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'Environment' as a social concern: Democratising public arenas in Singapore?

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This paper explores the question of who defines the agenda of envi-
ronmental concerns in Singapore. It argues that the state plays an in-
ordinately large role in defining the agenda and implementing the so-
lutions. Few other competing environmental agendas have been set in
alternative public arenas. While this has worked generally well in Sin-
gapore, there are larger roles for environmental groups, businesses and
industries, and other bodies to play. It is in the enlarged roles of these
bodies that the hope for a greater democratization of public arenas in
Singapore lies.

Introduction

The roots of environmentalism stretch back historically, but the "envi-
ronment" as a public concern has emerged only recently in Singapore.
Nonetheless, the idea has provided abundant grist for the analytical mill.
This paper is but one addition to the growing literature that addresses
the problems of the environment in Singapore from a social perspective
(see, for example, Tyabji 1991; Kong and Yeoh 1992; Savage 1993;
Savage and Kong 1993).

My concern here, however, is to focus on the hitherto little-explored
area of the power of social groups in defining the nature of public con-
cern and ultimately resource allocation in environmental management.
Specifically, I wish to explore the question of who defines and acts on
the agenda of environmental concerns *vis-à-vis* developmental goals, and
relatedly, how "democratic" a process this agenda-setting should be.
These issues become particularly important when we acknowledge that
a fluctuating degree of public concern about the environment is often
a poor indicator of the exact state of the environment. What such fluc-

tuation indicates instead

> is something about the political processes which facilitate, accommo-
> date and enable the temporary prominence of certain concerns in ...
> the public arenas. (Hansen 1993, p. xv)

Indeed, the fall of certain issues from prominence in public arenas is
often a reflection of the fact that they have been overtaken or crowded
out by other issues.

To shed light on these questions in the context of Singapore, I adopt
Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) conceptualization of "public arena" as that
through which social problems become defined and are brought to so-
ciety's attention for action. Public arenas, they argue, generally have lim-
ited carrying capacity, so that there is competition between different
issues for "space" on the social and political agenda. Consequently, those
groups with the power and voice will be able to push certain agendas
while less powerful groups may find themselves with little space to pro-
mote theirs. The process of agenda-setting is more frequently an un-
democratic one.

With regard to Singapore's environmental concerns, I will argue that
the existing political institutions[1] play an inordinately large role in iden-
tifying and facilitating the implementation of the solutions, often,
though not invariably, to good effect.[2] In the current situation, it has
been necessary for the state to take the lead and set the agenda (Savage
and Kong 1993). In what follows, I will illustrate the paramount role
of the state in Singapore's environmental change and management in
relation to the existence of public concern and debate. Specifically, I will
illustrate how sustained interest by environmental groups cannot ensure
that they can set the environmental agendas nor that the agendas they
set are effectively acted upon. In the case of businesses and industries,
while some businesses may genuinely encourage public participation in
environmentally friendly behaviour, there are others for which environ-
mental concerns are glosses for economic gains. It is possible that once
international and national attention begins to turn from environmen-
tal concerns, publicity campaigns and marketing strategies will quickly
shift as well. Nevertheless, I will argue that while the paramount role
of the state is justified, there are still larger roles for both environmen-

tal groups and businesses and industries to play, and it is partially through their enlarged roles that there can be a greater democratization of public arenas in Singapore.

The Role of the State: Urban and Environmental Planning

The state's influence on Singapore's environmental balance sheet can be understood in terms of the nature of environmental management and policy changes. Environmental management encompasses two major directions: the eradication of pollutive and unhygienic sources and the creation of a clean and green city. In relation to the former measure, the government has, amongst other things, cleared slums and squatter settlements, particularly in the central urban area; introduced improved housing conditions through the Housing and Development Board (HDB); phased out pollutive activities such as pig and duck farming as well as backyard trades and industries; cleaned up polluted waterways; and introduced a plethora of laws to ensure that minimum standards of environmental health are maintained (Appendix 1). In turn, the Garden City Concept of 1965 has guided the large-scale planting of trees and shrubs over the island to counteract the harsh urban environment, and to provide protection from the sun and glare (Yeh 1989).

