

# Lee Kuan Yew's "Socialism" Reconsidered

by Michael D. Barr

Since 1969 Lee Kuan Yew has associated welfare with “malingering and laying about”, warning that it “must bring us down to perdition.”<sup>1</sup> Yet to this day, the original leaders of the People’s Action Party of Singapore (PAP) maintain that they were socialists when they came to power in 1959.<sup>2</sup> It is generally accepted that Lee Kuan Yew was genuine in his belief in some sort of socialism in the early years of PAP government, but there has been very little detailed attention paid to the nature of his vision of socialism, or his attitude to the welfare state.<sup>3</sup> In recent years Lee has made several statements on his early attitude to socialism and the welfare state which demand a reconsideration of his early views on welfarism, if for no other reason than even his later statements are inconsistent. Lee has maintained variously that he abandoned the idea of the welfare state immediately upon coming to power in 1959;<sup>4</sup> only after witnessing the failure of socialism and the welfare state in Britain in the years following the PAP’s rise to power,<sup>5</sup> and; in the 1970s, after studying the record of achievement in welfare-free Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Finding the truth amongst these retrospective accounts is further complicated by Lee’s public position that until 1965, it was impossible to create a socialist state in a minuscule trading community like Singapore, though in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s he aimed to create a socialist Malaya or Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> If Lee wished to defend this proposition today, he

<sup>1</sup> Lee Kuan Yew’s interview in Raj Vasil’s *Governing Singapore*, (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1984), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s interview with Goh Keng Swee, 1 October 1996. Lee Kuan Yew in Melanie Chew (ed.), *Leaders of Singapore*, (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> While Albert Lau characterised the early PAP’s views of socialism as “an endorsement of the ideology of pragmatism” in his 1981 honours thesis dedicated to the subject, James Minchin dismissed it as “indifferent socialism”. Albert Lau Khoong Hwa, “Pragmatism: A History of the Ideas of Socialism of the People’s Action Party (1954-1976), unpublished honours thesis presented to the Department of History, National University of Singapore, 1980/81, p. 77; James Minchin, *No Man is an Island: A Portrait of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), p. 107. Garry Rodan gave the PAP’s socialism more credence. He acknowledged that in the early life of the PAP government, there was “a socialist vision of sorts...” but argued that this socialism was “seen as an outcome, a result: that is, improved material conditions of the working people. The actual process by which such a result was achieved... was by implication a technical rather than a political or ideological consideration.” Garry Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore’s Industrialization: National State and International Capital*, (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 25 September 1993.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* and *The Straits Times*, 22 December 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, “A Tale of two cities: Twenty years on”, (Li Ka Shing Lecture, University of Hong Kong, 14 December 1992), *Ministerial Speeches*, Volume 16, Number 6, November-December 1992, pp. 51-67, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s interview with Goh Keng Swee; Goh in People’s Action Party Central Executive Committee, *PAP 4<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Souvenir, 1958*, (Singapore: *Petir*, 1958), p. 14. Also see Toh Chin Chye, writing as PAP Chairman in People’s Action Party Central Executive Committee, *The Tasks Ahead, PAP’s Five Year Plan 1959-1964, Part 1 and Part 2*, (Singapore: *Petir*, 1959), *Part 1*, p. 7. This position was stated even more clearly a year later in “The Fixed Political Objectives of Our Party. A policy statement by the Central Executive Committee of the People’s Action Party”, in People’s Action Party Central Executive Committee, *Petir, 6<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Souvenir, 1960*, (Singapore: *Petir*, 1960), p. 3, which argued: “We have clearly stated that we stand for an independent, democratic, non-Communist, Socialist, Malaya. We have never said that we stood for an independent, democratic, non-Communist, Socialist Singapore... because we realise that a Socialist Singapore is an economic impossibility.”

could point to his advocacy of the creation of a welfare state in Malaysia as late as 1964.<sup>8</sup> A corollary of this argument is that it was Singapore's separation from Malaysia that forced the PAP to abandon socialism.<sup>9</sup>

This article explores the conflicts and paradoxes in these accounts and argues that Lee never intended to build a welfare state in Singapore, Malaya or Malaysia, but that despite the apparent contradiction, he regarded himself genuinely as a socialist in the early years of the PAP Government. The basis for this conclusion is three-fold: a study of the politics of the major welfare issue facing the first PAP Government; a brief examination of the PAP's record during the period of Singapore's membership of Malaysia, and; a study of Lee's statements regarding socialism and welfarism at the time. Although the focus of the inquiry is Lee Kuan Yew's early attitude to socialism and welfarism, this will involve a substantial consideration of the actions and words of Goh Keng Swee. Goh was Lee's right-hand man during this period, and was at the coalface of the issues upon which some of our judgements must be made.

Lee Kuan Yew's accounts of his drift from the welfare state contain inherent contradictions. Perhaps Lee's single most enigmatic statement on the matter was in an interview with *Lianhe Zaobao* in 1993. Speaking of Britain's post-war Labour Government, Lee said:

They were going to create a just society for the British workers - the beginning of a welfare state, cheap council housing, free medicine and dental treatment, free spectacles, generous unemployment benefits. Of course, for students from the colonies, like Singapore and Malaya, it was a great attraction as the alternative to communism. We did not see until the 1970s that that was the beginning of big problems contributing to the inevitable decline of the British economy.

