

A commemorative publication by *Challenge* magazine

REMEMBERING LEE KUAN YEW

Our Founding Prime Minister
1923 – 2015

His ideas and impact on the
Singapore Public Service

FOREWORD

Our FOUNDING PRIME MINISTER...



Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the 2014 National Day Parade.
Source: Suhaimi Abdullah/Getty Images

Our founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, died on March 23, 2015, at the age of 91.

To say that Mr Lee served Singapore and Singaporeans for almost all of his adult life would be understating his extraordinary contributions. Mr Lee and his Old Guard colleagues played indispensable roles in transforming Singapore from a Third World country into a First World country that is peaceful, cohesive and prosperous. Without him and his colleagues, Singapore will not be where it is today.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew was also singularly instrumental in creating the Public Service ethos that we have today – clean, efficient, effective and indeed exceptional. As a young civil servant, Mr Lee's leadership left a deep impression on me and I had the great privilege of watching, from close up, the way he handled many important issues, such as relations with major countries, in both good and bad times. Those of our colleagues who have worked closely with him speak

of his legendary attention to detail, his exacting performance standards and the clarity of purpose he applied to every problem.

They also found the side of him that was a caring boss. But underpinning all these was Mr Lee's unwavering dedication to keeping Singapore successful. For Mr Lee, if something was worth doing for Singapore and Singaporeans, it was worth doing it very well. We saw this, for example, in his dedication to the cause of the trade unions, so that workers can have a share in the fruits of the nation's progress; his promotion of home ownership so that every Singaporean has a stake in the country; his personal attention to the greening of Singapore which he saw as a means of gifting to every Singaporean, no matter his station in life, a very conducive urban environment. The list is endless.

Mr Lee's passing is a poignant moment in Singapore's history, a moment for all of us to pause and reflect on his contributions to Singapore. As we celebrate the life of a great leader, an astute statesman and an exceptional Singaporean, let us seek to emulate his passion and dedication in serving Singapore and Singaporeans. Let that be Mr Lee's legacy to the Public Service.

As a tribute to Mr Lee, the Public Service Division has produced this publication to commemorate his ideas and impact on the Public Service.

Sincerely,
Peter Ong
Head, Civil Service

Cover photograph by Tara Sosrowardoyo, National Museum of Singapore Collection

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On INTEGRITY



Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Mr Lee Kuan Yew knew right from the start of his career that a clean and ethical government – built on a sound legal system and the rule of law – was vital to Singapore’s survival and prosperity. He saw it his mission to eradicate corruption and empowered the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) to go after the “big takers in the upper echelons”. To counter systemic corruption, Mr Lee staunchly championed the policy of paying political leaders as well as all public officers competitive salaries. He introduced the idea of a “clean wage” – guiding the Public Service away from the provision of staff quarters, staff cars, and pensions – so that there are no hidden benefits to serving the public. With the help of these measures, the Service has developed a reputation for integrity, and Singapore has been ranked consistently as one of the least corrupt nations of the world. This has gained the trust of foreign investors, whose investments helped to propel Singapore from a developing economy to a developed one in just 40 years.

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“He tackled corruption earnestly after 1959... [Now] it is in our DNA that we expect civil servants to provide the public with services without asking for ‘under the table’ money.”

**– shared on Cube by Loh Yoon Min,
Senior Assistant Director (Financial
Investigations), CPIB**

“What is often highlighted publicly are the salaries of political leaders and administrative officers who lead the public service; what is less often highlighted is that we pay competitive salaries for all jobs and all schemes of service across the entire public service. This has enabled the Service to professionalise jobs across the public sectors, including teachers, lawyers, accountants and statisticians. We even give performance-based bonuses, a practice that distinguishes the Singapore government from virtually all other governments.”

