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The Man with the Blanket

Soon after being appointed Chairman of Singapore's Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960, Lim Kim San went around the slum area in Chinatown. He came across a labourer in a bunk who had a blanket pulled right up to his neck. Lim asked the man whether he was sick. The labourer replied: "No. I've got no pants on." Lim asked him why. He replied: "My other brother has just taken my pants out. I'm wearing briefs." Lim's thoughts on the man's reply: "No, I don't think he was in briefs. There was no such thing as briefs at that time. You see how poor they were! They had to share [clothes]."¹ The dead were not exempt from sharing, either. "In those days, there were shops which pulled clothing and shoes off the dead to sell them. 'My God,' I thought to myself, 'I really must help these people.'"²

It was a moment of transformation for Lim, then in his forties. Scion of a well-to-do business family, a product of the prestigious Anglo Chinese School and the elite Raffles College, he was a talented and successful businessman. The gourmet and racecourse enthusiast had access to what the good life could offer in Singapore. He had often driven past Upper Nanking Street, but had never been inside the shophouses where Singapore's poor huddled — lured from China and elsewhere, ironically by the island's prosperity.

Prosperity during colonial times had been a mixed blessing. Singapore had prospered since Stamford Raffles had established an

entrepôt on the island in 1819 to service the East India Company's China trade. As East-West trade grew during the nineteenth century, the British colony became the clearing-house for the region's produce and the distribution centre for the European goods traded in return. Indeed, the city became the trading, banking and insurance headquarters for the whole of Southeast Asia. However, the population grew as well. From a mere 52,900 in 1850, it rose to 229,900 by 1901, shot up to 940,700 by 1947, and almost doubled in the following decade. People crowded into the shop houses at the centre of the city area.

Originally built to accommodate a shop on the ground floor and house the people who worked there, these buildings themselves began to grow. Extra stories were tacked on, bringing them usually up to four, and extensions were added at the back. As more and more immigrants came, first the houses and then individual rooms were divided and subdivided into a dark warren of tiny cubicles — airless holes with room in them for little more than a bed. Thus buildings originally designed for one family were made to house 10 families or more, without privacy or sunlight, with a single tap, a single latrine, a single cooking space. For lack of any other place the street became dining room, meeting place and children's playground.³

Yet the population continued to expand, driving some families from the city and forcing them to build shelters illegally wherever they could. Up came squatter settlements that “developed in a girdle of squalor and misery around the central city”.⁴ Unemployment, crime, gangsterism, extortion and prostitution flourished, and racial tensions simmered, in the vast underbelly of the city even as the island, and its ablest inhabitants, prospered in the seas of global commerce.

The gulf between the two kinds of life in Singapore hurt Lim, although he lived in a far better part of the city. Under his leadership, as many housing units were built during the three years from 1960 as had been built during the preceding three decades. He would go on to become a minister holding crucial portfolios such as National

Development, Education, Finance, and Interior and Defence. He would chair the Council of Presidential Advisers. He would come to play a gatekeeper's role in the screening process through which Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) put prospective members of parliament and ministers. He would helm the Economic Development Board, critical to Singapore's success; chair the Port of Singapore Authority, also crucial to a port-city; would serve in the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Public Utilities Board; and he would head the profitable Singapore Press Holdings. While these contributions were substantial, it is as "Mr HDB" — the architect of Singapore's early, ambitious and phenomenally successful public housing programme — that he is best remembered.

Lim Kim San died on 20 July 2006.

The following chapters will trace "Mr HDB's" development from being a successful businessman keen on building a fortune for himself, to being a successful nation-builder literally. But first, it is necessary to sketch the context in which that transformation occurred. A process that began with self-government for Singapore and the PAP's rise to power in 1959, and continued through Singapore's difficult years in Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, culminated when the island was ejected from its geographical hinterland and set about becoming a global city.