Yet without further explanation he continued:

*The moment we got into office in Singapore in 1959, we reversed policies. We stopped free medicine.... We knew that free medicine was wasteful.... We learnt very quickly that it was not workable, that this was one of the causes of Britain's decline and that until they got rid of it they could not prosper because they were not trying to compete as a people.*<sup>10</sup>

Granted that in the last sentence Lee was obviously talking about the welfare state as a whole rather than just free medicine, Lee's statements leave only one conclusion: that from the moment it came to power in 1959, the PAP government had no intention of introducing a welfare state, and that this decision was taken more than a decade before Lee and his colleagues could look back from the 1970s and come to the conclusion that the welfare state was "one of the causes of Britain's decline."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Winds of Change*, (Singapore: Peoples' Action Party Central Executive Committee, 1964) p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *Extrapolating from the Singapore Experience: Special lecture by Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, at 26<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce, Orlando, Florida, USA on October 5, 1978*, (Singapore: Publicity Division, Ministry of Culture, 1978), p. 11. This theory has been accepted as part of the conventional wisdom since the publication of Chan Heng Chee's *Singapore: The Politics of Survival 1965-1967*, (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 25 September 1993. Italics added.

<sup>11</sup> This logic does not imply that Lee was not influenced by the plight of Britain in the 1970s. Lee's National Day Address in 1972 provides ample evidence that the decline of Britain influenced his thinking. See *The Straits*

Less than a year earlier, Lee gave an irreconcilably different account of his abandonment of the goal of creating a welfare state:

From the late '60s, I have visited Hong Kong almost every year, to study and to understand why Hong Kong people work with so much more drive and vigour than the people in Singapore, and to learn something from them.... Through Hong Kong watching, I concluded that state welfare and subsidies blunted the individual's drive to succeed.... I resolved to reverse course on the welfare policies which my party had inherited or copied from the British Labour Party policies.<sup>12</sup>

Goh Keng Swee has been much less prolific in his accounts of his socialist past. This paper will show that Goh was an advocate of the creation of the welfare state before he entered government, and he went through the motions of trying to introduce a comprehensive social insurance scheme for the first couple of years after he came to power. Yet he has never claimed since then to have actually believed in welfarism, although he does say that he used to be a socialist. The three volumes of his collected speeches contain no retrospective accounts of the development of his views, and only three references to the welfare state.<sup>13</sup> Goh told Melanie Chew recently that he and his colleagues were socialists when they came to power, but said quite simply that they were wrong.<sup>14</sup> Goh's most recent contribution to the question was his interview with the author, in which he denied that he and Lee ever intended to build a welfare state, yet once again claimed that they were socialists.<sup>15</sup>

Any attempt to find the truth in this quagmire of contradictions must at some point consider what the PAP did, rather than what its leaders said, and the focus of this part of our study must be Goh Keng Swee rather than Lee Kuan Yew, since Goh, as Minister of Finance, was at the centre of all of the issues related to the question of welfarism. When the PAP came to power in 1959, the welfare debate was focused on the proposal to replace the Central Provident Fund (CPF) with a comprehensive social insurance scheme modelled on the British Labour Government's Beveridge Report. The CPF was designed explicitly as a scheme to force Singaporean employees to save for their retirement through their own and their employers' compulsory contributions. The PAP leadership had been calling for the replacement of the CPF with a social insurance scheme even before the CPF began operations in 1955. From its inception the PAP advocated that social security be available to "all those who through

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*Times*, 23 August 1972. The logic does, however, lead to the conclusion that the developments in the 1970s reinforced an existing view, rather than led Lee to a reconsideration of his position.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, "A Tale of two cities: Twenty years on", p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> In 1966, Goh said on one occasion that he regarded the welfare state concept as "appropriate in an affluent society but largely irrelevant to a nation struggling to escape age-old poverty." Earlier in the same year, he made a statement to the effect that he thought the welfare state tended to "vanquish" a society's "pioneering spirit". Goh Keng Swee, *The Economics of Modernization*, (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1995), pp. 30, 136. In 1976 he made a scathing criticism of the excesses of some West European welfare systems which, he said, were so generous that they left some workers better off unemployed. Goh Keng Swee, *The Practice of Economic Growth*, (Singapore; Kuala Lumpur; Hong Kong: Federal Publications, 1977), p. 166. His references to socialism were marked by constant criticism of other socialist administrations, while defending Singapore as a model of practical, working socialism. Goh, *The Economics of Modernization*, pp. 34, 50, 78, 113, 183. There are no references to welfare or socialism in his most recent book, Goh Keng Swee, *Wealth of East Asian Nations*, (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Goh in Melanie Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Goh Keng Swee.

