will be perfectly natural for these global stresses to flow into Singapore.

A few concrete examples will help to explain this.

Some time in the next decade, China will surpass the United States and have the world's largest economy. This will be the first time in 200 years that a non-Western power will be No. 1 in economic terms.

It would be perfectly natural for such economic shifts of power to be accompanied by geopolitical competition and conflict. And if relations become difficult between the US and China, where should Singapore stand? How will our multi-ethnic society react to this stress?

Similarly, many Singaporeans, not just Muslim Singaporeans, felt the same global outrage over the unnecessary killings of civilians in Gaza. They wanted the Government to express this outrage loudly and clearly.

Yet, Singapore also has a vital national interest in maintaining good ties with Israel, as do China and India. So how should the Government react to these conflicting pressures within Singapore society?

If, perchance, relations deteriorate between China and India as they have between China and Japan, where does Singapore society stand? In short, prepare for global stresses and strains to invade Singapore.

The second source of stress arises from the fact that Singapore society is becoming more complex - not least because we are one of the most open cities in bringing talent and ideas from the rest of the world.

Economically, this was necessary: One of the main reasons Singapore has prospered and developed rapidly in the last 50 years is that we are plugged into global networks of trade, technologies, ideas and talent.

Quite naturally, this openness has also made Singapore society more complex. For instance, we now have a large and outspoken community that feels strongly about equal rights and acceptance for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people.

This community has to live cheek by jowl with the more conservative sections of Singapore society. Inevitably, there will be stresses.

Anyone who doubts this should study the unfortunate saga of the National Library which was caught between two distinct opposing points of view. Should the book shelves of the National Library reflect the traditional views of the conservative older Singaporeans, or the new views of the globally connected and the more open and cosmopolitan younger Singaporeans?

As Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews pointed out in a recent commentary in these pages, an IPS survey showed clearly that the views of Singaporeans on many social issues are changing significantly.

A smaller percentage of each cohort of Singaporeans thought that pre-marital sex, homosexual sex, and pre-marital cohabitation were always or almost always wrong.

For example, only 28 per cent of youth thought that cohabitation was always or almost always wrong, compared with 53 per cent of the middle-aged and 63 per cent of seniors.

Thus, it is misleading to talk about a single set of "community norms". Who should arbitrate between the differing views of older and younger Singaporeans?

The third source of stress will be a natural result of the political evolution of Singapore. Clearly, we are moving away from a political environment dominated by a single strong voice to a complex political environment where there are many voices.

This is a perfectly natural result of Singapore developing a large middle-class population that wants to have a greater say in national decision-making procedures.

Political transition

FOR many years, Singapore was linked to the "four tigers" of Asia, namely South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Significantly, all the three other "tigers" have had to struggle with political transitions from a single dominant party or authority to societies with more complex political environments. All three, in different ways, have had difficulties making these transitions.

In South Korea, the political transitions were so difficult that two former presidents, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, went to jail; another, Roh Moo Hyun, committed suicide.

In Taiwan, the pro-independence antics of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian almost sparked a major international crisis.

In Hong Kong, we are seeing a remarkable degree of political polarisation that will make it difficult to select a new chief executive who will enjoy broad support.

Mr Li Ka-shing, one of Hong Kong's most prominent citizens, recently appealed for compromise in Hong Kong, saying: "A spirit of tolerance attuning our differences showcases

the strength and capacity of our shared civil society. Should we fail to nail the perfect synthesis between ideals and practicalities, we must still move forward together."

Bear in mind that there have been large-scale demonstrations in Seoul, Taipei and Hong Kong. Singapore has had a few protests at Hong Lim Park, each with attendees numbering in the thousands.

Will more widespread protest spread beyond Hong Lim Park in Singapore? We need to reflect on this possibility.

In short, there will be no shortage of stresses and strains coming our way. The big question we have to answer is this: How do we manage these stresses?

In the past, it was clear that we delegated a lot of authority to the Government to manage these stresses and strains and come up with wise answers. Those days are gone. We as citizens of Singapore have to learn the difficult art of dealing with many different voices pulling in opposing directions, and try to find a way of keeping the central consensus strong and cohesive.

This question of whether Singapore needs more contestation or consensus was the subject of a debate at the annual IPS Singapore Perspectives Conference in January. The proceedings of this debate will be published in a volume by IPS soon. It was a tough and highly contested debate.

The topic of the debate was "This conference resolves that consensus rather than contest will secure Singapore's future." IPS asked me to support this motion and Professor [Chua Beng Huat](#), my colleague from the [National University of Singapore](#) sociology department, to oppose this motion. The debate took interesting twists and turns as IPS got the audience to vote at each turn of the debate.

Before the debate began, IPS called for a vote. Both Beng Huat and I expected the civil society audience at this event to vote overwhelmingly in favour of contest over consensus. Surprisingly, they voted 274-187 in favour of consensus. After one round of debate, another vote was called. Beng Huat managed to swing the crowd, which then voted 331 to 210 in favour of contestation. This led to even more vigorous debate, which resulted in the audience shifting back to its original position and voting 316 to 232 in favour of consensus. Both Beng Huat and I were surprised by these great swings in opinion.

These swings made me wonder if there is a high degree of uncertainty in Singapore society over which direction Singapore should take in the next phase of its social and political evolution. Many acknowledge and are aware that political contestation is going to rise in Singapore. This trend is unstoppable as it is the normal global and regional trend. Singapore is just becoming a "normal" society, after decades of having what some people considered abnormal politics, with one dominant party winning landslide elections.

At the same time, we remain an exceptionally vulnerable society. As Prime Minister [Lee Hsien Loong](#) once said: "Once you think you are in a cruise ship and you are on a holiday and everything must go swimmingly well and will be attended to for you, I think you are in trouble."

When he was asked what he thought was a more appropriate metaphor, he said, "I think we have upgraded our sampan. It's Sampan 2.0."

Anyone who has been on a sampan will know that if people fight on a sampan, it will topple over. Yet, we will never ever get back the high degree of political unanimity that we enjoyed for so many decades. More fissures will emerge.

To manage these emerging fissures, we will have to develop a new political culture in Singapore: a political culture based on compromise and consensus. I believe it can be done.

It will require a lot of patience and painful cajoling to persuade Singaporeans to compromise between their many conflicting positions. And it will take at least a decade or two before this new political culture is entrenched in Singapore.

So shall we start working on it right away, and make it a key national goal for the next 50 years?

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