A PLAN FOR SINGAPORE

Raffles had a vision of Singapore becoming "the emporium of the East, on the route between India and China" "on the basis of free competition". Given its origins, the independent city-state did not mind importing capital, managers, engineers and others. It did not share the fears of many newly-independent countries, which regarded multinational corporations (MNCs) as exploiters of cheap Third World labour and raw materials that would "suck a country dry". Singapore had no raw materials for anyone to exploit, and nobody

else “wanted to exploit the labour”. So it welcomed MNCs that, instead of exploiting Singapore, taught its people to do jobs that they otherwise would not have learned to do.⁵ By tuning into the global economy, Singapore was able to overcome its drawbacks, such as the fact that it had little by way of natural resources except for its harbour. What the country brought to the table were values such as hard work, discipline, thrift, ruggedness and openness to change.

The test came soon after independence. When the British decided in 1968 to withdraw from their bases, they caused what could have turned into a major economic crisis for Singapore. However, the threat was converted into an opportunity. The military facilities and the technicians working for them were released for productive civilian industries, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding prime minister, recalled. “We developed an economy in which the enterprise of American, European, and Japanese MNCs transformed British military bases into industrial facilities for manufacturing, and for servicing of ships, oil rigs, aircraft, telecommunications, banking and insurance.”⁶

The economy grew by leaps and bounds, providing the resources necessary for the country’s defence. The introduction of National Service in 1967 created a citizens’ army and obviated the need for Singapore to invest in a large and costly standing army.

On the political front, the need for stability loomed large. Political stability, the PAP Government believed, was necessary to make Singapore a worthwhile and safe investment destination for foreign and local capital.

Stability required good leadership. Leaders would have to be honest, capable, clear in their thinking, and committed to Singapore’s long-term good. Bureaucrats, too, would have to share these qualities and goals and emerge from a process of stringent selection. Together, political leaders and competent bureaucrats formed the governing elite.

Under Lee Kuan Yew's dynamic and charismatic leadership, the PAP functioned as a broad church open to a variety of thinkers and doers. It attracted a range of minds, from the philosophical Sinnathamby Rajaratnam and the cerebral Goh Keng Swee to the intellectual C.V. Devan Nair and the earthy Lim Kim San. Each member of the Old Guard complemented the others in ensuring the survival and success of Singapore.

Singapore was a racially diverse society descended largely from immigrants. If the new Singapore were to succeed, this society would have to be given a stake in the land. This is where public housing, and Lim Kim San, came in.

LIM KIM SAN: TECHNOCRAT OR POLITICIAN?

Lim was initially reluctant to join politics. He made few political speeches as a member of parliament and as a minister. He had a reputation as a nuts-and-bolts person who got things done. These aspects of his life have created the notion that he was a technocrat and not really a politician.

That myth was present in the headline of an article that appeared on him after his death: "The most unpolitical of men"⁷. In the same article, however, appeared a paragraph that was much closer to the truth. Lim, Chua Mui Hoong wrote, "was among the legendary core of Old Guard ministers known for their 'political entrepreneurship', bold to experiment with new ways of doing things".

In short, he was a politician.

The headline was not wrong: Lim was indeed the most apolitical of men. However, that was before he joined politics. What he became once he had entered public life was far more than a technocrat: He evolved into a politician who acted in the full knowledge that he was taking decisions that would affect the lives of thousands down the decades.

It is true that the breezily apolitical Lim, the businessman, is evident in his Oral History Interview. That phase of his life covered two epochal events: The Great Depression of the 1930s in the long aftermath of World War I, and the Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore — which the British had touted as their impregnable fortress — in the 1940s during World War II.

Although his family suffered financially during the Depression and he suffered physically at Japanese hands, the first catastrophe did not lead him to ponder deeply the connections between economics and war. Even during and after the second calamity, he remained apolitical in the sense that he did not set about driving the British — who had lost their colony to Japan in a war that had cost innocent Singaporeans dearly — out of Singapore when they returned to it victorious after the war.

