THE STRAITS TIMES

Let's talk about policy failures and the elected presidency

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PUBLISHED JAN 18, 2016, 5:00 AM SGT

On Friday, President Tony Tan Keng Yam delivered an address to open the 13th Parliament, in which he highlighted the need for political change and referred to the elected presidential system. In this article written before that presidential address, the writer calls for a U-turn on the elected presidency.

It is now January 2016. Singapore's jubilee year SG50 is over. SG51 has begun. We must now begin preparing for SG100.

To do so, we must switch gears, going from celebration to reflection. We must think hard about new approaches and policies we need to adopt to keep Singapore successful.

One thing is absolutely certain. If we believe that we can sail into the next 50 years with the same set of policies that made us successful in the first 50 years, we are headed for trouble.

We could very well replicate the Kodak experience. Kodak was once one of the world's most successful and admired companies. It became complacent. It refused to change course when circumstances changed. Today, Kodak is history.

To begin our process of reflection, we should do an objective audit of our successes and failures over the first 50 years. Of all the countries in the world, we can be the boldest in doing such an objective audit, as our successes far outnumber our failures. As I said in a Huffington Post article ("Why Singapore is the World's Most Successful Society"), Singapore can well claim to be the most successful nation in human history. With such a sterling record, we have little to fear about speaking about our failures.

Yet, it is also a fact that we have been reluctant to speak about our failures. To the best of my knowledge, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has been the most open in speaking about our mistakes. As he said during the heat of the 2011 General Election campaign: "We're sorry we didn't get it exactly right, but I hope you'll understand and bear with us, because we're trying our best to fix the problems. We made mistakes, we have slip-ups. We must apologise, acknowledge, put it right."

It was truly honourable for PM to apologise for mistakes made by the Government. However, when we do our objective audit of successes and failures, we should not feel any obligation to apologise for previous errors. Eliciting apologies is not the objective of this audit. Indeed, it is human to err. As we are human, we have naturally committed errors. Some initially successful policies can turn out to be errors when they are mechanically and unthinkingly applied even after circumstances have changed.

STOP AT TWO POLICY

Take our population policy, for example. Initially, our policy of "stop at two" was remarkably successful. The Stop at Two campaign ran from 1972 (when the crude birth rate was 23.1 per 1,000) to 1987 (by which time it had fallen to 16.6 per 1,000). Given its success, we kept on going with it. Sadly, we woke up too late to realise that it had been too successful. Hence, when we finally made the U-turn and tried to encourage people to have more babies, we were too late. The momentum towards falling fertility rates, and eventually population reduction, had become too strong.

Should we blame someone for not making the U-turn fast enough? No! We should absolutely not do so. The policymakers then were making decisions based on the best evidence and knowledge they had. Also, when we turn this audit into a blame game, people will naturally become reluctant to open up and speak about their mistakes.

Yet, it is very healthy for both individuals and societies to admit to their failures. I recently read the speech Steve Jobs gave at the Stanford Commencement ceremony in June 2005. It is a truly moving speech. In it, he admits that he was "a very public failure" when he first got fired from Apple. He even thought about running away rather than confronting his failures. After some reflection, it began to dawn on him that "getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me". In short, learning from failure can be a reinvigorating experience.

THE DANGER OF A ROGUE PRESIDENT

To get the process going, it may be best to start on a bold note. We must be prepared to consider whether some of our "sacred cow" policies may have indeed become failures, even though the intentions and goals behind them may have been perfectly valid. Let me suggest one such policy that we should revisit: the elected presidency.

The intention behind setting up the elected presidency was perfectly honourable. As Singapore has accumulated significant reserves, a clear danger had emerged that a rogue government could be elected that would spend away all these hard-earned reserves. Hence, an elected presidency was created so that a "second key" would be needed and the president's consent required before the

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Government of the day could spend past reserves. In theory, this idea could not be faulted.

In practice, it may turn out to be faulty. While we worried about a rogue government in the past, we did not consider the possibility that a rogue president could be elected. It is true that democratic electorates can display wisdom. They demonstrated this when they gave the People's Action Party government a solid mandate in the 2015 elections. Sadly, it is also true that democratic electorates can display a lack of wisdom. Populations do succumb to charming, charismatic and populist politicians. We saw this in Thailand when then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was elected. Why should a population not vote for a populist leader who promises to improve their lives immediately with cash handouts?

It is true that our elected presidency does not allow the president to open the coffers with his single key. Yet, the election of a figure who is opposed to the responsible government in power can create painful political tensions. As many democracies, including some in our region, have fallen under the spell of populist politicians, it would be a mistake to assume that Singapore is naturally immune to this.

Let me add here that I am not the first to suggest that our policy of an elected presidency should be revisited. Janadas Devan and Ho Kwon Ping published an article on Sept 3, 2011 ， in The Straits Times saying that the 2011 presidential election here "was a divisive and highly politicised affair. Two words describe its outcome: confused and unfortunate".

LET PARLIAMENT ELECT PRESIDENT

Hence, we should seriously consider the possibility that the time has come to do a U-turn on the elected presidency. Here, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We can go back to the old practice of having the Parliament elect the president. Many good presidents were chosen by Parliament, including Mr Yusof Ishak, Dr Benjamin Sheares, Mr Devan Nair and Mr Wee Kim Wee.

At the same time, there is wisdom in Singapore choosing presidents through Parliament. This will enable us to choose them on the basis of merit, not popularity. In a multiracial society such as ours, there is also merit in rotating the president among the different ethnic groups. For example, our last

Malay president, Mr Yusof Ishak, was president from 1965 to 1970. The time may have come for another Malay president.

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in an interview with The Straits Times on the elected presidency on Aug 12, 1999, also noted the importance of presidents coming from minority communities. He said: "I think it's time to remind Singaporeans that we are a multiracial community. And it's also good. It's a symbolic expression of our national identity."

We will not be the first Commonwealth democracy to see the merit of having a member from a minority to be the symbol of the nation. From 1999 to 2005, Canada had Ms Adrienne Clarkson, a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong, as its governor-general.

Similarly, New Zealand has chosen members from minorities to be its governor-general: Sir Anand Satyanand (2006-2011) is Indo-Fijian and Sir Jeremiah Mateparae (2011-ongoing) is Maori.

There is no doubt that we need to have a robust debate in Singapore before we change course on the elected presidency. The people must be psychologically prepared before any such big change is made. And when we have the debate, we should not make it a "blame game". The authors of the elected presidency had honourable intentions. Yet, it may not have turned out to be one of our wisest policy decisions.

If we can admit that even a "sacred cow" policy such as the elected presidency may have been a failure, we will open the doors for others to speak out about other possible failures in the first 50 years of our independence. As Steve Jobs said, admitting to failures can provide a sense of relief and allow us to move on.

To understand the power of this point, look at the opposite case. For reasons that continue to elude me, most contemporary Japanese governments are reluctant to admit that the Japanese governments of 1930 to 1945 made serious mistakes in the build-up to World War II. This reluctance means that each Japanese government has to bear the cross of defending previous governments.

We should avoid this mistake. Instead, we should tell our historians and public policy scholars: please feel free to discuss our failures of the past 50 years. This will liberate us from the past and allow us to focus on the future.

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