

**REMARKS BY DEAN KISHORE MAHBUBANI<sup>1</sup>****AT THE LAUNCH OF *GEORGE YEO ON BONSAI, BANYAN AND THE TAO*****ESPLANADE CONCERT HALL, SINGAPORE, 9<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2015**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by joining KK and George in welcoming you to this event, since the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy is also a co-host of this event. And like them, I also want to begin by apologising for this small space, but as George said, there's always some blessing somewhere. I'm so happy to see so many of you here standing, because all my life, I have dreamt of a standing ovation, and finally I'm getting it!

Anyway, more seriously, it's a huge challenge to stand up at a podium and speak after George Yeo. But I'm grateful for life's little mercies – I'm glad I'm speaking before Tommy Koh and Amartya; otherwise, life would be impossible! The big question I face now is: how can I make a contribution in five minutes? I feel that the best thing I can do is to explain why I think this book – which has a very interesting title, *Bonsai, Banyan, and the Tao* – is significant to the larger history of Singapore.

In my view, the great limitation of Singapore is that even though we've had 50 exceptional years of remarkable success, we don't have a good history book, or a good narrative of how and why Singapore succeeded. And that's why, quite often, portrayals of Singapore tend to be one-dimensional; they tend to focus on the material side – “Look at the beautiful buildings; look at Changi Airport; look at the port,” and so on and so forth. These commentators forget that Singapore, like all societies, has a hard side and a soft side, and that soft side is never actually properly brought out in the descriptions of Singapore. And that is why I think, frankly, what we need now is a good theory of Singapore's history.

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So, in just three minutes, I'm going to give you a new theory of Singapore's history.

And unless I give it a good title, you will forget it. If I say 'Collection of Four' or 'Group of Four', you will forget it. So please remember the phrase, 'The Gang of Four Theory of Singapore History'.

So, who is this 'Gang of Four'? Now, what I want to point out is that Singapore's history is unique in that we have had at least four leaders who are rather exceptional by any standards, and they are exceptional because they were not just good politicians and policymakers, but also very good writers. The two qualities do not go hand-in-hand. I can think of only other leader in Asia who stands out on both counts: Jawaharlal Nehru. It is amazing that a small island like Singapore has produced four such leaders. And I think it's this balance of being able to do both that explains why Singapore has evolved in the way that it did.

### **Lee Kuan Yew**

The first, of course, obviously, is Mr Lee Kuan Yew. And it's obviously not a secret that he was a great writer. I'll never forget a lunch I had with David Marshall in the Cricket Club over thirty years ago. Even though David Marshall was being very critical of Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the time, when I asked him, "Who do you think is the best writer Singapore has?" he said to me, "Kishore, there's absolutely no question – it's Mr Lee Kuan Yew." And so, you can see what an exceptional writer Mr Lee was, and you can see it in the recognition he received for his writing.

What you may not know is that Lee Kuan Yew credits his wife for improving his writing skills. He said, "My purpose in writing my books is to get the average 'O' level graduates ... to read it and understand it. So, my wife was my scrubber. You know, I'm an orator, or at least I try to be. So, I have [oratorical] flourishes when I speak. You must have flourishes because then you capture people's attention and you expand on it; then you're able to go back and repeat it, but not in words. So she tells me, look – and she's a draftsman; as a lawyer, she did all the drafting of agreements, contracts, conveyances and so on; so she uses words precisely – she says, 'Why do you want to write it like this? The 'O' level boy will not understand this. Why not use a simple word instead of this polysyllabic word?' So I said, okay, I agree with you and I think in

the course of the two, three years that she corrected my drafts, after the first year, I began to write simple, clear, crisp, I mean, no convoluted, sentences.”

