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2010

Civil Society Sector and Political Change: An Interview with Catherine Lim

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Citation

Lien Centre for Social Innovation. Civil Society Sector and Political Change: An Interview with Catherine Lim. (2010). *Social Space*. 10-13.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research/69

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CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR & POLITICAL CHANGE

An Interview with Catherine Lim



Singapore is a society undergoing transitions. With a burgeoning migrant community, the advent of integrated resorts with casinos and an arguably increasingly effervescent non-profit, civil society sector, Singapore looks to be a society that is rapidly opening up. Yet, as writer and political commentator Catherine Lim controversially proposes, civil society and non-profit activists cannot create change without getting their voices heard and actively participating in the political process. She shares with Social Space, her thoughts on the indispensable ingredients for openness and political engagement in a society that wants to be truly global.

SS: Has Singapore become a more open society?

CL: I think it's incipient. Things are changing and moving in a positive direction. This has nothing to do with any noble change of mindset on the part of the government. It is the inevitable effect of opening up, which is what the government knows people want. I was surprised to hear the Prime Minister say in January (2010) that he would focus on economic restructuring, addressing demographic changes and "updating the political system."¹ The government is also changing its tack because it knows that the profile of voters has changed. There are many young netizens nowadays and the government knows it has to engage them and win them over. However, it seems to me they are good at giving a semblance of openness without relinquishing much real power. They are not even devious about it! I like them for their honesty and lack of pretense in this respect.

The reason is that our leaders are not comfortable with "mess." In January (2010), George Yeo made a speech in which he remarked that we must be prepared to have a little bit of messiness.² This was the first time I have heard a minister say it. But it will still be a controlled mess and for me, that is a mockery. My thesis is this: For the government's own survival, they need to allow for some disruption, to a degree which they can handle.

As it stands, the environment in this country does not allow for an open discussion of serious matters, let alone disruption. For example, there are no political clubs. In the past we had the Socratic Circle and the Roundtable. Nothing of that kind exists, not even in the universities. There is no foment, no excitement amongst students. To me this apathy is a bad sign because social and political awareness usually begins in the tertiary educational institutions.

Catherine Lim

Catherine Lim is a Singaporean writer, poet and political commentator. To date, she has published nine collections of short stories, five novels, two collections of poetry and numerous political commentaries, published in Singapore's English language daily, The Straits Times. Ms Lim was awarded the Southeast Asia Write Award in 1999 and an Honorary Doctorate in Literature by Murdoch University, Australia in 2000. In 2005 she was appointed an Ambassador for the Hans Christian Andersen Foundation in Copenhagen.

Instead, everything is now on the Internet, which I am wary of, because there is a lot of scurrilous rubbish online under the cover of anonymity.

SS: What are the ingredients needed for society to be more open?

CL: A change of mind-set on the part of the government. The media and the related institutions still take their cue from the government, which also needs to change. As for the general community, there are too few voices to really make an impact.

SS: Since 2007, the Economic Development Board has been on a strong drive to woo international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to Singapore. Does this spell the flowering of the civil society sector?

CL: My concern is that the growth and development you describe is being seen by people as a general opening up. I take great pains to emphasise that this is not the case. The government might even be happy that this is happening because they can retort to naysayers that we are opening up. I feel things are probably worse than before, in that the government is more perturbed now. If such organisations had a mandate to implement change in Singapore, they would not have been allowed into the country in the first place. People have a calculus, an abacus to measure pros and cons. So such organisations see the pros in this country – the rule of law, favourable tax regime, efficiency, the idea that Singapore honours its word and does a great deal of humanitarian work across the world. This does not go unnoticed by organisations that choose to set up in Singapore.

SS: But if NGOs can move fluidly from providing services to advocating for the needy, is this not a form of activism?

CL: First, while they are doing fantastic work, I don't see the impact on the political arena. In order to be effectual, NGOs have to steer clear of politically sensitive areas. In that respect, I think they are still hampered by the out-of-bounds markers. Second, the government is genuinely concerned about doing things well. So if the non-profit and social service sectors you refer to are identifying lacunae and omissions in existing programmes, the government would appreciate being told that something is amiss. However, this is not political activism. I do believe that the government has great respect for civil organisations and activity. But it draws the line there and insists that such organisations must remain non-political.

SS: Is the civil necessarily political?