**– Yong Ying-I, Permanent Secretary for
Public Service Division, in The Big Ideas
of Lee Kuan Yew**

On
INTEGRITY

“My theme to you is simply this. You and I have a vested interest in the survival of the democratic state. We the elected ministers have to work through you and with you to translate our plans and policies into reality. You should give of your best in the service of our people... It is in our interest to show that under the system of ‘one man, one vote’ there can be an honest and efficient government, which works through an efficient administration in the interests of our people. If we do not do our best, then we only have ourselves to blame when the people lose faith, not just in you... but also in the democratic system of which you and I are working parts...”

– Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s speech at the Civil Service Political Study Centre on August 15, 1959, as cited in Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas



Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the opening of the Civil Service Political Study Centre at Goodwood Hill on August 15, 1959.
Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



"...when the core leadership is clean, corruption can be gradually diminished. [Countries] must be prepared to take on the big ones in the highest echelons of the government. This is most painful to do as I know from experience...

In November 1985 one of Teh Cheang Wan's (Minister for National Development) old associates told the CPIB that he had given Teh two cash payments of S\$400,000 each in 1981 and 1982, to allow a development company to retain part of its land which had been earmarked for compulsory government acquisition... Teh denied receiving the money. He tried to bargain with the senior assistant director of the CPIB for the case not to be pursued. The cabinet secretary reported this and said Teh had asked to see me. I told the Cabinet Secretary that I could not see him until the investigations were over. A week later, on the morning of 15 December 1986, my security officer reported that Teh had died and left me a letter:

Prime Minister

I have been feeling very sad and depressed for the last two weeks. I feel responsible for the occurrence of this unfortunate incident and I feel I should accept full responsibility. As an honourable oriental gentleman I feel it is only right that I should pay the highest penalty for my mistake.

*Yours faithfully,
Teh Cheang Wan*

Teh preferred to take his life rather than face disgrace and ostracism. I never understood why he took this S\$800,000. He was an able and resourceful architect and could have made many millions honestly in private practice...

In 1995 Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong ordered an investigation into purchases of two properties each made by my wife on my behalf and by my son Lee Hsien Loong, then deputy prime minister. The developer had given them unsolicited 5-7 per cent discounts on these purchases, as he had given to 5-10 per cent of his buyers at a soft launch to test the market. Because my brother was a non-executive director of the company, a rumour went around that my son and I had gained an unfair advantage. The Monetary Authority of Singapore investigated the matter and reported to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong that there was nothing improper.

Nevertheless I asked the prime minister to take the matter to Parliament. In the debate, opposition MPs, including two lawyers, one a leader of the opposition, said that such discounts were standard marketing practice and was not improper. This open debate made it a non-issue in the general elections a year later.

Leaders must be prepared for such scrutiny to keep the system clean.

We have to keep our own house clean. No one else can do it for us."

– Mr Lee Kuan Yew's speech at the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute's "World Ethics and Integrity Forum 2005", April 28, 2005

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"We (the Public Service) take great pride today in being clean and capable, effective and exceptional. We probably take for granted the policies and practices, ethos and values, that shaped these outcomes. Many of our core policies were shaped by Mr Lee, with our pay policies and our investment in talent being two examples."

– Yong Ying-I, Permanent Secretary for Public Service Division, in a tribute to Mr Lee Kuan Yew on March 23, 2015, the day he died



On EXCELLENCE

Mr Lee Kuan Yew's exacting standards and attention to detail are well known and documented. His demand for excellence meant that the first generation of civil servants, who worked and interacted directly with him, made sure their work was always thoroughly researched, implemented properly, and could stand up to scrutiny. This work ethic was passed down to younger civil servants, and eventually shaped the Public Service's focus on quality and excellence.



“As civil servants, we were constantly amazed by Mr Lee's breadth and depth. On anything that matters to him, and to Singapore, he has a considered view. So it meant that we had to be as sharp as he. To present our views and win the case, we had to be thorough in our research and compelling in our arguments. It created, in my view, a culture of excellence in the civil service. Never take short cuts or the intellectually lazy argument, or short-change other points of view. For Mr Lee would sniff out these weaknesses. This culture of analytical rigour, openness to ideas – balanced by realism – infuses the political leadership as it does the civil service. It demands high quality thinking and solid work that defines the government to this day...