sickness, infirmity or old age can longer work.”<sup>16</sup> The party’s 1955 election manifesto went further by calling for the introduction of child endowment, maternity allowances and unemployment benefits, as well as the benefits outlined in the party’s original Manifesto.<sup>17</sup> During the subsequent election campaign the PAP called for the abolition of the Central Provident Fund.<sup>18</sup> In September 1956 Lee repeated the party’s call for the introduction of unemployment insurance.<sup>19</sup> Later that month S. Rajaratnam, one of the PAP’s inner circle of leaders, put his name to the Caine Committee Report, which recommended the replacement of the CPF with a social insurance scheme.<sup>20</sup> Goh Keng Swee’s first personal foray into the social insurance debate was a memorandum dated 7 March 1958, to the Committee of Officials Established to Examine the Recommendations of the Brocklehurst and Caine Committees Reports.<sup>21</sup> As Singapore’s Acting Director of Social Welfare, Goh had attended meetings of the Committee during February and March, 1958.<sup>22</sup> The Committee agreed with the recommendations of the Brocklehurst Report and the Caine Committee that the CPF be wound up and replaced with a comprehensive social insurance scheme, with unemployment insurance as one of the last benefits to be introduced as part of the new scheme. Goh dissented from these recommendations to protest the proposed delay in the introduction of unemployment insurance.<sup>23</sup> Although there was no mention by the PAP of social insurance or the CPF in the 1959 election campaign, the question of replacing the CPF with a social insurance scheme stayed alive for several more years. On 15 March 1962, almost four years to the day after Goh Keng Swee wrote to the Committee of Officials, Lee Kuan Yew told the Legislative Assembly that the Government intended to introduce social insurance benefits:

...first, to cover unemployment and redundancy; next sickness; then old age; and finally, of course, the Central Provident Fund can be dissolved in this wider and bigger institution to ensure stability and security for the worker....

Having sweated over this comprehensive social security scheme... we are not likely to just forget about it....<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Straits Times*, 22 November 1954.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 April 1955.

<sup>18</sup> *Nanfang Evening Post*, 4 May 1955, Current Comment, cited in Colony of Singapore, *Weekly Digest of the Non-English Press 1954-59*, (Singapore: Colony of Singapore, 1954-59)

<sup>19</sup> *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates Official Report*, 5 September 1956, columns 76, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Sydney Caine *et al.*, *Report of the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood*, (Singapore: Colony of Singapore, 1957).

<sup>21</sup> Committee of Officials Established to Examine the Recommendations of the Brocklehurst and Caine Committee Reports, *Report of the Committee of Officials Established to Examine the Recommendations of the Brocklehurst and Caine Committee Reports*, (Singapore: Colony of Singapore, 1958), pp. 56, 57. The Brocklehurst Report, referred to above, was one of several government reports into social insurance, the CPF and social security issues. The full bibliographical details are: International Labour Office Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance [G.J. Brocklehurst], *Report to the Government of Singapore on Social Security Measures*, (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Legislative Assembly*, 15 March 1962, columns 161, 162, 164.

Lee's reference to "having sweated over" this scheme was not just a piece of polemic. The speeches of Lee and Goh earlier in this debate reveal that Goh had laboured greatly over the drafting of an unemployment insurance scheme and had successfully negotiated an arrangement with employer groups. His negotiations with the pro-communist trade union leaders broke down only when they refused to promise industrial peace in exchange for the introduction of the scheme and when the Government insisted that employees must contribute to the scheme alongside employers and the government.<sup>25</sup> Although Lee stated the Government's intention to replace the CPF with a social insurance scheme, he also used this debate to indicate that the matter was not a high priority. Responding to a speech by David Marshall, Lee said:

There are bigger issues that the Communist front organisations are more concerned with.... He should pick up the Chinese newspapers.... There he will find out what are the things that really agitate them. And this is not one of them. They do not want social insurance.<sup>26</sup>

In retrospect it can be seen that the March 1962 debate marked the death of the proposal to replace the CPF with a social insurance scheme. The matter was simply not raised again. The next indication that the CPF would continue was the announcement of an increase in the interest rates paid to CPF members on 5 May 1964.<sup>27</sup> Even the announcement on 25 August 1964, that the Malaysian Government was introducing a disability insurance scheme did not prompt a revival of the social insurance issue from either the opposition or the government.<sup>28</sup>

New light has been cast on these events by Goh Keng Swee. In a recent interview with the author, Goh claimed that he had always intended to retain the CPF to use it as a tool of capital accumulation, and that he and Lee Kuan Yew never had any intention of introducing any kind of social insurance scheme:

MDB: When did you decide to keep the CPF as a permanent institution?

**Goh: All along. I thought it was a very useful institution of savings, started by the British. And then I intended to raise contributions when the time came.**

MDB: The whole question of the CPF and social insurance, was it tied up with the debate over whether to build a welfare state?

**Goh: I don't think there was much of a debate on that. We never believed in the welfare state.**

MDB: And that includes Mr Lee?

**Goh: That includes Mr Lee.**

MDB: From his earliest days that you know of?

**Goh: Yes.**

MDB: So he was never really a conventional British Labour Party type socialist, was he?

**Goh: (Guffaws of laughter.) Well, Singapore is a very small place. And a small country does not respond to what you expect a bigger country to**

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, columns 121-3, 132-4, 139-143.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, column 152.

