

By Invitation

## The road to a car-less Singapore

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Kishore Mahbubani

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**Just as Singapore achieved stellar public housing and economic development standards, it can strive for an excellent public transport system that would do away with the need for people to own cars**

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"I have a dream."

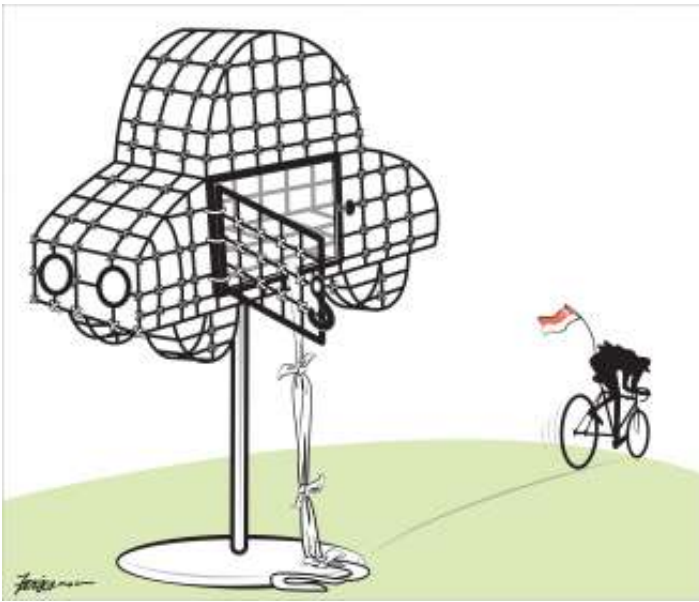
Martin Luther King made these few words famous. His dream of African-American emancipation seemed impossible in 1963. Yet, a few decades later, Barack Obama became president. Impossible dreams can come true. I hope that my impossible dream will also come true.

In 2050, no Singaporean will own private cars.

Yes, there will be cars on the roads. But all these cars will be shared self-driven cars which we will summon with our smartphones. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology study has shown that with a shared fleet, the number of vehicles in Singapore can go down from 900,000 to 300,000. With fewer cars, we can cut the amount of land we devote to roads from 12 per cent to as little as 6 per cent. That's a massive amount of new space for parks, cycling and jogging tracks, and even air-conditioned walkways. Singaporeans will gain a significant psychological boost from all this open space and greenery.

How can we make this impossible dream come true? The first step is clear. We have to stop worshipping our cars. In theory, a car is a functional instrument, just like a refrigerator, washing machine or hairdryer. We don't worship our hairdryers or washing machines. Yet, many Singaporeans wake up early every Sunday to polish their cars!

The dream of car ownership is an American dream. It makes sense that cars are integral to American life, where spaces are vast and there is



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so much land. It's no wonder so many American writers have been inspired to write about going on the open road, including Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jack Kerouac.

But Singapore is tiny. If each Singapore household has two cars, like most American households do, there would be a whopping 2.4 million cars creating perpetual gridlock on our roads. It will be a living hell.

On the other hand, if only half of the population own cars, the half who do not own cars will feel perpetually unhappy and deprived. In short, if we persist in dreaming the American dream in land-scarce Singapore, we are creating a formula for perpetual unhappiness. That is why we have to give up this American dream of car ownership.

To do so, we need a viable alternative. The second step to achieving a zero-car-ownership society is thus to build the world's best ecosystem of public transport, in which the trains, buses and taxis are all integrated into one seamless system.

We are well equipped to do this, because we already have the world's best public service. The impressive quality of mind in our public service allows it to implement government policies efficiently.

On the other hand, our private sector is not considered the best in the world. If our public sector works much better than our private sector, why are we asking our private sector to take care of our public transport? Why not de-privatise public transport?

The third step to achieving a zero-car-ownership society is to place our public transport system in the hands of a new public sector agency which can handle all the public transport limbs and integrate them into one ecosystem.

We have done this before, when we created the Housing Board to handle public housing. HDB went on to create the safest and cleanest public housing combined with the highest level of home ownership in the world.