One of the earliest measures to ensure control of air pollution is the Clean Air Act of 1971. To enforce the rules, written permission from the Anti-Pollution Unit (APU) is needed to occupy premises that are sources of pollution and to carry out alterations of, and extensions to, manufacturing plants. The APU also screens applications for setting up new factories and industrial establishments. In addition, there are routine inspections and spot checks on pollutive industries. There are similar controls over air pollution from mobile sources, primarily motor vehicles. Starting from January 1982, cars of three to ten years old have to pass a vehicle examination every two years and cars over ten years of age have to pass the same examination every year before road tax licences can be renewed, to ensure carbon monoxide and smoke emissions are kept at an acceptable level (Chia and Chionh 1987, p. 131).

However, while there are government structures to support environmental goals, Singaporeans are far from having cultivated a sense of

environmental consciousness and responsibility. As Dr Ahmad Mattar, the former Environment Minister, has pointed out, Singaporeans have not acted out of any genuine concern for the environment (Ministry of Communications and Information, 1990), but out of fear of legal and fiscal indictments. For example, when the Ministry of the Environment increased dumping fees by 33 per cent from 1 April 1991, rubbish contractors suddenly saw the value in recycling and began to sort, grade, and re-sell metal frames and salvage plastic waste materials such as bottles and shopping bags for export to recycling plants in Indonesia (*Straits Times*, 17 May 1991, p. 25). Similarly, it was only when the price of leaded petrol was raised above that of unleaded petrol in February 1991 that 55 per cent of motorists began to switch to unleaded petrol. The compelling influence of economic motivation above ecological consciousness is best expressed by a Ministry of Environment official who suggested that

> if people cannot be persuaded by education, you'll have to reach them
> where it hurts them the most — their wallets. (*Straits Times*, 23
> March 1991, p. 23)

Nonetheless, besides monetary fines, the government has attempted to inculcate a sense of environmental consciousness by public campaigns and exhibitions (Tyabji 1991; *Straits Times*, 3 March 1991).

While Singapore generally has a good record in environmental management, it is also a fact that large tracts of natural areas and habitats were destroyed in the relentless drive towards urban and economic development (Kong and Yeoh 1992). The proportion of land mass covered by forests decreased from 6.5 per cent in 1960 to 4.6 per cent in 1990, while the proportion covered by swamps dropped from 7.9 to 2.5 per cent within the same period. Correspondingly, the proportion of built-up area almost doubled from 27.9 per cent in 1960 to 49.1 per cent in 1990 (Wong 1989, p. 774; *Singapore Facts and Pictures*, 1990). The conflict between pragmatic development considerations and natural conservation has generally seen the triumph of the former. For example, public petitions were put to the Ministry of National Development in 1984 and later in 1990 to reconsider the decision to develop Kranji marshes. The various development claims included those of Singapore

Telecom and Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), both of which intended to build transmission towers there. The Ministry's response was that the substantial costs and the land constraints made it impractical to retain the area as a natural reserve (*Straits Times*, 15 October 1990, p. 21).

Environmental Groups

Turning now to the role of the environmental groups, let me deal with some concepts in pressure group politics in order to comment on the ways these groups operate. One typology distinguishes between "insiders" and "outsiders". Insider groups, according to Cracknell are those

> which have regular access to, and dialogue with, the bureaucracy, and who belong to policy communities. They may be "expert" organizations who are invited to contribute to governmental committees because their knowledgeability is recognized. ... [the] group's values will have to show some congruence with those of the government department concerned and the group must also be willing to play by the rules the bureaucracy sets down. (1993, p. 15)

There may be different degrees of insideness; sometimes, groups are given token insider positions, which emasculate them without offering any real rewards. On the other hand, there are outsider groups that adopt strategies that force the hand of the government. For example, they may encourage public outrage through the mass media, hoping therefore to get a quick commitment to action. These groups are invariably confrontational. However, their effectiveness is not guaranteed because there can be a conflict between "commanding attention" and "claiming legitimacy". In other words, by attempting to command attention through the media, civil servants and politicians have an opportunity to construct the claim-makers as irrational, and thus not deserving serious attention (Greenberg 1985). Such groups thus risk losing public sympathy.

