



Writer's Thoughts

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Speaking at the Community Engagement Programme Dialogue on 19 March 2011, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that Singapore had not developed a cohesive society by chance. Instead, this society was a result of “determined, deliberate and sustained efforts at integration”, a process that had worked because it had had the support of “all the communities, all the religious leaders and many many Singaporeans”. Addressing 700 community leaders on an occasion that marked the CEP’s fifth anniversary as well, he said that the objective of the CEP and other programmes was to shift attitudes. That was occurring. For example, mosque groups were joining other communities for brisk walking, and the Chingay Parade was not really a Chinese celebration but a multi-racial occasion now. “But it’s still work in progress”, Mr Lee said. His hope: “We are progressively strengthening our mutual bonds and with every year our people grow closer. With every crisis we learn to depend on one another more and with each success we gain in our national pride and identity. So let’s keep on going in this direction, maintain the momentum and continue to push ahead. And I hope you do many more CEP programmes in the next five years.”¹ Mr Lee drew an analogy with the earthquake and tsunami that had devastated northeast Japan earlier in March. Highlighting the calm and orderly response of the Japanese, he declared: “A terrorist attack on Singapore would be like a tsunami hitting our society. Can we respond like the Japanese?” His reply to his own question: “We have prepared well [and] so I am confident that we will take it in our stride.”²

Mr Lee’s comments encapsulate what is at stake for Singapore in the fight against terror. No matter how good the security agencies are — and they have been proved to be good — they can succeed ninety-nine times out of a hundred and Singapore would still not be completely secure because all that terrorists have to do is succeed once. If such an attack does take place, the cost in terms of lives and property could be immense, but the larger cost would be the damage the attack would cause to the social fabric. The Japanese responded to the earthquake, the tsunami and even the invisible terror of radiation spreading from damaged nuclear plants without breaking into riots, without fighting for scarce food and water, and with very little looting.

They did this because a penchant for trust and orderliness is ingrained in the Japanese psyche, not least because of the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Can the same be said of Singapore, which has not witnessed racial riots since the 1960s? Will Singaporeans pass the test? The hope is that they will never face the test, but what if they do? Here, instead of wringing hands and yet hoping for the best, the CEP is a practical way of preparing for the worst by joining hands in peacetime. The programme both builds on and deepens the social cohesion that is the bedrock of Singapore's survival and success. Of course, cynics could say that cohesion comes easy when there is no reason to fight, but the answer to them must surely be that the habits of the heart nourished and cherished during peacetime are exactly what a society needs to persevere during a crisis. Sceptics could argue, on their part, that the CEP reaches out to Singaporeans who are already convinced of the need for cohesion; in that sense, the programme preaches to the converted. What is there to guarantee that the rest of society will keep faith with the converted? The answer is that CEP activists do not keep their faith to themselves but are very generous in spreading it around. Why should it be assumed that Singaporeans at large will be immune to its message? Of course, the CEP is not a religion. Instead, it is a very strong affirmation of the secular common space that binds people of all religions and even none. But in its objective, which is to save Singapore from a violent racial and religious backlash to a terror attack, the CEP indeed draws upon the beauty and strength of the Singapore soul. What it does is to assure Singaporeans that there is hope after a crisis because sincere and committed people from all walks of life have been building the social infrastructure of that hope during peacetime.

The master-dramatist Kuo Pao Kun's play, *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree*, is a parable of Singapore nationhood that might also be called a secular creation hymn. It rises to a crescendo in the Tree Dance: "One tree joined to another tree, and then joined to another tree, forming a row of trees. One row of trees joined to another row of trees, and another row of trees, forming a forest of trees. Facing the approaching storm, they begin to dance and sing..."³ It is this ritual movement in choral solidarity that the CEP strives to capture. Singapore will exist only so long as Singaporeans collectively want their country to survive and prosper. It is that earthy and fundamental belief in Singapore, as a home worth having and defending, that terrorists wish to destroy by targeting the physical edifice called Singapore. The way to defeat them — and, indeed, perhaps, even to stop them — is to let them know that their endeavour is fated to fail because, even if they succeed in hurting the physical reality of Singapore, they will not be able to break the emotional and moral bond between Singaporeans and Singapore. Ultimately, the CEP is about national bonding and social resilience.

The CEP is just too important a programme to fail.

NOTES

1. "Stronger cohesion and common identity over past decade", Home Team Report, 20 March 2011, <http://www.hometeam.sg/article.aspx?news_sid=20110320agu8UqYJQkxy>.
2. Tan Yi Wen, "CEP celebrates five years of building social cohesion and communal harmony", Home Team Report, 20 March 2011, <http://www.hometeam.sg/article.aspx?news_sid=201103220swZGJvaOBfn>. For the full text of the Prime Minister's Speech, see <<http://www.singaporeunited.sg/cep/index.php/web/Our-News/Speech-by-PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-National-CEP-Dialogue-2011>>.
3. Asad Latif, "Sinking roots, settling down and building a nation", *Sunday Times*, 7 September 1997.