

The Singapore Story

A new narrative, a new story that can engage the younger generation, is needed



YEOW LAY HWEI

I am always amused by how much we are “mesmerised” by numbers, statistics and rankings.

National Day Rally speeches of the past have often contained a spreadsheet of growth numbers, figures and facts.

So it was indeed quite a change at this year’s Rally that the focus was not on macroeconomic numbers and statistics to convince the people that the Government is well aware of the problems and doing the right things but instead relying on narrating a few heart-warming stories of new immigrants making contributions to the Singapore economy and a difference to the society.

However, from the vitriolic comments in parts of cyberspace after the National Day Rally, and the ongoing discussions about citizens and foreign talent, one could not help but wonder if the message has indeed gotten across.

I also have a nagging feeling that the unhappiness about the large influx of foreigners is only a symptom of some larger issues and questions. It is not about us and them, but it is a question of who we are, what kind of society we want to build and what kind of Singapore we want to have.

I have been brought up to believe wholeheartedly the Singapore story, “From Third World to First”. I have no doubts that many people born in the ‘40s to ‘60s have also bought into the narrative of a highly capable, determined, and incorruptible



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Government that transformed Singapore from Third World to First in a matter of decades. The “Third World to First” story engages my generation and those borne at a time when Singapore was indeed struggling to emerge from the Third World.

However, for the younger generation who were born when Singapore was already a First-World nation, this story no longer engages. The question for many of us is what and where we go from here. We now have to think of a narrative that will take us from First World to XXX – the unknown? We need a new narrative, a new story that can engage. And this story can no longer be written by the Government alone.

I have my doubts that a narrative that continues to start with “The PAP Government will do this and that ...” will continue to engage citizens. Our society is much more diverse, our people are much more educated, the issues we have to deal with are far more complex and the world has become smaller. The story that can engage our imagination must begin with a “WE”. It

has to be a story that as many people who want to participate in the writing must be given the opportunity to do so.

It has to be a story that we all believe in.

Over the years, the Government has no doubt become more consultative and made serious attempts to explain its policies. Yet as the distance-based fare controversy shows, much more needs to be done in the communication.

Similarly, in the story on the need for immigrants, we have been told out of the blue that Singapore needs to have 6.5 million people and then when things get a little too crowded for comfort, we were told maybe 5.5 million is enough. How are these numbers derived? What assumptions went into the modelling to arrive at these figures?

With a far more diverse audience, the Government needs not only to communicate clearly, credibly, and intelligently, but also deliver it with empathy and humility.

Mr Jean Chalaby, an academic specialising on media history and transnational media, said in one of his articles how the fate of

governments are “inextricably intertwined” with the structure and capacity of communications. This may seem a little too far-fetched in our context, but it is a sober reminder of the importance of good communication.

There will also be Singaporeans who are not content with only being told why policies are made in the first place. They want to be consulted and engaged in meaningful debates, and they are the ones who want to participate actively in the writing the Singapore story.

It is not enough to tell these people – come and join the Government or enter politics if you want to shape the policy agenda and decide on the future of Singapore. We have to find other ways to engage those who do not want to be full-time politicians or Government officials.

The Government is certainly making efforts to consult, but besides strengthening Government-to-citizen consultation, we need to also find space and develop processes to allow citizens to engage one another directly.

Will the Government have enough trust and faith in its ability and capacity to reach out to a more diverse and demanding citizenry through better communication, meaningful consultation and active engagement? Will the citizens have the Singapore spirit to make things work and do things the right way?

These are essential questions that will decide if Singapore will move from being First World in infrastructure and have the hardware to be the best in civic consciousness, community spirit, graciousness and a welcoming place for all. ■

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

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