He then went on to give advice on how to write well. In a speech to Ministers of State and senior civil service officers at the Regional Language Centre on February 27, 1979, he said: “The written English we want is clean, clear prose. I choose my words carefully – not elegant, not stylish, just clean, clear prose. It means simplifying, polishing and tightening. Remember: That which is written without much effort is seldom read with much pleasure. The more the pleasure, you can assume, as a rule of thumb, the greater the effort... Impress by the clarity of your ideas.” He also mentioned that Dr Goh Keng Swee would give a paperback copy of Gowers’ *Complete Plain Words* to “every officer whom he thinks is promising and whose minutes or papers are deficient in clarity”.

Chan Heng Chee had the opportunity to witness his writing process first-hand. She recounted that when Mr Lee started writing his memoirs in 1995, “He sent each draft chapter around to a few people to critique. I was one of them. He would revise his chapter and send it back to us to ask again: Is this better? Could he improve it further? He was a perfectionist.”

### **Goh Keng Swee**

Dr Goh Keng Swee, who’s credited with being the architect of Singapore’s economic miracle, was an equally gifted writer. He could be very colourful. In his last speech as Minister, he described well how innocent PAP Ministers were: “We were like innocent virgins roaming a brothel area. Misfortune could hardly be avoided.” Wasn’t that a powerful image?

Janadas Devan has described his writing abilities well. He wrote, “Dr Goh Keng Swee has been described as the founder of the Singapore Armed Forces, the architect of Singapore’s economy, the master builder of independent Singapore. He was also, as I have said on many occasions... a remarkably gifted writer - indeed, the most distinguished writer of English prose this country has had... Was he so effective a public servant in large part because he was so precise, so translucent, so gracious a writer? ...He was a graceful, even stylish writer, to be sure. His ear - in part because

he listened to a good deal of music, especially Baroque - was unerring. His diction and his tone had a classical purity. I don't think he ever wrote a sentence that didn't sound good.”

And that was Dr Goh Keng Swee, the hardheaded, tough-minded economic builder of Singapore.

## **S. Rajaratnam**

The third, of course, was Mr Rajaratnam. I'm sure you all know about the great speeches by Rajaratnam. He would always have a very remarkable turn of phrase. For example, when the PAP was having difficulties with JB Jeyaretnam – who was fondly known as JBJ – Mr Rajaratnam came up with a speech about the dangers of JBJ. Everyone thought he was talking about JB Jeyaretnam, but it turned out that he was talking about ‘James Bond Journalism’!

He said, “I would like to ask what I will describe as Western JBJ journalists one very pertinent question. For the clarification of those of you who may have jumped to the wrong conclusion may I explain that JBJ stands for ‘James Bond Journalism’ - a form of Western journalism now on the prowl in Asia and whose devotees believe they have a journalistic 007 licence to destroy the reputation of leaders and governments in Southeast Asia with impunity... I would like at this juncture to contrast Soviet conduct on the question of press freedom with the crude, loud-mouthed and essentially Colonel Blimpish approach of the new breed of English-speaking JBJs.”

Rajaratnam's writing also clearly expressed his moral values and great ideas. He was the one who penned the Singapore Pledge. As PM Lee Hsien Loong put it, “His strength was as a thinker and a writer, a man of honour, with great moral courage... Raja's contribution to Singapore was not in bricks and mortar, or concrete and glass. It was in ideas, sentiments and spirit, captured in words he lovingly typed out. Every day when the pledge is recited in our schools, our children are reminded to live up to our aspirations as Raja expressed them.”

## George Yeo

But the fourth man, who, I think is in many ways as gifted as these three is clearly the writer today - Mr. George Yeo. So, a round of applause for George!

It's absolutely amazing how someone who was trained in Engineering in Cambridge, and then got a Masters in Business Administration, and then went on to spend many years in the Singapore Armed Forces, turned out to be this remarkably gifted and insightful writer.

As Minister Shanmugam eloquently described him, "George is a polymath, a uniquely gifted individual of a type who comes along once in several generations. Interested in history, culture, a thinker, a true renaissance man. I can go on. But perhaps all that needs to be said is: He is irreplaceable."