<sup>27</sup> *The Straits Times*, 6 May 1964.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 August 1964.

**react to. In a bigger country you have industries to protect it. But in a small country you can't.**<sup>29</sup>

The defensiveness of the last answer contrasts with the frankness of Goh's earlier statement that "we never believed in the welfare state", and to his initial reaction of hilarity to the idea that Lee was ever "a conventional British Labour Party type socialist." The rationalisation used in the last answer reflects the long-standing wisdom that the PAP never wanted to build a socialist Singapore, but aimed rather at creating a socialist Malaya. The immediate concern, however, is to examine the historical record to establish the veracity of Goh's claim that he and Lee "never believed in the welfare state." Are Goh's words the basis of an understanding of Lee's early attitude to the welfare state, or are they merely one more example of the seemingly interminable inconsistencies that surround accounts of the PAP's record on socialism and welfarism?

Goh Keng Swee is now saying that the PAP leadership's advocacy of a social insurance scheme was dissimulation. It is not difficult to find a motive for the PAP leaders to advocate a social insurance scheme in which they did not believe. Lee and Goh had to accommodate the wishes of the PAP's Chinese-educated supporters and the political agenda of the communist-controlled Chinese trade unions, which between them formed the backbone of the PAP's electoral and organisational base.<sup>30</sup> The PAP leaders therefore had ample reason to put aside their own views in the interests of political expediency.

Presenting a convincing case to say that Lee and Goh did, in fact, engage in a systematic campaign of dissimulation on the questions of the CPF and social insurance requires a little more effort, but has the reward of pointing the way towards an understanding of Lee's and Goh's ideas about socialism. At this point, it is wise to consider the words and actions of Goh Keng Swee and Lee Kuan Yew separately. In the case of Goh Keng Swee, the prime evidence of the truth of his assertion is the consistency of his policy development and programme implementation in the area of economic development, which enables us to confirm that Goh had decided to retain the CPF and did not wish to introduce social insurance from at least as early as January 1959, which was several months before the PAP came to office and only ten months after he wrote to the Committee of Officials. The earliest sign that Goh was dissembling in his advocacy of the closure of the CPF was a series of articles in the PAP journal, *Petir*, that were published over the first three months of 1959. The most widely publicised of these was the last one of the series, which was the only one to which he put his name. This article formed part of *The Tasks Ahead*, the PAP's political platform for the 1959 elections.<sup>31</sup> In the section entitled "Capital", Goh argued that Singapore must engage in a programme of raising domestic capital for development, and charged that if it did not do so, Singapore would be approaching its economic problems "with the mental attitudes appropriate to colonial servitude."<sup>32</sup> *The*

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Goh Keng Swee.

<sup>30</sup> For the general reaction of the Chinese community see *Nanfang Evening Post*, 4 May 1955, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 9 January 1957, Current Comment and 30 November 1959, Editorial, and; *Chung Shing Jit Pao*, 10 January 1957, Editorial, all cited in *Weekly Digest of the Non-English Press*. Also see *Legislative Assembly*, 15 March 1962, columns 149-151 for the specific stance taken by the Chinese trade unions in their negotiations with the Government; and column 145 for former Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock's confirmation that the CPF was unpopular with workers when the Labour Front government introduced it in 1955.

<sup>31</sup> *The Tasks Ahead, Part 1*, pp. 19-27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

*Tasks Ahead* was the high point of the PAP's pre-government policy formation, but Goh's concentration on capital accumulation was already well established by the time it was released. Both the January and February 1959 issues of *Petir* argued similar themes. The January issue editorialised that "looking for capital for industrial development" was "the task ahead", while the February issue made an explicit call for the use of "forced savings", and the recall of between a quarter and a third of the foreign investments made by the Singapore Government and Singapore banks to form a development fund.<sup>33</sup> Neither article was signed, but there can be no doubt that Goh was the author of both. This series of articles was not an overt commitment to retaining the CPF as a tool for capital accumulation. Such an explicit call could not have been made since the PAP had been advocating the closure of the CPF elsewhere. "Forced savings" did not have to be collected through the CPF, but the CPF was already in place and had just recently supplied finance to the Singapore City Council for the development of the electricity, gas and water utilities.<sup>34</sup> In the light of these events and Goh's subsequent retention of the CPF, there can be no serious doubt that Goh was thinking of the Central Provident Fund when he referred to "forced savings". A further indication that Goh's advocacy of social insurance was not serious was the conspicuous absence of any reference to social insurance in *The Tasks Ahead* and in the 1959 election campaign. This policy had been quietly dropped from the PAP's platform. Further, Goh worked as Minister of Finance for a year and a half without raising the issue in the Assembly. Goh's coolness towards social insurance was also shown in his response to pressure from the pro-communist trade union leaders to introduce unemployment insurance in December 1960 and January 1961. When the union leaders pressed the point, he tried to use unemployment insurance as a trade-off for industrial peace.<sup>35</sup> Unemployment insurance had dropped from being a basic demand in March 1958 to being an object of political barter in 1961. As a safeguard for his plans for the CPF, Goh separated the questions of closing the CPF and establishing a social insurance scheme in his negotiations with the union leaders.<sup>36</sup> When the negotiations for a trade-off broke down, Goh was content once again to let the issue lapse into obscurity. By this time Goh was only months away from unveiling his Development Plan, which relied upon the CPF as a source of development funding.