As prime minister, he demanded a lot of his people in government. Describing his consternation upon discovering that light switches in a government bungalow did not work, he said: “I want to make sure that every button works and even if you are using it only once in a while, please make sure every morning that it works. And if it doesn't when I happen to be around, then somebody is going to be in for a tough time because I do not want sloppiness... I do not ask of you more than I am prepared to give myself. And I say it does you no harm whatsoever just to make sure that the thing works. And don't be too kind. If you want to be kind to your people, to our people, then you have

got to be firm. And at times, stern to those who have a duty to perform to see that the duty is performed.”

– Peter Ho, former Head of Civil Service, in The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew

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“When he visits various parts of Singapore, he is known to call up senior public servants to ask about matters as varied as why this tree is doing poorly and why that area is so dirty and poorly maintained. He would send memos... [On one] occasion in the 1960s, Mr Lee wrote to the permanent secretary for National Development:

We spoke the other day about the maintenance of jets, nozzles and pressure of all our public fountains. Make sure something is done to see that pressures are maintained and nozzles kept clean, every six months or year as the case may be, and the pattern never altered...

When I accompanied Mr Lee to visit the new Khoo Teck Puat Hospital a few years ago, he asked the hospital chief executive numerous questions about healthcare delivery and serving patients.

He then asked me about the problems with the building design. For example, he wanted to know whether the corridors got wet when it rained – they did – and whether the building might be less warm if we improved the planting of creepers down some of the walls. He even wanted to know whether the pond next to the hospital flooded and overflowed to the hospital when it rained. The answer, fortunately, was no.

This attention to detail by the boss matters. If the boss cares, everybody else up and down the line cares. If the boss does not care, standards can begin to slip.”

– Yong Ying-I, Permanent Secretary of the Public Service Division, in The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew

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“I met Mr Lee Kuan Yew for the first time in March 1999, when he interviewed me to be his Principal Private Secretary. The first time I stepped into his office, I was struck by how simply furnished and functional it was. As I was to understand later on, Mr Lee was not interested in form. His focus was always on substance, whether something really worked or not. During the interview, his questions came steadily and were probing. After each answer that I gave he would pause, and pose a next question that forced me to think deeper. I learnt during that first meeting, about Mr Lee’s expectation to think deeply about any issue that I needed to discuss with him.

Many people knew Mr Lee to be stern and no-nonsense. He taught us how a leader needs to set high and exacting standards. But I found him to be a caring boss too, a side of him not as publicly known. Mr Lee had on more than one occasion, told me that I should get enough sleep otherwise I won’t be able to function optimally. He did not have to say this. I was appreciative that he cared enough to do so.

When Mr Lee decided that something was worth doing, he would ensure that it would be done well. He had this sharp focus and single-mindedness, and once he sets his mind on an objective, he would see it through. The lesson for me watching Mr Lee was that if something is worth doing for Singapore, it is worth doing very well.

What qualities of Mr Lee left a deep impact on me? There were many. But what stood out for me was Mr Lee’s discipline. His lifelong effort at learning Mandarin is well known. Every week, he would stick to the discipline of at least one Mandarin lesson. Every day he would keep to his exercise regime. He showed me the importance of having a strong will, in order to do something successfully.”

– Leo Yip, Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs, was Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s Principal Private Secretary from 2000 to 2002

On SUSTAINABILITY



Source: PUB, the national water agency

Since 1963, Mr Lee never missed his yearly tradition of tree-planting, a sign of his commitment to creating a Garden City. He took a personal interest in anything related to greening and brought in ideas from his detailed observations overseas. Making Singapore clean and green wasn't just for the sake of aesthetics but to assure investors that this country made the effort to improve itself. Similarly, his vision that the then-putrid Singapore River could one day contribute to the nation's water supply spurred him to initiate a decade-long cleanup in 1977. Guided by the belief that "every other policy had to bend at the knees for water survival", Mr Lee led efforts to expand local rainwater catchment areas, increasing the number of reservoirs by nearly five times from 1960 to 1986. His unwavering focus on diversifying water sources for self-sufficiency paved the way for today's "Four Taps" strategy (complementing imported and local catchment water with desalination and NEWater). Today, the Marina Barrage stands as proof of his foresight.