And I can tell you this from personal experience. When Yugoslavia was still alive, I travelled with him to Belgrade, and a local Yugoslav guide was telling us about the history of that place. When he finished his description, George Yeo carried on! I could see that guy's jaw drop. And he said, "How do you know so much?" That's amazing.

George Yeo dedicated his brilliant and incisive intellect to the service of Singapore. His love for Singapore manifests itself not in mere words of praise for his homeland but in his honest and insightful assessment of our little red dot's place in the world and its future. For example, in the 1996 Temasek Seminar he said, "Looking back at history, no empire, nation-state, or city-state existed in the same form forever. At the most, they survive a few hundred years. The mighty Tang dynasty collapsed after 300 years. The British empire on which the sun never set fell within a period of 200 to 300 years. For city-states, the outstanding example was Venice, but even it could not withstand Napoleon's onslaught. It was subsequently absorbed into a united Italy. But Venice may rise again because the Venetian spirit lives on among its people. The point to remember is that there has been no century without war and revolution. For Singapore, our instinct must to prepare for all weather conditions. The weather will always change. It may be sunny now but it will rain. We may be in the

middle of a storm but sunshine will follow. What we must mentally prepare ourselves for is to survive both sunny weather and stormy weather, even a typhoon.”

And so we are really blessed to have, in Singapore, at least four people who’ve succeeded in being good politicians and being good policymakers, and who’ve contributed to the development of the hard side of Singapore, but equally importantly, have made an equally important contribution to the soft side of Singapore.

What made these four men quite remarkable is that they were practical men, they were men who understood history and also were very committed to Singapore.

## **1. Very practical men**

Each member of our ‘Gang of Four’ has an impressive legacy.

Lee Kuan Yew raised Singapore from Third World to First World, forged a multi-ethnic polity, helped to secure the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, set up EDB, and transformed Singapore into a clean and green city with initiatives such as cleaning up the Kallang River and moving street hawkers to hawker centres. As he said, “A blighted urban landscape, a concrete jungle, destroys the human spirit. We need the greenery of nature to lift our spirits.”

Goh Keng Swee, as we know, was the economic architect of Singapore – for example, he set up the Jurong industrial estate. He also built up the Singapore Armed Forces from scratch, envisioned the Jurong Bird Park, and spearheaded civic and moral education in schools.

As foreign minister, Rajaratnam built up the Foreign Service. He initiated diplomatic links with other countries. He also ensured that Singapore’s sovereignty was recognised by the international community, such as by helping Singapore to enter the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and of course ASEAN. He also established the culture of hard-headed and realistic analysis of geopolitical trends which has been the hallmark of our Foreign Ministry.

George Yeo also has a very concrete legacy in the form of the Esplanade and the Integrated Resorts. He also inaugurated the National Library Board and National Arts Council as Minister of Information and the Arts. He pushed for widespread Internet infrastructure in the 1990s, ensuring that Singapore would be able to join the information age. He also led the negotiations for the US-Singapore FTA.

These four leaders had clear visions and the practical ability to get things done. This was a key element of their success.

## 2. Very aware of the importance of history

The four of them were also similar in their passion for and understanding of the importance of history.

Lee Kuan Yew, for example, when he was awarded the Lincoln Medal in 2011 said, “China is an old civilisation of four to five thousand years. The country’s history and cultural records show is that when there is a strong centre (Beijing or Nanjing), the country is peaceful and prosperous. When the centre is weak, then the provinces and their counties are run by little warlords. This leads to divisions within China and weakness. This belief is deeply embedded in China’s history and culture. No central government will want the country to drift into chaos. Hence, there is unity and uniformity of thought among Chinese elites...America’s advantage is in its diversity of centres of talent. American centres of scholarship are spread widely and diverse - Eastern Seaboard and the Ivy League colleges, Western Seaboard with their Stanfords and the Berkeleys, in the North Chicago, the South Houston and other centres. The different schools of thoughts contend and, out of that contention, come new ideas, innovations and creations. Chinese tradition and culture tend to produce a more uniform Mandarinate. But it will change and catch up.” This shows his recognition of the critical importance of history to understand present-day trends.