When the PAP came to office in 1959, Goh showed no enthusiasm at all for creating a social insurance scheme, but he was tireless in his quest to solve the housing and the unemployment crises which beset Singapore. Goh viewed social services and economic development as rivals for the same funding. While a balance needed to be found, when it came to a direct choice, Goh would always choose economic development:

Ambitious plans for immediate improvement of social services have to be eschewed. Such plans will only be implemented by diverting much of the available capital resources from other even more pressing needs.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 January 1959, 3 February 1959.

<sup>34</sup> *Legislative Assembly*, 24 April 1958, columns 188, 200.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 March 1962, columns 121-5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, columns 122, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Goh Keng Swee in C.V. Devan Nair (ed.), *Socialism That Works... The Singapore way*, (Singapore; Kuala Lumpur; Hong Kong: Federal Publications, 1976), p. 33.

Housing development was classed as one of the “more pressing needs”, rather than as a “social service” because of its political sensitivity. The Plan gave housing development its highest priority, and budgeted to spend nearly \$200 million over four years to build or begin to build 51,031 flats.<sup>38</sup> Housing construction was the single biggest item of expenditure in the Plan, and accounted for twenty per cent of total outlays.<sup>39</sup> The Development Plan was budgeted to cost \$871 million, of which two-thirds (\$591.4 million) was to come from domestic sources. By far the single largest contributor was to be the CPF, with a loan of \$120 million.<sup>40</sup> In fact the CPF proved to be even more important than the budget allowed, contributing eighty per cent of the Plan’s local capital.<sup>41</sup> This fact is so simple that its significance may be overlooked. Goh Keng Swee, however, saw the source of capital as the central issue in development economics. Goh made clear the importance that he attributed to sources of capital on other occasions. The Development Plan was brought down in April 1961. In November of that year, Goh wrote in an academic journal that the application of modern techniques requires an educated population and the involvement of experienced managers, but:

The first [requirement] is capital. Capital is accumulated through savings out of current income. Just as a rich man can save more than a poor man, so a wealthier country can save a larger part of its national income than a poor country and this is one of the reasons why the disparity between wealthier and poor countries continues to increase.<sup>42</sup>

Just over three years later, in February 1965, Goh told a conference on “Economic Planning in Southeast Asia”:

Economists are agreed that by far the most important single variable determining the scope and effectiveness of a development plan is the amount of domestic savings that can be made available from the economy during the plan period, or more precisely, the proportion of the national income that can be saved.<sup>43</sup>

The strongest argument that Goh was speaking frankly when he said that he never intended to introduce a welfare state, at least by the time the PAP won office, is the consistency of his words and actions on the questions of the CPF and economic development from January 1959 onwards.

If Goh Keng Swee had no intention of introducing a welfare state, what of Lee Kuan Yew? The very fact that Goh, as Lee’s Minister of Finance, took the actions outlined above, is an indication that Lee was not committed to welfarism. At the very

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<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Finance, Singapore, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964*, (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1963), pp. 2, 121.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Finance, Singapore, *Second Development Plan, 1966-1970*, (London: IDC Camera Unit, 1968), p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> Goh Keng Swee, “Differences in economic development problems as between Singapore and other Asian countries”, *Journal of the Commerce Society*, (College of Commerce, Nanyang University), Volume 1, Number 4, (1961), p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Goh Keng Swee, *The Economics of Modernization*, p. 54.

least Lee collaborated in dropping social insurance from both the PAP's election platform and its programme in government. The evidence of Lee's 1993 interview with *Lianhe Zaobao* is also a powerful indicator that Lee had abandoned the welfare state by the time he won office: "The moment we got into office in Singapore in 1959, we reversed policies. We stopped free medicine. People paid a small sum for medicine, later raised to one dollar. We knew that free medicine was wasteful."<sup>44</sup> This evidence points to an even stronger case for disbelieving that Lee supported the concept of the welfare state. The PAP did not, strictly speaking, promise free medicine, but advocated the creation of a voluntary health insurance scheme which would be organised by trade unions, farmers' associations and so forth. The health insurance would make medical services and medicine free at only the point of consultation and sale.<sup>45</sup> As Prime Minister, Lee also committed \$90,000 to keep the existing unemployment relief operating until the end of the year, but this hardly constitutes a commitment to the welfare state.<sup>46</sup> The record of events does not take us much further in our examination of Lee Kuan Yew's views. Instead we must examine his words.