"An elected government cannot have certain sections of the city green and clean, as when the British were here, and leave the rest to fester... No society like that will thrive ... No family will want its young men to die for all the people with the big homes and those owning the tall towers. So it was important that the whole island be clean, green and with everybody owning property. It was a fundamental principle on which I crafted all policies, and it's worked. This is a priority which was very high up on my list. Apart from finance and defence, it's a sense of equalness in this society. You can't have this sense without giving all Singaporeans a clean and green Singapore."

– Lee Kuan Yew in Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going

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"Mr Lee was pragmatic and realistic. His view is that nothing could be done without adequate funds. In 1978, Mr Lee called a big meeting at the Istana, attended by several Permanent Secretaries. George Edwin Bogaars was then Perm Sec for Finance. After a lengthy talk about the Garden City, Mr Lee suddenly said, 'George, give them the money. If I put a polythene bag over your head, you will suffocate!'

Mr Lee was referring to the Parks and Recreation Department (PRD)'s extensive work at the time to install perforated concrete aeration slabs to cover up the tree bases, so that people walking over such areas would not cause compaction. Compaction would 'suffocate' the roots by preventing air and moisture going into the root environment of the trees. Incidentally, it was difficult to get money from the Ministry of Finance for the annual budget, but after that meeting, it was easy to get money for [our] annual budget and to increase [the] staff of the PRD."

– Wong Yew Kwan was Singapore's first Commissioner of Parks and Recreation in 1974, when Parks and Recreation was still a Division under the Public Works Department

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"During one of the tree-planting ceremonies in 1984, Mr Lee Kuan Yew suggested to me that the PRD should plant big, tall jungle trees in our major parks, saying, 'You and I will not enjoy them but our grandchildren will.'

Mr Lee initiated the planting of fruit trees in housing estates and in government institutions in 1981. His objective was to inculcate social discipline in our society. He wanted to see that our people respect public property. In his observations in Greece and Japan, he said fruits from roadside trees were never stolen. He asked if fruits from trees planted in housing estates were stolen, whereupon I informed him that some were not only stolen, but bore teeth marks on the fruits like the guava, where children had tested them for ripeness. Amused, he laughed, saying, 'Never mind, plant more fruit trees until they get tired of stealing them.'"

– Chua Sian Eng, former Commissioner of Parks and Recreation Department (1983-1995), in Garden City Singapore – The Legacy Of Lee Kuan Yew

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"Mr Lee embedded in us the psyche of survival and security when it comes to water, and it has been our guiding principle in PUB ever since. I recall the most

critical afternoon meeting with him (in 2002) when my officer and I had to persuade him that our water master plan with NEWater was the answer to our water challenge. In the midst of the discussion, he fell strangely silent for some time, deep in thought. Suddenly he turned to me and pointedly asked, as if cross-examining me in a court of law, whether we could deliver on our plan to wean Singapore [off] imported water. After spending so many afternoons with him, listening to his intense concern for water, how else could I respond except to give him a resounding 'Yes'. A man of his vision and passion demanded and deserved nothing less. I remembered so well his reaction. He fell back into his chair, became silent again for a long while, and then to my amazement, he gave a smile the likes of which I have never seen before from him. With that, he rose and left the meeting. I knew he had decided we could make it. I was left in awe at the very calculated way he weighs the risks and takes a firm decision with no turning back."