We also created the Economic Development Board (EDB) to promote the economic development of Singapore by providing a single window for all foreign investment in Singapore. EDB helped our small country of five million people attract more foreign investment than Indonesia, which has 250 million people.

Similarly, a Public Transport Board (PTB) could be created to manage all the limbs of our public transport, merging all the trains, buses, taxis and shared vehicles in Singapore (including bicycles and scooters for hire). The goal of this system would be to provide all the mobility that Singapore citizens need while gradually reducing the need or incentives for private car ownership.

The reason why we can dream this impossible dream in 2015 and not in 1975 or 1985 is that modern technology is changing faster. I was in Silicon Valley in October and saw first-hand what great strides Google and Tesla have made with self-driving cars. Several think-tanks and consulting companies have already begun studying the likely impact of self-driving cars.

For example, Deloitte has named many benefits of a shared, driverless fleet - including sharp drops in commuting costs, the number of traffic accidents, the number of broken traffic laws, the number of jams, and the amount of vehicle emissions (as much as 90 per cent). Underserved segments of society, such as seniors, can become more mobile.

Autonomous systems can even increase the speed and reduce the cost of deliveries.

The time is also ripe for a change in the public transport ecosystem because with the appearance of services such as Airbnb and Uber, people's attitude towards ownership is changing. Private homes and cars can become hotels and taxis because it has become financially rational to blur those lines. And it is certainly more rational for Singaporean households to shift to public transport. It costs about \$20,000 a year to own a Toyota Camry - more when you include varying costs like maintenance, fuel, parking and Electronic Road Pricing. On the other hand, it costs \$1,440 per person annually to buy an Adult Monthly Travel Pass from TransitLink, which allows for unlimited train and bus rides. We may never actually get to zero-car ownership. But even if we get near there, it would be a truly remarkable accomplishment.

The benefits of developing the world's best ecosystem of public transport are clear. We will get the best mobility of any city anywhere in the world. We will have zero traffic jams and will never have to worry about arriving late anywhere. This will enhance the economic efficiency of Singapore and make us an even more attractive destination for high-value-added investments.

But these material gains are less important than the spiritual gains.

When we worship material goods like cars, we will be perpetually unhappy. Someone else will always have a better car than ours. Through the ages, the great philosophers have always said that happiness never comes from owning things. Ancient Greek philosopher Democritus said: "Happiness resides not in possessions, and not in gold; happiness dwells in the soul."

John Ruskin said: "Every increased possession loads us with new weariness." And Bertrand Russell said: "It is the preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly."

Happiness does not come from owning the most expensive car, but from living a life of greater meaning and purpose. And developing the best ecosystem of public transport in the world will help us gain meaning and purpose in our lives.

If we are as successful with PTB as we have been with HDB and EDB, and we end up with an even cleaner and greener city with no traffic fumes and no traffic jams, we will create the most admired city on planet earth. We will have provided an alternative model for the Asian cities around us that are suffering because of massive traffic jams, such as Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila, New Delhi and Beijing.

Asia is urbanising quickly. Of the 10 most populous cities in the world, seven are in Asia. The World Bank has found that from 2000 to 2010, nearly 200 million people moved to urban areas in East Asia. Meanwhile, the urban population in South Asia grew by 130 million between 2001 and 2011, and will rise by nearly 250 million by 2030.

At the same time, the Asian middle class is growing rapidly. Brookings Institution's Homi Kharas estimates that by 2030, Asia will account for 64 per cent of the global middle class, and over 40 per cent of global middle-class consumption. These middle-class urbanites are still holding on to the American dream of private car ownership. And as they fulfil their individual American dreams, they create living nightmares in their cities.

Singapore's new world-class ecosystem of public transport can serve as an alternative dream for humanity. Just imagine how much better our planet earth will be if the new Asian middle classes decide to copy the new Singapore dream of zero-car ownership. The true road to happiness always comes from helping others. If tiny Singapore can help humanity, we will become the happiest people in the world.

**• The writer is Dean of the LKY School of Public Policy, NUS, and the author of Can Singapore Survive? This essay is adapted from his opening address to the Land Transport Authority symposium on The Future of Mobility.**