All this is true. However, what transformed Lim into one of Singapore's founding fathers was the social impact of the PAP's arrival on the political stage. He saw a party that matched its anti-colonial rhetoric with a pragmatic blueprint for action. Lim understood that it was natural that, when political life resumed in Singapore after the war, there would be a "sort of flux", "with things going this way, that way". But what was required was that, out of the flux, a party would emerge with "a cohesive plan for Singapore". He was looking for something concrete. "And that I think was what the PAP did. And not only that. I was attracted to the PAP not only because I believe in their platform, but also because I trust... I know the people who run it and I have great faith in them."⁸ He joined the PAP in 1959.

Appointed HDB chairman, he realized quickly what his job entailed. At the physical level, it meant having to deal with a terrible housing shortage. At the political level, however, this meant providing houses not merely for the sake of housing, but to give the people of an independent Singapore a tangible stake in their new society.

Lim is commended rightly as "Mr HDB" for his hands-on approach to providing public housing. His businessman's instinct for

keeping costs down, his unerring eye for detail, his frenzied pace of work, and his integrity all came together to create the masterpiece that is Singapore's public housing.

However, that is not all there is to the story. The HDB was nothing if it was not political; it was proof that good and effective governance could change mental as well as physical landscapes among a largely immigrant people. The HDB was an act of faith to make immigrants believe that a place of sojourn could become a home, that a place to buy and sell could become a nation to inhabit and to defend.

It was that sense of political possibility that galvanized the hitherto apolitical Lim. Asked why low-cost housing had failed in so many other countries, he answered: "Well it is a question of political will, isn't it? The political will to do whatever is required to achieve the goal."⁹

Indeed, by his own account, it might actually be misleading to think of him as a technocrat. A technocrat is someone who brings specialized skills to a job. In his own assessment, he was anything but a specialist. He spoke of his philosophy, whether as a minister or in managing a statutory board or in running a company:

My policy is roughly this: I am not a specialist at anything. Neither am I a professional. But I listen to the specialist and the professional... I use my common sense to ask questions like 'How about this or that?' If they cannot agree, then I must myself decide.... But the whole thing is this: *listen to people*.¹⁰

The ability to listen to experts, use one's common sense, take decisions oneself and then take responsibility for those decisions is a political trait by any standard.

But is there a case for making a distinction between politicians and technocrats at all? If so, what role did a "technocrat" like Lim play in strengthening the government in what was, after all, a very politicized era? Or was it precisely "technocrats" like him who made an important difference to Singapore?

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew argued in an extensive interview, given not long before Lim died, that such distinctions are artificial.

Categorizing people as technocrats and politicians is an oversimplification. Nobody is completely a technocrat or completely a politician. It is a continuum of where your interests and special skills lie. He may not have been politicized in the sense that he was not thinking of self-government, getting rid of the British and taking over the running of the system and changing the social order. Yes, he was basically a businessman. But he had a social conscience and had gone through personal privation during the Japanese Occupation.¹¹

It was that background of having known privation that made Lim empathize with Singapore's poor.

Working in HDB, you begin to see how poor people are living, how miserable their conditions were, and you begin to feel this is something worth doing. You are giving them a home; the CPF [Central Provident Fund] will enable them to buy their homes; and will create a better society. So, in the end, he became a politician nearly as much as anyone else in Cabinet. He may not be well-versed in the idiom of politics — he never went to the LSE [London School of Economics] and listened to Harold Laski or whoever, but in real-life situations, whether you want to create a fairer society, you feel and respond as a human being. In today's terms, the media and the general public like to say that "O, he's a technocrat, he's not a real politician". That's utter rubbish. You may start off as a technocrat.¹²

In that context, Lee recalled the career of former Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen.

