

No Man is an Island

A study of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew



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Introduction

In a mid-1984 issue of Singapore's *Sunday Times*, Dr Yeo Ning Hong* recalled his first meeting with the Prime Minister and senior Cabinet members: it filled him with an 'immense sense of awe'.¹ Even a foreigner like myself can testify that Lee Kuan Yew, whom I interviewed briefly in 1976, comes across as no ordinary human being. To be on the receiving end of his anger must be quite terrifying. Even when he is talking calmly, there are hints that the volcano remains active underground.

By Southeast Asian standards, Lee is unique. He is a ruler to the fingertips, yet he was not born to rule. By race he is Chinese, although born locally and Westernised through upbringing and education; but Zhou Enlai's gibe that Lee is like a banana—yellow of skin, white underneath—is unfair to one who always keeps his own counsel and is the patriot of no fatherland so much as his own will. He has long been a formidable speaker and debater in English, of world class among politicians on a stage where English has only recently become the first language. He has mastered from scratch the other tongues needed for communication with his people. He is the patron of Singapore politics: spotting, hiring and firing top talent; commanding the apparatus of power and various alternative sources of information; able to choose freely when to let well enough alone or when to intervene.

* Now a full Cabinet Minister in the Government elected December 1984.

Some commentators exaggerate his capacity to be a one-man band, a saviour figure. According to Richard Nixon, 'the fact that a leader of Lee's breadth of vision was not able to act on a broader stage represents an incalculable loss to the world'.² Yet it is inconceivable that Lee could be Prime Minister or President of any country but Singapore, however much his admirers crave his style of leadership for their own countries. His star and that of the island republic have merged almost beyond distinction.

Together with a band of colleagues, particularly the former First Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee, and supported by a remarkable workforce at all levels, Lee Kuan Yew has presided over the transformation of Singapore into far more than the ideal port and commercial centre that Stamford Raffles intended it to be when purchasing the island in 1819.

What are the reasons for Lee's extraordinary dominance at such a time of change? Is it because his is the exotic plant of civilised leadership that Raffles envisaged might one day emerge from the inhospitable tropical soil, producing its own special bloom?

What makes Lee more than an opportunist, a clown or a stooge, three types of character who, in his view, have crowded the political stage of Singapore? Surely he is not less willing or less able than others to seize opportunities for attaining his goals. It is not that his personality has been matched to the demands of his rise to power or his present undisputed position without moments of play-acting and absurdity. Neither has it been true that he has always been recognised as his own master.

Has his special endowment been, as an Indian MP put it in 1966, a revitalising love for his people?³ If so, his love has been of an unusual kind—berating, despising, exhorting various groups and, although sometimes exulting in and congratulating the people, finding few individuals to like or appreciate more than briefly.

How important is his intellectual stature? He has observed that Singapore's intellectuals have not come to the fore in the service of their country and their people, and he does not class himself among them.

Is he a creature of chance? Lee may be the only person who can pinpoint the role of fortune at any stage in his career.

What puzzled me after living in Singapore for some years (1968–71) was that no one seemed to be asking these questions. Lee and his colleagues were somehow 'there', indestructible parts of the landscape, eminences all the more influential for being grey and understated. Rumours ebbed and flowed about them, but did not come to much. The minority I met who hated the People's

Action Party (PAP) leaders resorted to name-calling or worked up a case for the prosecution based on examples of high-handed political behaviour, an exercise that could be transposed to almost any other technocratic setting. A greater number rejected particular policies but expressed no need to investigate the men who framed them.

This is not to say that I was at ease with Singapore's politics. I was already inclined to be sceptical about manmade social systems. I became more sharply so, being a pastor in the midst of Singapore's teeming life and a Christian wary of selective morality and secular pragmatism. I found it hard to esteem those who looked down on citizens with a lordly air of approval or blame.

Why were Singaporeans so reluctant to examine for themselves the character, the values and the history of their masters, especially Lee Kuan Yew? Were they mesmerised by the speed of the transformation going on day by day before our very eyes? Could they not guess that the extensive engineering of their society would have far-reaching consequences?

Two years after returning to Australia and being unable to put Singapore out of my mind or to shelve the many questions that had arisen, I decided to undertake a piece of postgraduate research that could form the basis of a book. The project would give me a chance to examine and share with others what I had experienced and observed. Its gestation has been very slow because of other more immediate responsibilities, but regular visits to Singapore quickened my resolve to bring the project to birth.

Mr Lee is a much misunderstood man in spite of Mr Alex Josey's efforts, possibly because of them.

Goh Keng Swee, *The Economics of Modernization*, 1970, page 177.

Alex Josey's huge *Lee Kuan Yew*, published in 1968, was my first resource. It contained thick slabs of Lee's speeches over the years of power, sandwiched between thin slices of dry narrative and flavoured with the spice of personal detail. Josey had been a confidant of Lee's from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, one of his most regular golfing partners and an admirer of Lee's blend of gradual socialism and definitive leadership.

Unfortunately, his book was hard to digest. A second edition, which appeared in 1971, brought the record up to date but left out many of Lee's more fiery speeches from the self-government and merger periods (1959-65).