

02/01/2003

Wishful thinking on economic, water issues

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WHAT would Singaporeans like to see in the New Year? Hints of these were given in a special report in the Dec 30 issue of The Straits Times.

It carried a fictitious front page with a Feb 30, 2003 date (above) themed: "A Great 2003: The 10 stories we'd like to see in The Straits Times next year". The page led off with news every Singaporean yearns to hear: the economic downturn is finally over. Businesses are expanding, new orders are flooding in and more jobs are being created. Euphoric news, certainly.

Reflecting concern over increasing cases of maid abuse, it carries a report that not a single case of maid abuse was reported during the year.

Interestingly enough, it carried an article announcing that the water supply issue had been settled amicably, with Malaysian and Singaporean officials shaking hands to seal the deal.

Under the heading "Water deal with Malaysia sealed", the story says the deal "marked a happy end to their protracted and often bitter water dispute".

It reads: "The key points agreed to by the two sides: Singapore will pay more for Malaysia's water, but will be guaranteed continued water supply after 2061."

The guarantee, says the report, runs for 100 years after the agreement expires in 2061 and Singapore will be allowed to charge more for the treated water sold back to Malaysia.

A Malaysian official is quoted as saying: "Malaysia is happy with the deal, and I think Singapore is too. It's a win-win deal."

The report says: "Singapore has maintained it is legally not obliged to pay more for water it is getting now, and will do so only if a new pact for post-2061 is inked."

Adding differences still remain over other issues such as the use of Malayan Railway land in Singapore and a new bridge to replace the Causeway, it quotes a Singapore official as saying they are not in a hurry to discuss these other issues now.

Perhaps the story about the water issue should not be dismissed as wishful thinking. It is known that The Straits Times has strong links to the Singapore Government and it is possible that what has been written is a reflection of the thinking of the Government.

If so, it seems to suggest a shift from Singapore's intransigence over a price review for water.

If the article does not voice the Singapore Government's sentiment, at the very least it suggests that the Government must go for a price review

or there can be no solution to the problem.

On Dec 30, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed regret over the "selfish behaviour" of Singapore with regard to bilateral issues. This, he said, was hurting ties.

Its handling of the water supply issue, Dr Mahathir said, was one case of such behaviour. Malaysia, however, had been flexible and understanding.

When, for instance, Singapore requested for an increase in the volume of water supply due to its increasing population, Kuala Lumpur agreed.

Even in this fictitious article, there appear to be hints of selfish demands. But the article hit the nail on the head in quoting the fictitious Malaysian official: both nations must seek a win-win situation.

And flexibility is required for that. Is Singapore ready for this?