   The few existing environmental groups in Singapore all operate primarily from insider positions. They generally do not define the agenda but participate in programmes set by the state. The two most important groups are the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) and the National

Council on the Environment (NCE). The NSS, first known as the Singapore branch of the Malayan Nature Society, has been in operation since 1954. The group is dedicated to the "study, conservation and enjoyment of our natural heritage in Singapore, Malaysia and the surrounding Southeast Asian region" (Briffett 1990, p. 7). As part of the NSS, Jalan Hijau (meaning "green way" or "green road") was formed in 1991 as a sub-group by volunteers to improve environmental awareness and encourage environmentally friendly life-styles among Singaporeans. Still in its infancy, Jalan Hijau has brought out Singapore's first green directory, a 48-page booklet containing over 200 listings of waste recyclers and second-hand goods dealers and simple tips on environmental issues.

The NSS was, up till ten years ago, a nature appreciation group. It was only in the early 1980s when the Serangoon estuary, Singapore's most bountiful bird habitat, was destroyed by development that the society awoke to the need to have its voice heard. From the start, the NSS operated primarily from an "insider" position, going by the rules set down by the bureaucracy. In all their efforts, they consciously shied away from being labelled a "pressure group" and preferred to engage in behind-the-scenes lobbying. In this way, they have succeeded in winning a certain degree of trust with the state, as reflected in the government's acceptance of the NSS's 1988 proposal to conserve Sungei Buloh. This relationship has encouraged the NSS to move closer towards setting its own environmental agenda, as reflected in its 1990 Master Plan on conservation, which identified areas of ecological value to be preserved. The Plan was endorsed by the then Environment Minister, Dr Ahmad Mattar, who urged government departments and statutory boards to adopt it.

If the NSS functions primarily as an insider group, the NCE, a non-profit, non-government organization established in 1989 to "[improve] awareness, concern and responsibility for the environment" (*Straits Times*, 14 November 1991), is even more readily identifiable as such. The Council comprises nineteen members and reads like a corporate Who's Who, including those from industry, government ministries, academic institutions, and trade associations. Apart from its role in Singa-

pore's annual Clean and Green Week[3] (the Ministry of Environment being the other major partner), little is heard in public arenas about the NCE and its activities. The NCE's role in one of Singapore's major "environmental events" is largely an administrative one, while the government is perceived to have given Clean and Green Week its kick-start (*Straits Times*, 9 November 1992). This feeds effectively into Singaporeans' perception that protecting the environment is largely the government's responsibility (*Straits Times*, 9 November 1992). That the NCE is housed in the Ministry of Environment building reinforces all the more the perception of its insider position *vis-à-vis* the state.

While the insider position has the merits of avoiding open confrontation with the state, few environmental groups are actually consulted before policy is drafted "at the point at which real influence can best be exercised" (Cracknell 1993, p. 18). Often, such groups are called upon to testify before committees. But this is more for providing information rather than defining and negotiating the problem at hand. In Singapore while the NSS's Master Plan is favourably received, it is also one document amongst many in the Concept Plan committee's deliberations and at the end of the day most recommendations are in fact rejected.

Businesses and Industries

In recent years, businesses and industries in Singapore have become increasingly involved in the "environmental act": by encouraging public participation in environmentally friendly activities; by offering financial assistance to environmental projects; by investments in environmentally friendly plants; and by growing commitment to environmental auditing. I shall turn to the first and second activities as they are clearly relevant to the question of encouraging democratic participation.

Nippon Paint Singapore adopted a marketing strategy during the Clean and Green Week in 1992, ostensibly aimed at encouraging public participation in environmentally friendly activities. Specifically, it enticed Singaporeans to use "environmentally friendly, long-lasting, quality paint" by offering the "Green Card", a scratch-and-win card, with cash prizes totalling S$155,000 (*Straits Times*, 8 November 1992). Such a campaign did little to inculcate an attitude of environmental con-

sciousness. A similar idea was introduced in Hongkong Bank's "Care-for-nature" MasterCard issues. While half the annual fee of the card goes into the "Care-for-nature" Trust Fund that the bank has set up, the scheme ironically encourages consumption while touting conservation, as each time a cardholder spends using the card, a percentage of each purchase will automatically be contributed to the Fund.

