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Global Health Security

COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from Lee Kuan Yew

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SYNOPSIS

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew faced many crises in his lifetime, regional and global. Were he alive, he would have a lot to say about the present COVID-19 pandemic and how to deal with it. What lessons can Singapore and the rest of the world learn from his experience?

COMMENTARY

THE FIFTH anniversary of the death of Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew passed quietly on 23 March 2020. The uneventful day was hardly surprising in a world brought almost to a standstill by the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a time of unprecedented crisis, testing the mettle of leadership in every country and the resilience of its people.

If he were alive, Mr Lee would have quite a bit to say about leaders and their people in such trying times. He had experienced many such periods in his 35 years as prime minister. What lessons can Singaporeans draw from the way he faced those challenges that might be relevant today? I can think of three.

#1: Singapore's Vulnerability: Myth or Reality?

First, was his clear-eyed, unsentimental view of Singapore's vulnerability: A small island with a multi-racial people with no natural resources completely dependent on the outside world for trade and investments.

For him, this was not just an existential fact but one that shaped the policies he developed to ensure Singapore's survival and success, including the building up of the armed forces, opening the economy to foreign multi-national companies and inducting the best and brightest into government.

Years later he worried that a younger generation, raised amid peace and plenty, took success for granted and was increasingly sceptical about the idea that Singapore was vulnerable. Was Mr Lee's view just an excuse for continuing to keep a tight rein on the city state especially its politics, many wondered.

Their scepticism made him decide to work with a group of journalists which I led to write the book *Hard Truths* published in 2011. In the foreword to the book, he wrote:

"I have lived through many economic and political crises in the region and the world. These have crystallised some fundamental truths for me that we forget or ignore at our peril. Without a strong economy, there can be no strong defence. Without a strong defence, there will be no Singapore. It will become a satellite, cowed and intimidated by its neighbours."

"To maintain a strong economy and a strong defence all on a narrow base of a small island with over four million people, the government must be led by the ablest, most dedicated and toughest. The task will become more complex as a more educated and confident electorate believe that Singapore has created a sturdy base and need not be as vulnerable as before. What will never change is that only the best can lead and secure such a Singapore."

Vulnerability Exposed by COVID-19

Singapore's vulnerability has now been exposed as never before by the pandemic. With almost every country shutting its borders, its links with the outside world for which it is so dependent has been severed. In fact, it was already hard hit before the virus outbreak when US-China trade tensions slowed its economy the most among ASEAN countries.

Another example: As the pandemic has curtailed air travel, national carrier Singapore Airlines has reduced its capacity by 96 percent, probably the most drastic action among all international airlines. Reason? Singapore is too small to have any domestic flight and SIA is completely reliant on international travel which has now ground to a halt. SIA's vulnerability mirrors that of the country.

If Mr Lee were alive, he might be forgiven for saying: I told you so. The irony of this pandemic is that the entire world is now vulnerable but there is scant understanding of this reality among most people.

#2: COVID-19: Transparency & Attitude of Mind

The second lesson from him which is relevant to the present crisis has to do with how open leaders have to be with their people about problems and issues. In a speech in 1967, just two years after Singapore's independence, he spoke about swine fever which had spread and destroyed pig farms in Malaysia.

“In other parts of the world, when their pigs suffer from swine fever, they hush it up. They pretend they do not have it. Net result: All pigs get infected. We can do likewise but we will become permanently a chronic society: sick. So when we get swine fever, we will announce it. Alert everyone so that we can arrest the spread of the disease and bring back normalcy.”

The point here has less to do with transparency of information but more to do with an attitude of not running away from problems but confronting them head-on, with the people onboard. He was famously blunt about the many shortcomings he saw in Singapore society then, such as its Third World standards of hygiene and civic consciousness and the quality of the workforce and management.

He was not afraid to raise these issues, often cajoling, sometimes scolding the people to get them to pull up their socks. But this leadership style is out of fashion in many democracies today where populist leaders shy away from telling the hard truths so as to win the people’s vote.

It is only in a crisis like the present one that these leaders are now talking tough and implementing the appropriate measures. Even then, many were in denial earlier and their countries are now paying the price for their belated action. True leadership though is about being consistent with your approach, during peaceful as well as trying times. Mr Lee understood this to a fault.

#3: Quality of Governance & Public Service

The third lesson is about the quality of governance and the competence of the public service. He gave this account of what he expected in a speech in 1965:

“I went to a government bungalow the other day and I pressed the button and nothing happened... And I wondered how it was. Succeeding families had been living there - prominent government minister and officers - without that being put right. And the following day all buttons worked.”

He had high standards even in those early years and it resulted in him seeking the most able to join the government. How is this relevant today?

The deadly coronavirus is putting every public healthcare system in the world to the test. Even with the best available, many will die. But it makes a great difference whether you have enough ventilators and ICUs and doctors and nurses able to operate the equipment to treat and save the infected.

The system must already be in place, planned well in advance, so that when the pandemic strikes, you can press the button, so to speak, and it works. If you press and nothing happens, it is too late to do anything.

When Mr Lee discovered that Singapore was in such a state in 1965, he did not (as some ministers did, apparently) just walk away. He put his heart and soul into making sure that every button worked, including in the hospitals and operating theatres.

On the fifth anniversary of his death, it is worth celebrating this achievement and making sure that every button continues to work here.

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