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## **Reflections on Lee Kuan Yew: His Legacy on the Public Service**

*By Eddie Teo*

### **Synopsis**

*Mr Lee Kuan Yew made the Public Service an efficient and honest institution, globally respected and second to none, which could work with the political leadership to ensure Singapore's survival, sovereignty and independence.*

### **Commentary**

THERE IS much that Singapore and Singaporeans have to thank Mr. Lee Kuan Yew for. Today, I wish to thank him for what he has done for the Public Service. He laid the foundation, and built the first few stories of an institution that is now globally respected, second to none, and the envy of many governments. By the time I joined, in 1970, Mr Lee already had 11 years to shape the Public Service into one which he thought Singapore should have - an efficient and honest institution which could work closely with the politicians to ensure Singapore's survival, sovereignty and independence.

Right from the start, Mr. Lee was very clear that the Public Service should be cleaned up and turned into an incorruptible and meritocratic institution. As former president SR Nathan said, Mr. Lee was not so much a visionary, as someone who had the uncanny ability to anticipate, prepare for, and solve problems, for the nation. He lived, thought, felt and breathed for Singapore, 24/7.

### **For Singapore's survival and progress**

He knew that for Singapore's survival and continued progress, public servants had to be recruited and promoted on the basis of ability, not connections. Hence, he retained the Public Service Commission, but replaced promotion on seniority with promotion through merit. He wanted the service to have the best brains and to have a fair share of our top students. Knowing that character was as important as intellectual ability, and fully aware of human fallibility, he beefed up the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) to ensure that once recruited, public servants remained straight and honest. It was only much later that he added the incentive of high public service salary.

Mr. Lee firmly believed that to ensure his Government was incorruptible, anti-corruption laws had to apply to everyone, regardless of rank and position. Having watched how other newly-independent countries went downhill, Mr. Lee realised that the best way for our public servants to imbibe the DNA

of incorruptibility was for the political leaders themselves to stay clean. The then Cabinet Secretary once told me that there was a salesman from a company selling executive jets who annually sought to interest Mr. Lee in buying a jet for his official use. After several rejections, the salesman gave up. Like many of his older colleagues, Mr. Lee lived simply, frugally and unostentatiously. And he never moved out of his Oxley Road home to a bigger mansion.

### **What working with Mr Lee was like**

What was it like to work with Mr. Lee? Many senior public servants feared him, and felt intimidated by him, given his piercing eyes, sharp questions and high expectations. When I first took over as Director, SID, I was a green 31-year old, untutored in how to relate to Mr. Lee. 37 years later, I still recall our first telephone conversation. I don't remember the content of that conversation, but it must have been a criticism or query on a paper we had sent out, because Mr. Lee made it a point to question every report SID put out for about a month, and less frequently after that. That was his way of testing you. When you passed the test, he eased off a little.

Everyone who worked for him would say how much they learned from him. For me, listening to the discussions he had with foreign visitors I brought to see him was a lesson in geopolitics which no university education or book could match. Many foreign visitors left impressed, awed and mesmerised by the depth, breadth and practical relevance of Mr. Lee's analysis and comments. When I accompanied him on his official trips abroad, the way he stood up to other foreign leaders and defended Singapore's interests, made me proud to be Singaporean.

Mr. Lee had that balance of a great leader which a Harvard professor taught about – the ability to have a big picture on any issue and yet to zoom in on details when necessary. Other public servants have testified to his deep knowledge of details in areas of their expertise, often surpassing that of the technocrat. In my domain, he appreciated assessed intelligence and was occasionally interested even in operational details.

### **Another side of Lee Kuan Yew**

There was another side of Mr. Lee which not many people knew. This was his unwavering support for politicians and public servants who were loyal to him and otherwise doing their job well, but like all human beings, made mistakes. In that sense, he was more caring and less ruthless than people made him out to be. Mr. Lee kept people on for a very long time once he felt comfortable with them and deemed them able, trustworthy and loyal. And when they lost an election or retired, he would quietly seek another job for them.

He showed appreciation mostly in his deeds rather than with words. He never praised you directly for a job well done. If you're lucky, you get to hear about how he thought of you through third parties. This would sound strange to our younger officers, who nowadays expect feedback of their performance all the time.