– Tan Gee Paw, Chairman of PUB, joined the Public Works Department in 1967 and was Permanent Secretary of the Environment from 1995 to 2001

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"Reservoirs were my domain. The moment we separated in 1965, I felt that we would need to conserve as much of our water as we could collect because we never could predict how they would move to pressure us. Every now and then, they'd say: 'Stop the water.' So we dammed up all the rivers, created Upper Peirce and Upper Seletar. We had many new reservoirs and expanded the water catchment. The Marina and the cleaning up of the rivers was my top agenda. I pressed the PUB, with Lee Ek Tieng, the Chief Water Engineer. I said: 'We will do this whatever its cost.' So we cleaned up the city... All the open drains were for clean rain water to be channelled eventually into reservoirs. That took 15, 20 years, but it was done. Now we're going to have the Marina together with the Singapore and Kallang rivers as a reservoir. With reverse osmosis, we can now safely use the water in the Marina."

– Lee Kuan Yew, as quoted in Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore

On COMMUNICATION



Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Mr Lee Kuan Yew was an orator who could move a crowd with his fiery speeches. He knew that leaders must be able to communicate ideas and feelings well. As a parent, he made sure his children spoke properly and used correct language. With the help of his wife Mdm Kwa Geok Choo, he refined his writing style to be even more direct and concise, to write in short sentences and in the active voice so that the man in the street could understand what he wanted to say. On bilingualism, Mr Lee practised what he preached – he took up Chinese lessons and made sure his children were educated in Chinese in their early years. He was clear that English had to be Singapore’s language of business and administration but he saw the need for Singaporeans to learn a second language – Mandarin, Malay or Tamil – so that they could be rooted in their culture and values through their mother tongues.

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“My purpose in writing my books is to get the average ‘O’ level graduates ... to read it and understand it. So, my wife was my scrubber. You know, I’m an orator, or at least I try to be. So, I have [oratorical] flourishes when I speak. You must have flourishes because then you capture people’s attention and you expand on it; then you’re able to go back and repeat it, but not in words. So she tells me, look – and she’s a draftsman; as a lawyer, she did all the drafting of agreements, contracts, conveyances and so on; so she uses words precisely – she says, ‘Why do you want to write it like this? The ‘O’ level boy will not understand this. Why not use a simple word instead of this polysyllabic word?’

So I said, okay, I agree with you and I think in the course of the two, three years that she corrected my drafts, after the first year, I began to write simple, clear, crisp, I mean, no convoluted, sentences.”

– Lee Kuan Yew in Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew: Citizen Singapore: How to Build A Nation (Giants of Asia)

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“Mr Lee... taught me that a leader not only needed to have clarity of views and single-mindedness of purpose, but also required a capacity for clear communication, where complex problems were conveyed in a way that could be grasped and understood by the man in the street ... he once called together all the senior civil servants for a forum at the Regional English Language Centre to discuss what he considered to be unacceptably low standards in the drafting of Cabinet papers, where ideas were not clearly expressed, grammatical errors were too many, sentences were too long, and words were badly chosen. We were not to camouflage ambiguity and uncertainty with words. And we all ended up having to attend classes on writing simply and directly. *The Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers became a serious benchmark and reference for us all.”

– Lim Siong Guan, the former Head of Civil Service from 1999 to 2005, served as Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s first Principal Private Secretary from 1978 to 1981

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“[Mr Lee Kuan Yew] used to deliver his [National Day Rally] speech in Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin and English... the Education Ministry pointed out to him that he was not setting a good example by using Hokkien when schools were trying to teach Mandarin. So his last speech in Hokkien was in 1979. In the same year, on 7 September 1979, three weeks after his last Hokkien speech at the rally, he launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

At the launch, Mr Lee urged young people – students and graduates – to give up dialects in five years and to have Mandarin, English and Malay become the language of the coffee shops, hawker centres, shops, cinemas and other public places.

Years later, in 2005, when asked if he worried about the political cost of giving up Hokkien as many people were then still speaking dialects, Mr Lee said: ‘I had a responsibility not to mislead the young. As long as I was still speaking Hokkien at the National Day Rally, I was in fact saying it is okay to do so... So never mind the price; setting a good example, it had to be done.’

