



A Man of His Time: Mr Lee Kuan Yew (1923 - 2015)

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

MR LEE KUAN YEW, our founding Prime Minister, left us on 23 March 2015. As a leader and statesman, Mr Lee was unique and to many, a nonpareil. And so are his many achievements for Singapore. Like a magical football team, Mr Lee, with the help of his able teammates, made all the right decisions that transformed this country from a third world entrepot into a first world city state. The achievement, as one commentator put it, was completely disproportionate to the size of Singapore.

Indeed, much has been said and written about Mr Lee's remarkable achievements and contributions. But a reflection on Mr Lee in *SMA News* would not be complete without mentioning the pivotal role he played in shaping the

policies responsible for transforming our healthcare system into one of the best and most efficient in the world.

Under his leadership, the Government started off on the right footing by first focusing on basic public health needs such as clean drinking water, proper sanitation, and vaccination programmes for infectious diseases. Appropriate resources were diverted to strengthen and subsidise public primary and acute care services. The overall impact of legislations to curtail tobacco consumption and to criminalise misuse of drugs on the health of Singaporeans is significant but often underappreciated. Developing a 3M system (Medisave, MediShield and Medifund) that emphasised a balance between dependence on the state



and individual responsibility, Mr Lee and his government were successful in persuading the people of Singapore to be accountable for their own healthcare. Many difficult but good decisions at managing cost and patient expectations kept the public healthcare system effective yet sustainable. By being open to talent, the Singapore healthcare system continued to attract brilliant and dedicated professionals from other countries.

Today, Singapore boasts of a world-class healthcare system which is both safe and effective, while remaining affordable and accessible to every Singaporean. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that many of these fundamental guiding principles laid down by Mr Lee Kuan Yew have remained relevant and important today, even as we begin to tackle a different set of healthcare challenges related to a rapidly ageing population and the consequent need for the integration of healthcare services.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew will always be remembered for his achievements and how he has continuously transformed and improved our lives through one record-breaking statistic after another. But what distinguishes Mr Lee from many other leaders before and after him, goes beyond mere achievements and abilities. A Singapore diplomat was once asked how Singapore was able to be different and became so much more successful in its nation building and economic development than many countries in a similar economic

league in the 1960s. The answer went something like this: "You could say it was a sheer miracle – that a group of politicians under the leadership of Mr Lee Kuan Yew came into power and miraculously, none of them were interested in making money for themselves. All they cared for was the survival of Singapore and its people. It was a miracle considering how rampantly institutionalised corruption was in other third world countries at that era. By the sociopolitical norms at that time, this group of incorruptible leaders was simply an anomaly... almost insane!" Mr Lee has ensured that zero tolerance for corruption and nepotism becomes the key guiding principle for anything Singapore, earning the envy and disbelief of other nations.

At the SMA Annual Dinner 2012, when the Association conferred on Mr Lee its highest award, SMA Honorary Membership, we made it clear that it was not just for his achievements and contributions to Singapore, but also for his ideals, values and principles. In the citation for Mr Lee, we listed five of these upon which the success of Singapore has been built – "the rule of law", "a largely corruption-free society", "meritocracy", "interracial and inter-religious harmony" and "affordable political campaigning, election rules and processes where all political parties and aspiring politicians can have a contest of ideas and win the ballot, without raising large amounts of money". These values, principles and ideals that had become very much a part of Mr Lee and what he represented, will stand the test of time, and will continue to serve and guide the people of Singapore, long after his passing.

Many will recall how, at that annual dinner, Mr Lee was so inspired by the occasion that he delivered an impromptu

but no less insightful speech upon receiving his Honorary Membership. He reiterated the importance of bringing home Singaporeans training for their medical degree abroad, and attracting those from countries with similar cultures so as to better serve older Singaporeans. He also exhorted doctors in Singapore to uphold the high standard of professional care and ethical practice, and strive to be the centre for medical excellence in this part of the world. His speech that night showed how proud and satisfied he was in witnessing the journey taken by the medical profession in Singapore since the early days when MRCP was still a rare achievement. It also revealed in him a deep sense of concern for the future of the profession and for Singapore, and a strong determination to strive for the best interests of this nation and her people. This was the hallmark of Mr Lee's career in the past 60 plus years.

Mr Lee's continuing legacy

True to his constant desire to make Singapore a better place, Mr Lee Kuan Yew has continued to serve the country even after his passing. The outpouring of genuine grief and sadness in the week of mourning following his demise was unprecedented. Singaporeans were galvanised closer together, in a remarkable show of solidarity, as they mourned for their loss. The sheer number of Singaporeans who subjected themselves to hours of queuing under harsh weather conditions just to pay their last respects and to say their last goodbye surprised even the sceptics. Many Singaporeans were genuinely surprised by the degree of sadness and the sense of indebtedness they were experiencing.

Somehow, through Mr Lee's passing, the virtues of gratitude, altruism and the communal spirit of *gotong royong* were rediscovered. Mr Lee's passing also offered many, who until then were either ignorant or disinterested, an intense yet valuable lesson on the history of modern Singapore. Through the biographical account of Mr Lee's life and political career, viewers were also given a historical narrative of Singapore's fragile past, and will hopefully learn to appreciate its success story today in the appropriate context.

The revelations and stories read and heard during the week of mourning following Mr Lee's passing have also given many people a better idea of him beyond the image of an intellectual leader with steely determination. We learnt that like many of us, he enjoyed family life and was the model husband, father and grandfather to his wife, children and grandchildren. Like some of us, he too enjoyed playing golf and a good chocolate dessert after dinner. We learnt that he also had friends, though he generally kept the engagements at an intellectual and professional level. We also learned from reports that he was always grateful and had never forgotten those who had been generous, kind and helpful to Singapore. In a different world or under different circumstances, he

might have chosen to lead a "normal" life like any one of us. That his life was devoted to and occupied solely by concerns for the well-being of this country and her people was a matter of personal choice – a choice that he made decades ago and never looked back. Throughout his life, he was motivated by an intense desire to promote the long term interests of Singapore and her citizens.

Life for this city state without our founding Prime Minister has finally begun. But we should not fear, for his most valuable gift to us, besides the gift of a successful first world nation, are his values, principles and ideals that will help us ride the future waves of challenges and find our way, emerging even stronger and more resilient.

As Mr Lee once said, with much optimism:

"For the young, let me tell you the sky has turned brighter. There's a glorious rainbow that beckons those with the spirit of adventure. And there are rich findings at the end of the rainbow. To the young and to the not so old, look at the horizon, follow that rainbow, go ride it."

Thank you Mr Lee Kuan Yew, for the bright sky and rainbow you have given us after years of selfless public service. The best way we can honour you is by picking ourselves up from our grief and becoming more resilient and cohesive as a nation, as we search for the bright sky ourselves, guided by your ideals, principles and values.

May you rest in peace, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. ■



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