While such schemes raise questions regarding their profit motivation, there are others that deserve mentioning. For example, the forty British Petroleum (BP) stations island-wide have since November 1991 been equipped with recycling bins for collecting paper and drink cans. To further encourage participation, free drinks and gifts were given out during the Clean and Green Week in 1991. Proceeds from the project were turned over to the National Parks Board. BP recycling centres were also set up in public areas such as hawker centres, carparks, and mass rapid transit (MRT) stations (*Straits Times*, 5 and 6 November 1991). Apart from these efforts, businesses and industries have also provided sponsorship for environmental projects. Hongkong Bank and Shell Petroleum Company have financed such projects, and this has encouraged individuals, schools, and community groups that "want to do something for the environment but lack money" (*Straits Times*, 24 October 1992) to participate in such programmes.

Conclusion

In Singapore, as in any highly concentrated urban centre, the onus of maintaining harmonious human-environment relationships cannot be left to *ad hoc* interests of the community. The importance of politically enlightened institutional direction cannot be overemphasized. As Hawley (1986) has pointed out, complex urban ecosystem problems demand that people come together as a polity to deal with their needs and problems. In practical terms, Professor Tommy Koh, Singapore's Ambassador-at-large has argued that only when there is a fundamental change in thinking at the top can there be balance between economic progress and protection of the earth (*Straits Times*, 20 April 1991). In this sense, Singapore's leaders have expressed well generally in word and deed their commitment to environmental protection.

This said, more good can be achieved if public arenas were further democratized. Environmental groups, as well as businesses and industries can contribute in their different ways towards agenda-setting, policy implementation, as well as social education in Singapore. Clearly, the same can be said of the mass media and the research and scientific community. When combined with political will, urban ecosystem problem-solving may be less daunting than it now seems.

NOTES

1. By "political institutions", I adopt Miliband's (1969, p. 46) definition of the state as including the government (the executive), the legislature (parliament), the bureaucracy, the judiciary, police, and armed forces.
2. Indeed, the considerable role of the state reflects the broader political culture in Singapore where issues ranging from public urban plans to private reproduction behaviour have been subject to state scrutiny and direction.
3. The aim of Clean and Green Week is to educate Singaporeans to be environmentally responsible.

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Appendix 1
Some Legislation Relevant to Singapore's Environment

Clean Air Act, 1971
   Clean Air Act (Amendment), 1975 (Better control of air pollution and more effective enforcement)
   Clean Air Act (Amendment of Schedule) Notification, S.127/1980 (Stricter control of the storage of toxic and volatile substances)
   Clean Air (Standards) Regulations, S.14/1972 (Allowable emission limits set for various industrial pollutants)
   Clean Air (Standards) (Amendment) Regulations, S.43/1978 (Stricter control over the emission of certain air pollutants)
   Clean Air (Prohibition on the Use of Open Fires) Order, S.38/1973

Environmental Public Health Act, 1968
   Environmental Public Health (Hawkers) Regulations, 1969

Environmental Public Health (Markets) Regulations, 1969
Environmental Public Health (Public Cleansing) Regulations, 1970
Environmental Public Health (Food Handlers) Regulations, 1973
Environmental Public Health (Food Establishments) Regulations, 1973
Environmental Public Health (Funeral Parlours) Regulations, 1973 ·
Environmental Public Health (Crematoria) Regulations, 1973
Environmental Public Health (Cemeteries) Regulations, 1978
Environmental Public Health (Swimming Pools) Regulations, 1979

Factories Act, 1973

Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) Rules, S.345/1974

Port of Singapore Authority Act, 1971

Prevention of Pollution of the Sea Act, 1971
Prevention of Pollution of the Sea (Amendment) Act, 1976
Prevention of Pollution of the Sea Regulations, S.254/1976 (Oil refineries to keep
an adequate stock of readily usable dispersants for combating pollution)
Prevention of the Pollution of the Sea (Amendment) Regulations, S.320/1983
(Tug boats also have to keep a stock of readily usable dispersants)

Radiation Protection Act, 1973

Water Pollution Control and Drainage Act, 1975
Sanitary Appliances and Water Charges Regulations, 1975
Trade Effluent Regulations, 1976
Sanitary Plumbing and Drainage System Regulations, 1976
Sewage Treatment Plants Regulations, 1976
Surface Water Drainage Regulations, 1976