Hon Sui Sen was a civil servant but he faced enormous problems, first with Malayanization and then he had to find jobs when the British withdrew. I fielded him as an MP, and he wasn't very happy because it was new to him and he wasn't a man who could make speeches. I said: "Never mind. You do it, you get in, you'll solve, the jobs have to be done." So, finally, he got the EDB [Economic Development Board] going, he became the Finance Minister, he

got the Development Bank going. He's as good a politician as anybody.¹³

Lee talked about his own career as well.

To say that of Lim Kim San [that he was a technocrat] is an oversimplification in categorizing people. People see me as a politician, but I am not a politician alone. Yes, I concentrated on the overthrow of the system and on getting a new system in place and creating a different social order. I started life wanting to make a good living as a lawyer. Later I decided that the law would lead me nowhere. I made money fighting other people's battles with each other or with the state, but to what purpose? To my purpose, for money. I am not to be concerned whether the man is right or wrong; my job is get him off or to win his case. That was not the life that I wanted.¹⁴

Asked how he would characterize himself, Lee replied: "As someone who was thrown into politics; it started with the Japanese beating me up during Japanese Occupation."¹⁵ The same thing happened to Lim, but he did not take to politics as Lee did. Was that not the difference?

No, he reacted in a different way. He didn't go to England. I had not only that experience with the Japanese here but I saw the British come back, new military officers in uniform trying to run this country with no experience whatsoever. Then I saw how they were running their own country. Yes, it was a different system from ours, but I concluded that there's nothing they can do for Singapore which I cannot do as well if not better, because I would represent the people. They were representing the British people, and their job was to extract out of Singapore as much economic benefits as they could from Singapore and Malaya to get the dollars which they required to support the British pound and pay for their imports. So it was a combination of these two that made me what I am. I decided that their system was flawed, that they were not capable of governing me better than my friends and I who had grown up under the system, and suffered, knew what it was all about and could be as competent. We went through that process; Lim Kim San did not.¹⁶

Lee returned to the theme of the educational experiences of the first-generation leaders, particularly their exposure to education in Britain.

He did not go to England, he did not go through that same sequence of experiences. Goh Keng Swee did and so did Toh Chin Chye. A few of us who went to England decided that, no, they were not more capable than us. Definitely they did not send their best people here. The best people they kept for their home civil service, the next best the Indian Civil Service and then next the colonial civil service. We knew their ranking. We knew what the graduates in Oxbridge chose to do, would join the Foreign Service, the Home Service, the professions, the Indian Civil Service (that came to an end after India's independence in 1947), and only then the colonial service. But that came to an end in the 1960s. So we knew the quality of the people who came to rule over us. I saw my contemporaries come out here to earn a living. How could they run the place better than I? It's a different experience that we went through.¹⁷

Yet, at the end of the day, Lim had a social conscience that made his transition to a political career natural.

The man with the blanket would have understood that sentiment fully.

Lim's role in the unfolding of the Singapore story provides a fascinating glimpse into how, faced with the task of making an improbability work, a businessman came together on a platform with people of very dissimilar backgrounds and outlooks to produce a nation where the dead would not have to share their clothes with the living.

Notes

1. Lim Kim San, Oral History Interview, by Lily Tan, Oral History Centre, Accession Number 000526/21, Project: Economic Growth of Singapore, 1955–79, Date transcribed: 25 February 1985, pp. 134–35. Hereafter OHI.
2. Lim Kim San, Interview, in *Leaders of Singapore*, by Melanie Chew (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 163.
3. "Biography of Lim Kim San", in *The 1965 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership*, <www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyLimKimSan.htm>.

4. Ibid.
5. Lee Kuan Yew, Speech at the 26th World Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce, 5 October 1978, cited in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, by Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan (Singapore: Times Editions and The Straits Times Press, 1998), pp. 109–11.
6. Ibid., p. 111.
7. *Straits Times*, Singapore, 21 July 2006.
8. OHI, p. 103.
9. Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, op. cit., p. 165.
10. Ibid., p. 168.
11. Interview with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the Istana, 16 June 2006.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.