CL: The political element is important. You can have any amount of civic activities – for example, the arts, education, and humanitarian work. But as long as you draw a line, a society cannot flourish and create institutions dedicated to self-reform.

SS: What limitations do you see in the current model of governance?

CL: The checks and balances do not belong to the people. The people are told they must make money and be responsible citizens. Presumably, the latter means Singaporeans must “vote responsibly” once every 5 years. The government has also come out to say that if it is found to be corrupt or incompetent, it should be voted out, because it deserves it. At the same time, the current administration knows that the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) cannot exist in its current form indefinitely. The party is engaged in a process of self-renewal, but self-renewal to their image. This leads to the perpetuation of a trusting citizenry that has received no real political education. Trusting power is a terrible thing. You are better off distrusting power in the long-run.

SS: What is the missing piece in the relationship between the government and the people?

CL: The climate of fear is still too prevalent. Self-censorship is prompted by this and it serves the government's purpose. People are afraid to vote for the opposition because they have sons or daughters with government jobs and they worry they will be jeopardised.

SS: Doesn't this fear presume that our vote is not secret and that our government is unforgiving of citizens who do not vote for them?

CL: Absolutely. I am sure the government is a little bit embarrassed by this perception at this juncture. I am used as an example of political openness because I say what I want to say and nothing happens to me. But the government speaks from the perspective of comparing Singapore to police states where if you say anything to challenge the ruling regime, you are thrown into jail. Singapore is a part of the free world and we should not be comparing ourselves to police states.

SS: What features of practicing democracies do you think Singapore ought to adopt more of its practices from?

CL: Institutions of self-reform, as I call them. First, we need greater press freedom. Second, we should have the right to freedom of assembly and demonstration. We should even allow things like political cartooning.

SS: Why is the right to demonstrate important?

CL: It is people's way of expressing sentiments and ideas in avenues that are not otherwise open to them. The government always retorts by stating that such voices should be expressed in Parliament and that such individuals should join politics. But democracy does not require one to join politics and speak in Parliament. People should be free to express their views. Of course, a line should be drawn when violence and vindictiveness come into play. Apart from greater freedom of speech regarding local politics and issues, I also think we need to cultivate an environment in which young Singaporeans are free to express their views on global developments, crises and politics. The existing approach to censorship is self-defeating. I think we are witnessing the psychological consequences of this kind of continual repression on the Internet. The pure vitriol and scathing hatred online is, I believe, the result of all that pent-up emotion. I don't like this kind of writing because it is neither principled, nor informed.

SS: Does our government and our society as a whole consciously tell its youth to give up all manner of ideals to focus solely on personal gain?

CL: Yes, I think that is what they are doing. There is plenty of lip-service to altruism. But primarily, we're driven by self-interest with respect to protecting and perpetuating the well-being of our family. Parents I know will not speak out if it will compromise their children's careers. Similarly, peers of mine have said they will migrate if their children migrate. For many of us, we care about what the government does on the basis of how it affects the family and particularly one's children. The national impulse will never gain ascendancy over the maternal impulse.

SS: So do you believe that the lack of civil resilience is because everyone is dependent on the government?

CL: Yes. The only way things work with the government is if a particular attitude or action leads to greater economic stability, which in turn leads to greater political stability. Each rides on the other and the economic imperative is paramount. We see this with the arts as well. The government is not particularly fond of the arts, but they appreciate it if it is good for business, as it draws people to Singapore. They don't seem to care

too much for literature because it has no real value as a tourist attraction! Theatre and the performing arts are much more saleable. So this civil society movement we're talking about, if the government believes that it will enable economic growth and promote political stability and social harmony, they will most definitely support it.

SS: What are your impressions upon reading the Forum Page of the Straits Times? What does it tell you about the people of Singapore and the press?

CL: I can see that it is very controlled. My sense is that the letters have been filtered and carefully selected. If the public becomes sceptical, occasionally, they allow a hard-hitting letter in. Unfortunately, this is a newspaper that will never allow really critical letters that will create a ruckus to be published in the Forum page. The PAP and the media, in short, will never allow the publication of questions for which they are not prepared to give the answers. My sense is that the government controls the questions as well.

SS: Are the Speaker's Corner and the loosening hold on civil society merely token gestures as well?

CL: Yes I do believe they are token gestures. The out-of-bounds markers are still firmly in place and there is no sign that the government is prepared to relinquish some of those markers. You still cannot say anything in a concrete way about government probity.³ But in a free society you should be able to say these things and be refuted by government in an open manner.