In March 1992, then Senior Minister Lee launched the Mandarin-speaking luncheon for ministers at the Istana. Senior journalists from the Chinese press, including myself, were invited to join in the lunch. Present at the inauguration lunch were PM Goh Chok Tong, Minister for Education Lee Yock Suan, Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo, Minister for Labour Dr Lee Boon Yang and Minister for Communications Mah Bow Tan.

I recall that a week before the launch, Goh Chok Tong shared with us that the conversation during these luncheon meetings would be entirely in Mandarin. The idea was to force him and other ministers to discuss current affairs in Mandarin with people from Chinese-speaking backgrounds. This would help them overcome the psychological barriers, pick up more Chinese vocabulary, especially on politics and economics, and form a habit of speaking Mandarin more naturally without inhibitions. Once they gained enough confidence, they would start doing this in public. Of course, all this would be done without causing uneasiness among the minorities.”

– Seng Han Thong, Member of Parliament and former journalist, in The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew

Excerpts from Mr Lee Kuan Yew's speech to Ministers of State and senior civil service officers at the Regional Language Centre on February 27, 1979:

"What I want to discuss is the importance of simple, clear, written English. This is not simple. Dr Goh [Keng Swee] gives every officer whom he thinks is promising and whose minutes or papers are deficient in clarity, a paperback edition of Gowers' *Complete Plain Words*. It presupposes that the man who attempts to read the book has reached a certain level of literary competence. The book, written words ... cannot convey to you the emphasis, the importance, the urgency, unless the receiver is a trained reader. And in any case, human beings are never moved by written words. It is the spoken word that arouses them to action.

I want to convince you, first, of the importance of clear, written communication; second, that you can master it, if you apply yourself. The use of words, the choice and arrangement of words in accordance with generally accepted rules of grammar, syntax and usage, can accurately convey ideas from one mind to another. It can be mastered, even though you are not an Englishman.

When I was a law student I learned that every word, every sentence has three possible meanings: what the speaker intends it to mean, what the hearer understands it to mean, and what it is commonly understood to mean. So when a coded message is sent in a telegram, the sender knows what he means, the receiver knows exactly what is meant, the ordinary person reading it can make no sense of it at all.

When you write notes, minutes or memoranda, do not write in code, so that only those privy to your thoughts can understand. Write so simply so that any other officer who knows nothing of the subject can still understand you. To do this, avoid confusion and give words their ordinary meanings.

Let me just give a few recent illustrations of writing so sloppy that I had to seek clarification of their meanings:

First item: **With increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, we will require continued assistance particularly in the technological and managerial fields.**

I asked myself, 'What have I missed in this? What has the first part about urbanisation and industrialisation to do with the second part about continued assistance? Why do we need more assistance particularly in technological and managerial skills because of increasing urbanisation and industrialisation?' It is non-sequitur. We need technological and managerial assistance anyway. The first part does not lead to the second part.

Item from the Ministry of Education: **(It is necessary to study) the correlation between language aptitude, intelligence and values and attitudes to ensure that the various echelons of leaders are not only effectively bilingual but also of the desirable calibre.**

