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Make sure all kinds of voices are heard

Tan K. B. EUGENE

Singapore Management University, eugene@smu.edu.sg

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THE SINGAPORE CONVERSATION

Make sure all kinds of voices are heard

EUGENE K B TAN



The national conversation endeavour, which is taking place at a time when Singapore is at a crossroads — politically, economically and socially — has generated a fair bit of excitement, but also the usual cynicism among some Singaporeans about the utility of such an exercise. Expectations are varied, and managing them will be a key challenge.

On Saturday, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat announced the composition of the 26-member committee that will help spearhead the conversation on Singapore's future.

While it is not possible for such a committee to be completely representative, it was a missed opportunity that government critics and Opposition politicians were not included.

Mr Heng explained that the national

● Eugene K B Tan is Assistant Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University, and a Nominated Member of Parliament.

conversation is not a partisan exercise. Yet, the fact is that over a quarter, or seven out of its 26 members, are political office-holders from the People's Action Party Government.

The Singapore conversation should aspire to be multipartisan in outlook and approach. This would help the committee to reach out to a wider group of Singaporeans and engender buy-in for the engagement process as well as the outcomes.

The reality is that the vision for Singapore will be inflected by one's political views of what type of society we should be.

I hope that the Opposition parties and other civil society and interest groups will take part in this national endeavour and submit their inputs to the committee. Collectively, they will represent a broad spectrum of Singaporean society and I hope they will see themselves as stakeholders.

Looking at the committee's composition, the accent on youth is also evident. Most members were born post-1965 and the oldest (actress Lim Ru Ping) is a relatively youthful 61 years of age.

But the dialogue about our future has to include the past, present and future. Any vision outlined will be path-dependent on the past and present. Furthermore, there will be far more Singaporeans aged 60 and above in 20 years' time than there are today.

HOW WILL DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS BE PICKED?

The national conversation will proceed in two stages: The first is gathering broad views on the kind of Singapore citizens would like to see in the 2030s. The second will see deeper discussions on key themes. There will be the ubiquitous social media platforms for Singaporeans to offer their views, and at least 30 dialogue sessions, conducted in the different languages and dialects, of between 50 and 150 persons each time.

So far, the modalities point to a process that seeks to be as inclusive as possible. However, the devil is in the details. How will the dialogue participants be picked? Will they, for example, be selected through the parastatal institutions like the People's Association? How will the sessions

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be conducted?

For the national conversation to be truly all embracing, it must not be one where the “converted” are dialoguing with the “converted”. Neither should it be one where the “vocal minority” are given a larger prominence than is merited.

There is a need to reach out to the “silent majority” as well as those critical of government policies. The process should not exclude focus group discussions.

EXAMINE THE CORE VALUES

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has indicated that the national conversation cannot undermine the core values such as meritocracy, multi-racialism and financial prudence, adding that “within these broad principles, we should review what needs to change and where we should act more boldly”.

While the core values are critical to our well-being, surely the conversation must be open to examining how those values can be refined and tweaked to serve us better?

If we assume that the core values as they are being practised cannot be improved, then this imposes a severe inherent limitation.

Take, for example, meritocracy. Given the likelihood of persistent and significant income inequalities in Singapore for the foreseeable future, our system of meritocracy can potentially be divisive if it results in a permanent underclass. So, while we insist on meritocracy as a cardinal organising principle of our multiracial society, how we practise it is crucial in the final analysis.

So long as a minority genuinely believes that the meritocratic system makes it difficult for them to progress, even if the majority of Singaporeans think otherwise, cohesion would be undermined.

Ordinary citizens should have a say in what happens in Singapore. This will contribute towards active citizenship and a strong sense of ownership of our common destiny, especially as we approach the golden jubilee of our independence.

‘HORIZONTAL’ CONVERSATION TOO

I hope that the national conversation will not be the only conversation taking place in the next 12 months. Neither should it be a “vertical” one between the committee (and the Government) and Singaporeans.

Rather, it should catalyse many conversations among Singaporeans of all backgrounds. These “horizontal” conversations are no less important than the formal ones and will enrich the consensus-building process.

Qualitatively, the national conversation should be characterised by robust debates, in which groups contest each other based on their competing, sometimes conflicting, needs and aspirations. I hope we can thus nurture a healthy culture of debate in a milieu of civility, respect and tolerance. Even if we do not agree, we should seek to understand the basis for the other party's views, and agreeing to disagree is not necessarily a poor outcome.

Debates and consensus-building are not zero-sum games. In a more diverse and complex nation, it is ultimately about Singaporeans engaging with each other with open minds, and going beyond the form to the substance of the Singapore that we want to nurture.