It would be difficult and counter-productive to try to separate a consideration of Lee Kuan Yew's views on welfarism from his statements on socialism. Below is a near-comprehensive account of the written record of Lee Kuan Yew's statements from 1955 to 1960 which impinge upon socialism or welfare issues, excluding those statements which are related primarily to communism or colonialism. Although Lee described himself as a socialist in the 1950s, as early as 1955 he was on record as limiting the significance of his socialist ideas. In November of that year he told the Legislative Assembly:

Every political party understands... that the people are not interested in "isms": Capitalism, Socialism, Fascism, or Communism. They are only interested in seeing that their ordinary lives improve. Whoever can work to improve their ordinary conditions of life gets their loyalty and allegiance.<sup>47</sup>

A few days later, he spoke of the idea of socialism again, this time in more positive terms. On this occasion Lee indicated that he regarded "state planning and control" as central to the concept of socialism: "I have always thought that a Socialist is one who believes that state planning and control would bring about the greatest benefit to the community as a whole."<sup>48</sup> While Lee's description of socialism is accurate in so far as it goes, Lee deliberately avoided acknowledging that widespread state ownership is normally considered to be a feature of a socialist state. It is reasonable to surmise that he was choosing his words carefully because he did not wish to be held to a programme of nationalisation which would be difficult, if not impossible to implement in Singapore. If, however, Lee was choosing his words with such care, we may also conclude that he was serious in his attraction to "state planning and control", and that his vision of socialism was based substantially upon

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<sup>44</sup> *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 25 September 1993. It should be noted that despite this decision, the PAP Government has retained subsidies for health services for low income earners.

<sup>45</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 March 1959; *The Tasks Ahead, Part 2*, pp. 20-3.

<sup>46</sup> *The Straits Times*, 8 August 1959.

<sup>47</sup> *Legislative Assembly*, 21 November 1955, column 1018.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 November 1955, column 1540.

the utility of a strong, centralised state as a tool for achieving national goals. Indeed, Lee's subsequent career has demonstrated that this paternalistic centralism was more deep-seated in Lee's psyche than any theory of socialism. In 1957 he indicated that his vision of socialism was directed primarily at achieving economic development. Lee was probably reflecting the influence of the pragmatic economist, Goh Keng Swee, when he told the Legislative Assembly:

I do not think for many years to come, even taking Malaya as a whole, that it is possible to have complete State ownership of capital and of industrial potentials. Hence, in our desire... to expand industrially and rapidly, we have to attempt all kinds of not quite orthodox socialist schemes to try *to do in ten or twenty years what European nations have taken about a hundred years to do.*<sup>49</sup>

Taken in conjunction with our study of Goh Keng Swee's attitude to the CPF, we may conclude that Lee regarded the strong paternalistic state as a useful tool to accumulate and deploy capital to achieve unnaturally rapid economic development. Because state control was a more substantial part of Lee's socialism than state ownership, he had no hesitation in curtailing plans for nationalisation of enterprises. In 1959 Lee told a mass rally that despite the theory of socialism:

...the continuance and development of the *entrepôt* economy means that private enterprise and capital must be allowed to further develop trade and commerce, and to break new ground in building up manufacturing industries.<sup>50</sup>

To Lee, socialism was primarily a means of organising society to industrialise and bring prosperity in the shortest possible time: "to do in ten or twenty years what European nations have taken about a hundred years to do." Only when wealth had been created was its distribution an issue. The challenges faced by underdeveloped countries such as Singapore were totally different to those faced by the developed countries of Europe. Hence, if the theories developed by British and European socialists did not meet Singapore's needs, this was hardly surprising and there was no need to have qualms about adjusting the theory. While the continuation of a capitalist economy could not be avoided, the thing that marked out Lee as a socialist was the dominant role of the state, his belief that checks should be applied against exploitation of workers, and his commitment to ensure that the social benefits of economic development should be well distributed among workers. There was, however, barely a mention of those unable to work:

Although we recognise the limitations of an *entrepôt* economy and the necessity for private capital and private enterprise, it is our duty to see that the worker gets a fair return for his labour, without which capital is barren and fruitless. *The wealth and prosperity which labour produces must be shared in wages, medical, health, holiday and other benefits, and in good working conditions.*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 January 1957, column 1239. (Italics added.)

<sup>50</sup> Lee Kuan Yew in PAP, *The Tasks Ahead, Part 2*, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* (Italics added.)

In February 1960, Lee restated another principle of the PAP's socialism:

A socialist believes that society as a whole will benefit, and there will be more happiness for more people, if all are given equal opportunities for education and advancement regardless of class or property.<sup>52</sup>

Today Lee regards this principle as the last remnant of his early socialism.<sup>53</sup> The picture that emerges from Lee's recorded statements over a six year period, which includes an election campaign, is one of a socialist of the most pragmatic kind, who believes in the abstract in state ownership of enterprises, but who does not regard it as essential and recognises that it would not be practical in Singapore. Lee believed that he was fulfilling his duties as a socialist by working for equality of opportunity for the children of all classes, protecting workers against exploitation, and widely distributing social benefits among the working population, all through the activities of a paternalistic centralised state. Apart from the absence of any concept of welfarism, perhaps the feature of Lee's thinking which most clearly separates Lee's socialism from British and European socialism is the emphasis on rapid industrialisation and the production of wealth. This is hardly surprising since Europe was already industrialised and wealthy while Singapore was not. The picture we have painted of Lee's socialism is very different in its fundamental character to that of the British Labour Party, and the absence of welfarism is only one of the more obvious points of divergence.