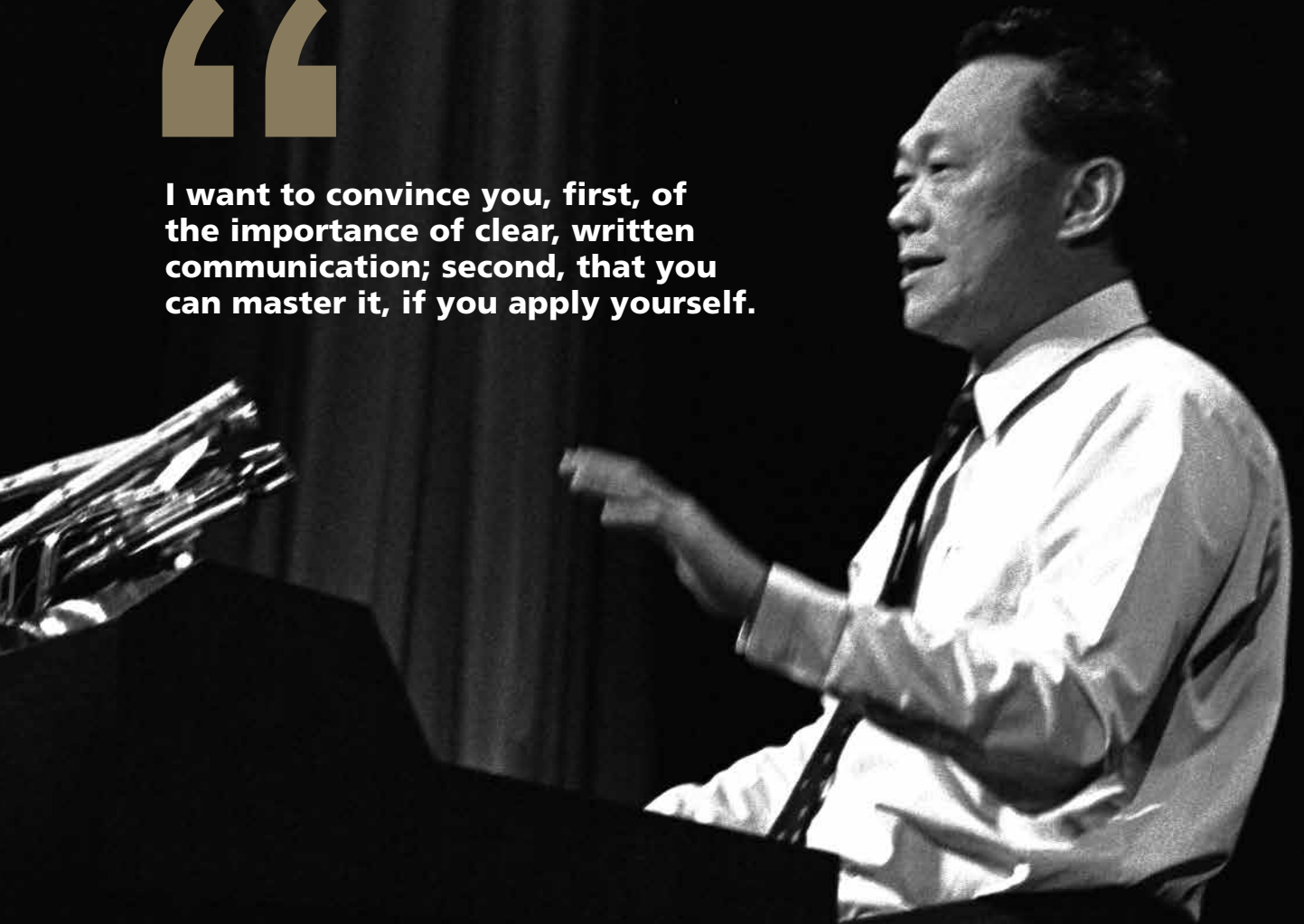
I read it over and over again. It made no sense. This is gibberish! I inquired and I was told, well, they were trying to find out how language ability and intelligence should influence the methods for instilling good social values and attitudes. Well, then say so. But somebody wanted to impress me by dressing up his ideas in many important words. Next time impress me with the simple way you get your ideas across to me.

If we do not make a determined effort to change, the process of government will slow down. It will snarl up. I have noted this steady deterioration over the last 20 years. I want to reverse it. If we start with those at the top, we can achieve a dramatic improvement in two years, provided the effort is made. Now I want to discuss how we can do it.

First, you must want to achieve it. I want you to because without effective written communication within the government, there will be misunderstanding and confusion. Every passing year we shall more and more assess the worth of officers for their language competence. We cannot afford to overlook language incompetence.