SS: Statistics show that about 1,000 Singaporeans give up their citizenship each year, and that up to 8,000 people a year are applying for foreign residency abroad.⁴ What are your thoughts regarding these developments?

CL: I think the government will have to act if large numbers emigrate. For their immediate purposes in terms of votes, they have to pay attention to what young Singaporeans think and feel. Singaporeans feel loyal to the good life that the PAP has given them. If the good life disappears or changes too dramatically, they too will leave. The current scenario, namely the migration you speak of, reveals a side of the Singapore psyche that is somewhat petty, namely, that we've cultivated resentment against people who leave and do not come back. There is a sense of small-mindedness and envy. I think this has to do with the materialism that is dominant in Singapore. If your singular point of reference is your house and your ability to upgrade, it fosters that kind of mean-spiritedness.

SS: What is your observation of the values of Singapore society?

CL: The values are so top-down, I am unsure of how genuine they are.

SS: What are these values?

CL: Meritocracy, fairness, efficiency, competency, honesty, discipline and hard work; the Confucian virtues of loyalty and community. These have all been handed top-down. What is missing is authenticity. The government has never said “be yourself.” They have never encouraged Singaporeans to develop as individuals. If somehow, through that process, the individual clashes with community, these two forces have to negotiate on how to accommodate each other. But we have never heard this from the government and Singaporeans never question these assumptions or values. The government instead presents two scenarios: you can either have a free society with messiness and instability or you can have what we give. They treat it as though the options are mutually exclusive, which does not have to be the case.

SS: What, in your opinion, will be the consequence of this?

CL: The very scenario the government is concerned about, namely the splintering of our society, may ironically be instigated by the policy they have implemented. This is because the government has created a politically naive society that will support even a corrupt leader if he or she wears the mantle of the PAP. So what we will have is a vulnerable society pincer between two very large powers – namely China and India – and with Malaysia to the north. So in the event of a crisis, wealthier Singaporeans are likely to leave the country because they have second homes. They will make no fuss. If the situation improves, they will consider returning. But they will

play it safe. The ones who remain behind will be the disaffected and disenfranchised and that will be a terrible scenario for Singapore.

SS: Do you think the Singapore government prefers a politically naive society to one that may splinter along ethnic and religious lines, for example, like what is occurring in Malaysia?

CL: I am going to fault that kind of argument because this is the famous policy of pre-emption. The government looks five steps ahead and nips social and political processes in the bud. You are punishing potential. So in actual fact, it isn't even real critics who are penalised, it is people showing potential to become critics. There will be mischief makers. But the government has sophisticated people in its Cabinet and an equally thorough surveillance mechanism. So the government can deal with the problem as and when it arises. You cannot kill off the bud due to the fear of some toxic, poisonous plant taking bloom.

SS: Despite your criticisms and concerns, what are you optimistic about and what do you hope for, in terms of Singapore's future?

CL: I am one of the greatest apologists, defenders and supporters of the existing government when it comes to the work that has been done here to assure the material well-being of Singaporeans. I can't think of a more conscientious group of people who will work hard to ensure this. My only wish is that they balance all this tremendous achievement with the issues we've discussed, so that we have a less asymmetrical state of affairs. My other wish is that we make more room for dissidents, whom I think of as the mutant genes in a society. Many of them may not be likable people, but my plea is this - allow these people to have their voice and their space. I believe change is going to come from them.

¹ Prime Minister's Office, Singapore. “Transcript of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Speech at Singapore Perspectives 2010 at Raffles Convention Centre on January 25, 2010.” <http://j.mp/97Cmsg>.

Teo Xuanwei and Loh Dylan, “Ng: Competition is Good for Politics in Singapore.” *TODAY newspaper*, April 12, 2010.

² St. Joseph's Institution. “Transcript of Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo at the Inaugural Fullerton-SJI Leadership Lecture, January 22, 2010”. <http://tinyurl.com/sji-george-yeo-speech>.

³ Philip Bowring, “All in the Family.” *International Herald Tribune*, February 15, 2010. <http://j.mp/ctQx7r>.

Clark Hoyt, “Censored in Singapore.” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/opinion/04pubed.html>.

⁴ “About 1,000 Singaporeans give up their citizenship each year.” *Channel News Asia*, July 21, 2008.

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