One remaining aspect of the question at hand is the possibility that Lee and Goh genuinely wanted to introduce a welfare state in Malaya or Malaysia. There is, however, sufficient evidence to conclude that such a plan was not on the PAP leadership's agenda. First, in his interview with *Lianhe Zaobao* Lee said that the PAP leadership became disenchanted with welfarism *per se* immediately upon coming to office. It is also significant that despite advocating the creation of a welfare state once in the 1964 Malaysian election campaign, there was no agitation on the issue thereafter.<sup>54</sup> By 1964 the "conservative" Malaysian Government was taking social insurance more seriously than the "socialist" Singapore Government. In August of that year, the Central Government announced the introduction of a disability insurance scheme. At the same time Kuala Lumpur was in the process of costing a more comprehensive social insurance scheme and had asked the International Labour Office to provide "draftsmen and administrators" for the project.<sup>55</sup> The Singapore Government had, by this stage, abandoned all such plans for its own people, and it made no moves to be part of the Malaysian project. Even Lee's hopes of nationalising some industries in Malaysia were abandoned during this period, not just because the PAP was in opposition and could not have achieved it, but because Lee and his colleagues decided that such a project would not work.<sup>56</sup> On balance, the evidence of the Malaysia period confirms that Lee's and Goh's personal visions of socialism contained no elements of welfarism. Socialism for both men was a means of

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<sup>52</sup> Lee's address to the Rotary Club, 24 February 1960, in Lee, *Speeches etc.*

<sup>53</sup> Lee in *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, *The Winds of Change*, p. 41. Admittedly, Lee had more immediate problems to occupy his attention in the Malaysia period.

<sup>55</sup> *The Straits Times*, 26 August 1964.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *Some Problems in Malaysia*, (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1965), pp. 28, 29.

organising society to maximise economic development while sharing the benefits of this development with the workforce. Despite their consistent claims at the time and Lee's less consistent protestations since, it is difficult to take seriously the picture of Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee as ardent believers in the welfare state at any time from the late 1950s onwards.

Thus far we have established that by the time Lee and Goh came to power, they had no welfarist inclinations, yet they still purport to have regarded themselves as socialists. To this point this inquiry has implicitly presumed that British welfare socialism was the only source of Lee's and Goh's ideas of socialism. This has left Lee's claim to be a socialist look rather hollow because without the welfare state or state control of industries, British socialism is mere skin without bones or flesh. If we are to take seriously Lee's claim to have been a socialist during this period, we need to identify an alternative inspiration and standard of comparison. It is a perverse irony that Lee, one of Asia's staunchest anti-communist leaders, found his new inspiration in Chinese communism. Lee's interest in Chinese communism was forced upon him by his involvement with the Chinese Middle School students in 1954,<sup>57</sup> but it quickly developed beyond necessity. In the mid-1950s, one of the topics of conversation among Lee's Malayan Forum friends in London was the devotion with which Lee was studying the first English translation of *The Collected Works of Mao Tse-tung*. Lee's friends were unsure of whether Lee was reading it simply to know his enemy, or whether he found the ideas in it attractive.<sup>58</sup> In fact, both elements were present. Early in 1955, Lee expressed his admiration for the Chinese revolution in these terms:

A government which in five years can change a corrupt and decadent administration into one which is scrupulously honest and which can withstand the armed might of the Americans in Korea, deserve full praise.<sup>59</sup>

In November of the same year, Lee told the Assembly that he accepted that communism had worked for China, but that he hoped to achieve the "economic and social benefits" of communism, while retaining "the human benefits of spiritual and individual freedom".<sup>60</sup> By 1956, Lee was quoting Mao approvingly in the Legislative Assembly, and described him as "one of the rare brains in this world".<sup>61</sup> The attraction to Lee was not Mao's economics or his Marxist theory, but his thoughts on the nature of power, leadership and action. In the Legislative Assembly, Lee lectured Members on Mao's teaching that "a new society comes out of the rifle barrel" and quoted Mao at considerable length.<sup>62</sup> Lee, of course, was not taking a revolutionary stance, but he was arguing at length that the British currently hold the gun and:

our first objective is to dislodge them and take over the gun and the government of the country. When you take over the country, then your battle begins. Then

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<sup>57</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger*, (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, [1961]), p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Wang Gungwu, 8 October 1996. Wang was visiting London in the mid-1950s and had social contact with Lee's friends in the Malayan Forum. Lee has confirmed that he studied Mao in the mid-1950s. Lee's interview with journalists from *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 1979, Lee, *Prime Minister's Speeches etc.*

<sup>59</sup> Lee in *Chung Shing Jit Pao*, Editorial, 21 March 1955, cited in *Weekly Digest of the Non-English Press*.