Goh Keng Swee, of course, was a world authority on the Meiji restoration. In his celebrated book, *Wealth of East Asian Nations*, he wrote, “Meiji Japan searched far and wide in its relentless pursuit of excellence.” He added, “The Japanese also got their priorities in education right. The stress was on universal primary education, which they achieved by around 1912. Then the expansion of secondary education became

their main objective. The end to class education, together with the end of feudal restrictions on occupation, offered opportunities for upward mobility for the talented. Only when all children had received a measure of secondary education did they direct their attention to expanding university education.”

Rajaratnam was also a voracious reader and an avid student of history. I remember that every time he came to New York City, he would buy more than a hundred books on each trip from the numerous well-stocked bookshops there. In fact, his idea for Singapore’s transformation into a global city was derived from the works of British historian and classics scholar Arnold Toynbee. He said at a conference in 1977, “Some five hundred years ago world history was transformed into European history. The European actors were the stars and the rest of the world the two-bit players in a basically European drama. The European domination of world history has now come to an end.”

Today’s book’s author, Mr. George Yeo, as many of you may know, is also a scholar of history. And therefore it is fitting that he is now the chancellor of Nalanda University, replacing Amartya Sen. His love for history shone through in his speeches as well. At the Non-Aligned Movement Meeting in 2006, he said, “This is my second NAM meeting. As Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, I attended my first many years ago in 1989 in Belgrade. It was a strange experience. Tito had died. The President of Yugoslavia then was a Slovene (by rotation) who looked distinctly uncomfortable in the chair. All around the city, there were banners celebrating the 700th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Kosovo - what was that, I wondered? I read up my guide book and learnt that, in that battle, the Serbs fought heroically but lost to the invading Turks. Milosevic in 1989 was determined that the Serbs should not lose control of Kosovo which was the birthplace of their national heroes. Within a few months, the Berlin Wall came down and Yugoslavia gradually dissolved into civil war as Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina struggled to become free. How much the world has changed!”

### **3. Very committed to Singapore**

The four leaders were also very committed to Singapore. Of course, this goes without saying for our three founding fathers, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and Rajaratnam, who dedicated their lives to building Singapore from ground zero.

George Yeo inherited their legacies. He always focused on the future of the Singapore, looking ahead to what Singapore could be, and what we should do to get there. For example, he chaired the Long Term National Development Committee, which was formed in 1989 by then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. This committee crafted proposals for Singapore's future, between 1990 and 2015, in a document entitled *The Next Lap*.

On 8 June 1990, he presciently said: "Looking ahead to the next 25 years, the biggest concern of most Singaporeans, and the concern too of many foreigners, is how to replace PM Lee Kuan Yew and the other remarkable men in his generation. It is this problem I want to discuss with you today... To really endure as a nation, what we need are good institutions. Good institutions last longer than individuals. Nations with good institutions survive bad luck and bad leaders... In other words, what we should be looking for are not new Lee Kuan Yews but strong institutions. How then do we develop strong institutions?"

Even now, he is thinking about the future, especially about how to engage the new generation of Singaporeans. In his introduction to *Bonsai, Banyan and the Tao*, he wrote, "If we fail to engage and involve the young, if we only want to change them without allowing them to change us, the transition from a hierarchical to a network society will be a troubled one. It is for this reason that I support activities which encourage young Singaporeans to see Singapore's future in positive terms... If youth has no passion, society has no future."

It is clear that, contrary to what many people say about Singapore, Singapore is not an intellectual desert. I would say that Singapore is truly an intellectual garden. And the reason why we have an intellectual garden that matches the physical garden out there, is precisely because we've had these four great leaders who are gifted as politicians and as writers. For that reason, I am really happy to see this book out in print. So thank you, George, for doing this for us.