

# THE STRAITS TIMES

Oct 6, 2010 Wednesday

THINK-TANK

## **Take holistic approach to public policy** **By Kishore Mahbubani**

IF MY mother were alive today, she would be surprised to read this article. From a young age, I absorbed from her a profound respect for Western medicine. After all, it saved my life as an infant when diarrhoea led some doctors to declare that my prospects were 'hopeless'. Western medicine gave me a second life.

As I get older, I have also come to believe that Western medicine - which often treats our body as a collection of parts that can be repaired separately - can be complemented with Chinese medicine, which generally treats our body as a holistic system that must be treated as a whole, linking both the physical body and the soul or spirit. Good science also needs to be complemented with good intuition.

I begin with these analogies because I have come to believe that the principles of Chinese medicine can be applied to public policies in Singapore. There is no doubt that Singapore has done exceptionally well with its public policies; our body is not sick. But we have not achieved perfection. No state has. But as an eternal optimist, I believe that there is scope for improvement everywhere.

Take the case of transportation. There is little doubt we have done well. Each 'limb' (to use a medical analogy) of our transportation works well, from the MRT system to Electronic Road Pricing (ERP). But even 18 years ago, when I was dean of the Civil Service College, one principle of our transportation system puzzled me. It was then a holy article of faith that each 'limb' of the transportation system had to pay for itself. Hence, the surplus revenue from ERP, say, cannot be used to 'subsidise' the public bus system. Indeed, the word 'subsidy' was taboo.

In our own human body, however, there are 'subsidies' everywhere. Not all parts of our body are equally strong. The strong parts compensate for the weak. The critical thing is not whether the right arm is as strong as the left but whether the body as a whole is working well.

This is why I wonder what our conclusions would be if we viewed our transportation system holistically. Each 'limb' of our system may be working well. But does the system as a whole deliver the best results? Equally importantly, what criteria should we apply to assess the 'best results'? Should we give priority to 'efficiency' considerations? Or should we add in environmental considerations? And who should 'pay' for these additional considerations?

All these thoughts came rushing into my head when I visited the truly impressive Chinese pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. Of course, the most impressive visual display was the long video mural depicting street life in the Song dynasty. But the exhibits that really impressed me were the ones that tried to measure the carbon footprints of each mode of transportation. The Chinese also proudly displayed the electric cars they had manufactured. Indeed, they had an all-electric bus fleet on the Expo grounds.

I wondered why we could not afford to have an all-electric bus network in Singapore. In the short term, there is no doubt it would cost more than the current diesel-driven bus system. But there would be many other public policy benefits that would compensate for these higher financial costs -

including cleaner air and being seen to be an environmentally responsible global citizen. It is little things like that that root people to their soil.

I should emphasise that I have chosen transportation only as an illustrative example. This principle of 'holistic' analysis can be applied to all other public policy sectors.

Take education: In a brilliant op-ed piece in The Business Times last month, a PhD student at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Ms Leong Ching, argued that a comprehensive review of Singapore's education should look not only at the \$8.037 billion that the Government spends on public education, but also at the additional \$820 million that Singaporean parents spend on private tuition. She did not use any medical analogies but the image of the parasitical limb of private education undermining the main body of public education occurred to me. Shouldn't we look at both when we evaluate the state of education in Singapore?

I firmly believe that a 'holistic' analysis of our public policies will eventually create a better Singapore. Why? When we do a holistic analysis, we have to factor in non-material considerations of ethics and values, as well as social considerations. Simply relying on economic principles or on the forces of the market would be incomplete, if not downright wrong. Hence, in our public policies, we must give increasing weight to the intangible.

A greater infusion of ethical considerations will also strengthen the soul of Singapore. And if we want Singapore to survive and thrive over the long run, the fundamental question we should ask is whether 'holistically' our policies are strengthening or undermining the 'soul' of Singapore.

Transportation, education, environmental and so on, are different systems within a larger Singaporean body. These systems - like the respiratory, circulatory, digestive and reproductive systems of the human body - are interrelated and must be treated as a whole.

Singapore has made enormous progress in the first 50 years by successfully finding the right answers to the urgent questions we faced in our early days. Over the next 50 years, we should try to find the right questions to ask before we begin trying to find the right answers.

The writer is the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.