

AS THE CASKET BEARING LEE KUAN YEW'S body made its way through the streets of Singapore, the rain was heavy and, for such a somber day, perhaps fitting. Among the pallbearers helping Lee's casket reach its final resting place that day was Lim Siong Guan, who had served as Lee's first Principal Private Secretary from 1978 to 1981.

From that secretarial position, Lim embarked on a public service career that one regional publication described as "impeccable." He served as a permanent secretary at four separate ministries: Defence, the Prime Minister's Office, Education and Finance. He chaired Singapore's Inland Revenue Authority and its Economic Development Board, the government's lead agency in promoting Singapore's position as a hub for global business. Lim also became the Head of Singapore's Civil Service—a civil service that is regarded by many as the best in the world. From 2007 until his retirement in 2016, Lim served as President of GIC, one of Singapore's sovereign wealth funds, and among the most reputable in the world.

Since 2005, Lim has served as a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy of the National University of Singapore—a role he still holds today—and he's co-authored a number of books with his daughter Joanne H. Lim, including *Winning with Honour: In Relationships, Family, Organisations, Leadership, and Life*.

Such a career—and that version skips over a number of senior roles—can make it difficult to narrow down a list of questions to ask. The flip side, as a recent conversation with Brunswick demonstrated, is that it's almost impossible to find a question about Singapore's history, government or marketplace on which Lim won't have a thoughtful view.

There's been a library's worth of analysis on Singapore's success. Is there a decision Singapore made, or a moment in its history, whose importance you think often gets overlooked?

Independence came to Singapore in August 1965. It was unexpected, unplanned and, in many ways, unwelcome. Two critical decisions were made for Singapore's way forward.

The first was that Singapore decided to market itself as a strong nation brand of trustworthiness. The government and the people would deliver on their promises, are reliable and dependable, would work hard and pay attention to quality and excellence. A strong nation brand attracts foreign investors, foreign talent, tourists and, in later years, wealth for management in Singapore.



Can Singapore Fall?

Few know Singapore's story as intimately as does **LIM SIONG GUAN**, whose 37-year career in government included senior roles at most every key ministry or institution.

The second: Singapore adopted an ideology of governance based on integration rather than assimilation. Ours was not to be the melting pot of races and cultures, but an acceptance of racial and religious diversity as the way of life in our social framework.

There has similarly been an abundance of writing about Lee Kuan Yew's leadership decisions and his leadership style. You worked as his Principal Private Secretary for years. What's a lesson you think most people fail to appreciate about his approach?

Two points. First, corporate leaders may seek better results through culling their poorer performers. But countries must not think this way: Governing a country must provide for everyone. Trust has to be won at every level.

Second, effective communication is absolutely critical: It is communication that seeks to convince and not just inform. Lee Kuan Yew was always mindful about whom he was speaking to: their concerns, their hopes and what would be reassuring for them.

In 2018, you published a series of lectures titled *Can Singapore Fall?* Introducing those lectures, you wrote, “the answer can only be, ‘of course it can.’ The real challenge is to find a way to think and act so as to minimize the likelihood of Singapore falling.” You published that before COVID, before the war in Ukraine, before China-US relations reached today’s tensions ... Do you think Singapore’s chances of falling have meaningfully changed since 2018? And do you see the greatest threat as coming from outside Singapore, or within it?

The most critical point I sought to make in the lectures was for Singapore to learn from history: that success is secured through economic growth which provided for jobs, housing, education, healthcare and so on, but failure follows through social decline due to lack of attention to social divides, whether it be caused by economic or behavioral factors.

Economic growth may be secured rather quickly; social divides tend to grow slowly, and quick fixes could be delusory.

Looked at in these terms of economic growth and social decline, I do not think that Singapore’s chances of falling have meaningfully changed since my lectures in 2018: The external threats are of course discomfiting, but I hope they would not distract us from tackling the internal threats of social division which can destroy the peace and harmony Singapore has enjoyed for more than half a century.

To me, so long as Singapore keeps up its practice of always envisioning the long term, positions itself to effectively address the evolving problems in good time, and recognizes that complacency and a loss of agility to change and adjust are the greatest dangers for Singapore, we can look to the future with cautious hope and confidence.

Singapore thrives on globalization. Yet global trade flows and financial flows have fallen from their peak levels, and some countries are enacting protectionist policies. Do you think the world is retreating from globalization—and if it is, what do you think it means for Singapore’s future?

Yes, the world is retreating from globalization. Bearing in mind that globalization has always been a chase for economies of production and of markets, the question is whether Singapore will still be able to find opportunities in these spaces. Southeast Asia, for example, will likely be one of the highest growth areas of the middle class in the world, and Singapore could well find opportunities from being at the center of this growth opportunity, both in terms of

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EDWARD STEPHENS

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high-end manufacturing, and of knowledge- and technology-based services. The key to success will depend very much on Singapore having an open mind on opportunities, and the agility for adjustment in policy and response. It won’t be easy, like all major change is never easy. The question boils down to whether Singapore can still “win the competition” in a situation where every nation will be suffering the consequences of deglobalization.

What’s the most common mistake you’ve seen multinational businesses in Singapore make?

As multinational businesses overwhelmingly have their headquarters in the developed economies, the people in their headquarters need to be very circumspect when deciding what to do with their subsidiaries. They need to be sure they have well understood their possibilities for using Singapore to improve their global competitiveness before they make any decision to cut back on their Singapore presence.

In this regard, they will be more likely to make the right decisions if they think in terms of the long term rather than simply in reaction to their short-term pressures, and if they consult closely with their people in the region rather than simply decide at headquarters. In Singapore, they will find an acute understanding of their business pressures and a perennial effort to help businesses survive and do well.

“How can I help you do your job better?” A profile of you said that was the most common question you asked team members. And yet, I think few workers hear their leaders ask that—even if most of those leaders have heard about the importance of humility and asking questions. What explains the disconnect, and can it be closed through training? Can leaders be taught to become more inquisitive, humble?

It may be that too many of us are taken up by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which posits that our highest need is “Self-Actualization.” Later research suggests that Maslow’s list is incomplete, and that our highest need is in fact the quality of “Transcendence,” which is to look for the well-being of others instead of just being concentrated on ourselves.

We all can intuitively identify with the value of “Transcendence,” because one of our greatest sources of joy and satisfaction in our lives is when someone turns to us and says, “You have made a real difference to my life.” Training can make us more aware of the value of helping others, but a desire to help others in whatever way we can is more a matter of the heart than it is a matter of what we know. ♦