<sup>60</sup> *Legislative Assembly*, 25 November 1955, columns 1377, 1378.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 November 1956, column 581.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, columns 506, 581-3.

you can say to yourselves and your country: “What kind of Malaya are we going to have? This is ours now.” .... That is the power situation. To get the maximum advantage out of this power situation, one must build organisations and not wait for spontaneous combustions.<sup>63</sup>

Lee repeated this lesson on power five months later, once again quoting the “great Chinese theoretician”.<sup>64</sup> Lee’s acceptance of the success of Chinese communism may have met the needs of political expediency, but it does not appear to have been feigned. Part of the reason for Lee’s stridency in Singapore’s Malaysia period was his fear that China would emerge so successfully over the next few decades that Southeast Asia would be swamped by the new giant. In 1962, he told the Malayan Students Union in London:

We have got to make sure that the capital we have accumulated is put to good use, that in ten years we take one stride forward, in twenty years we enter the industrial age and in thirty years definitely, we are an emerged nation, not an emerging one. Because, definitely in thirty years, we are going to have an emerged China....<sup>65</sup>

Lee saw in Chinese communism an effective but ruthless means of social and economic mobilisation to achieve economic development. Further, Mao had successfully taken a European theory of socialism and adjusted it to suit an underdeveloped Asian country. Since Lee was faced with the same task it is not surprising that Lee took more than a passing interest in Chinese communism. Rather than seeing Lee’s socialism as a gutted version of British socialism, it should perhaps be viewed as a less ruthless version of Chinese communism. This had provided no welfare but, in Lee’s perception, had successfully motivated and organised people to work hard to achieve a better life for themselves and their children. In this spirit, Lee told the Socialist International Congress in September 1965:

The democratic socialist has to organise to get the people to put in more effort after independence. He has to demonstrate that the sensation of improved living standards can give encouragement and enthusiasm to people in their effort, so speeding up capital accumulation and the acquisition of higher technical skills which can bring about a better life.<sup>66</sup>

Earlier in the same year he told the Asian Socialists’ Conference that democratic socialists must “mobilise human resources, to pitchfork our countries and backward economies into the industrial and technological era”:

The capitalists make people work hard through monetary incentives which we all call sweated and exploited labour. The communists do it by regimentation and

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, column 583.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 April 1957, column 1757.

<sup>65</sup> Lee’s speech to the Malayan Students Union, London, 14 September 1962, cited in Lee, *Speeches etc.* Also see the following for other examples of this argument: Lee to a symposium organised by the Historical Society of the University of Malay, 28 August 1964 in Lee, *Some Problems in Malaysia*, pp. 6, 7 and; Lee to Malayan students in London, 10 September 1964, in Lee Kuan Yew, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1964), pp. 37, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Lee, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, p. 31.

exhortation and a systematically induced state of semi-hysteria for work, using both the stick and the carrot. The democratic socialist is less ruthless and consequently less efficient, torn between his loathing for regimentation and mass coercion and his inhibition to making more effective use of the carrot by his desire to distribute the rewards more fairly and equally too soon.<sup>67</sup>

While Lee's regime avoided the "semi-hysteria" of the Chinese communist model, elements of this methodology can be discerned in the national campaigns for better work, personal and social habits which have become a routine part of life for Singaporeans.<sup>68</sup> The Chinese model of socialism suited Lee's personality and political strengths, and it reinforced his basic predisposition towards the activist role of a strong, centralised state. It was a concept of leadership and planning, rather than an economic theory. The concept was designed to provide a rational motivation for hard work, thrift and development based upon an egalitarian ideal, rather than upon monetary incentives or coercion.

Lee's socialism was intended to be the basis of a social consensus that would foster personal and national characteristics which would bring prosperity to the country. In that sense it was very much the forerunner of Lee's more recent embracing of Confucianism and his Asian Values of the 1980s and 1990s. Like Asian Values, socialism for Lee was primarily a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. It was, nevertheless, very real in his mind. There has been a tendency to dismiss Lee's socialism as vague and inconsequential. This is largely because the standard of comparison is usually British socialism, which was Lee's first political home. Lee's attitude to the welfare state, as reflected in the actions and ideas of his right-hand man, Goh Keng Swee, superficially confirms this assessment, but properly to understand Lee Kuan Yew, one needs a much broader canvass than just one set of ideas or even one culture. The influence of Chinese communism on Lee is an area which has been neglected to date, but considering its influence enables us to assess his proclaimed socialism from a different perspective. It is true that Lee's socialism was vague, but it is a serious error to dismiss it as inconsequential. By a ruthless process of trial and error, Lee has taken his ideas of power, leadership, economic development and the role of the state far beyond the examples offered by either the British Labour Party or the Chinese Communist Party. Yet it is unlikely that he could have arrived at his current ideological position without having been a genuine disciple of each. His courage and ruthlessness have now brought him very personal rewards. When we consider Lee's role over the last ten years as an adviser to the PRC, and the admiration he has received from British Labour leader Tony Blair, we can see how he has come full circle in a lifetime. The student has become the teacher, and is now honoured in the houses of his former mentors.

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<sup>67</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *Socialist Solution for Asia, A Report on the 1965 Asian Socialists' Conference in Bombay*, (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1965), p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Examples of these campaigns include the campaigns for quality control in industry and business, the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the Courtesy Campaign, the "Eat Frozen Pork" Campaign, the "No Spitting" campaign, the "No Urinating in Lifts" campaign and the current "Family Values" campaign.

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