Mr. Lee also kept in touch with people whom he considered friends and worth meeting and talking to, regardless of protocol. When I was High Commissioner in Canberra, and Mr. & Mrs. Lee went on their last official visit, he made every effort to meet, or if they were too old and feeble, to at least talk over the phone, with his very old Aussie friends. I found it very touching that Mr. Lee, knowing that it would be his last visit to Australia, made that effort to get in touch with all his old friends. Some public servants may recall a stout and spirited defence which Mr. Lee made for the Public Service in 1976 against a PAP MP in Parliament who had complained about discourteous, indifferent and bureaucratic public servants. It bears reading because I drew several lessons from his remarks on how he viewed the Public Service and the role of public servants in the traditional, British-derived system of Cabinet government, where public servants could not defend themselves publicly and required politicians to do so, on their behalf.

First, he believed that there was a clear distinction between the role of the politician and the public servant. The MP was supposed to be good at public relations - how to keep his constituents happy whilst having to say "No" to them. But the public servant was an administrator, not expected to excel in public relations.

Second, even back then, Mr. Lee made it very clear that he was less interested in a public servant's academic credentials than his other qualities. To quote him: "Can he get a job done? Can he get a team to work with him? Is he a talker or a thinker, or a talker and a doer? The best, of course, is the man who thinks before he expounds and having expounded he then acts. It has nothing to do with whether he has got a Ph.D or a School Certificate or even a Standard VI qualification." His remarks were the precursor of his instruction to the Public Service to adopt the Shell system of assessing officers on the basis of Helicopter Quality, Strength of Analysis, Imagination and Sense of Realism – or HAIR for short.

### **Not torn between duty and conscience**

Mr. Lee was able to frame an instruction in such a way that no public servant receiving it would find himself torn between doing his duty and listening to his conscience. When I was in ISD, Mr. Lee took great pains to explain the security needs of an operation to me in such a persuasive and compelling manner that even if there was a political imperative lurking somewhere, it remained in the background and never emerged.

This is a vital skill of a political leader which allows a public servant to act professionally and fulfill his duty with a clear conscience. During the years I served Mr. Lee, he never gave me any reason to feel that I was serving the ruling political party at the expense of the nation. When I obeyed and carried out his instructions, it was clear to me that I was serving the national interest.

This is not to say that Mr. Lee would expect anything less than total loyalty from public servants. And public servants gave of their best to him because Mr. Lee's message of survival and nation-building was so compelling and inspiring for anyone seeking to find meaning and purpose in his career. To Mr. Lee, the politician's job was to frame policy, with help from public servants, and then to go out to mobilise public support by convincing the electorate that what the government was doing was right. The job of the public servant was to implement that policy so effectively and efficiently, that the public would be fully convinced that it was the best possible way of doing it.

The clarity of Mr. Lee's instructions and the certainty and decisiveness with which he moved once a decision was made, was something public servants greatly appreciated. Public servants dread serving an indecisive minister who waits to see how the wind blows in Cabinet or how the public reacts. This is not to say that Mr. Lee was inflexible and did not solicit, or listen to, advice. But those who sought to advise him had better know when and how to do it.

This does not also mean that Mr. Lee never listened to advice or could not brook contrary views. He did not want to be surrounded by a bunch of sycophants and "yes men", comprising an echo chamber. He would not respect you if you had no firm position, because he would conclude that you had no guts, no backbone and no principles. Mr. Lee taught us not to trust such a person.

### **A complex multi-faceted personality**

Mr. Lee was a complex man, with a multi-faceted personality. My perspective of the man was obtained in the years I worked closely with him, roughly from 1979 to 1994. After that, we met less frequently, apart from an occasional one-to-one lunch at the Istana. The snippets I have shared today cannot possibly do him justice. No doubt there will be many others who knew him better and have worked with him more closely, who will tell their stories and share their views of our great national leader. Only then can we get a fuller picture of Mr. Lee's legacy to Singapore, which is wide-ranging and immense, and extends well beyond his impact on the Public Service and our system of public governance.

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