I want to convince you, first, of the importance of clear, written communication; second, that you can master it, if you apply yourself.



Let me explain my problems over learning languages so that you will know that you are not alone. When I made my first speech in Hokkien in 1961 during the Hong Lim by-elections, the children in China Street hooted with derision and contempt. I was unintelligible. I was talking gibberish. They laughed and jeered at me. I was in no mood for laughter. I could not give up. I just had to make myself understood. I had a Hokkien teacher follow me. He knew what I wanted to say. The ideas were there.

Let me emphasise this point. Before you can put ideas into words, you must have ideas. Otherwise, you are attempting the impossible.

The written English we want is clean, clear prose. I choose my words carefully – not elegant, not stylish, just clean, clear prose. It means simplifying, polishing and tightening.

Remember: That which is written without much effort is seldom read with much pleasure. The more the pleasure, you can assume, as a rule of thumb, the greater the effort.

So when you send me or send your Minister a minute or a memo, or a draft that has to be published like the President's Address, do not try to impress by big words – impress by the clarity of your ideas. Then I am impressed. I speak as a practitioner. If I had not been able to reduce complex ideas into simple words and project them vividly for mass understanding, I would not be here today."

For the full speech, go to bit.ly/LKYrelc

REFLECTIONS

Hiccups or not, the interview will go on

"In 2012, I had the privilege of being included in a team of *Straits Times* journalists who provided research and editorial support to Mr Lee Kuan Yew in the writing of the book, *One Man's View of the World*. I was 28 that year and Mr Lee was six decades older than me.

I read as much as I could and interviewed experts on the subjects to be discussed, hoping I would not be caught out. I soon found out that doing your homework was absolutely necessary, because Mr Lee certainly did his. He came for his interviews well-prepared to engage us. Of course he had a repository of wisdom and experience [but] not wanting to take things for granted, he had clearly spent time thinking through the fresh questions we had sent him.

Even at 89, Mr Lee had a work ethic that would put many to shame. Once, his assistant saw him resting after lunch and asked if he would rather postpone an interview scheduled for that afternoon. He declined to. Another time, he soldiered on despite hiccups which persisted throughout the hour-long interview. Often, he would send emails to the team after the interview, rephrasing something he had said to express his views more clearly.

In the interviews, he spoke much about our ageing population as well as the need to ensure that English remained the first language here even if China were to become a very dominant power in the region. In an age when many leaders fail to see past the next election cycle, here I was talking to an octogenarian thinking decades into the future."

– Elgin Toh, Assistant Director at the National Security Coordination Secretariat, was a former journalist

Mr Lee was a master teacher to me

"Mr Lee taught me that building a nation was not the same as building a city; a city is made of plans and concrete structures, but a nation is made of people united to work together for a bright future for all.

I well remember my first meeting with Mr Lee as his Principal Private Secretary. He told me that in the course of my work, I would be dealing with foreigners, and said: 'Always look the foreigner in his eyes. Never look down. You are dealing with him as a representative of Singapore. Conduct yourself as his equal.' As I look back, I plainly see that in this wise instruction lay the reason for what has made Singapore so much of what it is – well-regarded by the world, respected, self-aware, pushing always against the boundaries of possibilities.

Mr Lee had me sit in all his official meetings. It was his way of training me to develop understanding and judgment on the broad range of issues of government. When he was dealing with the merging of the then Nanyang University with the then University of Singapore, he took great pains to explain to me the issues involved, especially since he was sending me to discuss the matter with the Chairman of the Nanyang University Council.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew was a master teacher to me; he infused deep lessons on leadership and governance. I learnt always to be on the lookout for talent and to do whatever I could to allow people to achieve their potential. He had me and a whole team of Permanent Secretaries spend a number of days with Shell International in London to learn how they assessed the performance and potential of their staff. We modified their practices and suitably changed the Singapore Civil Service's system for the annual appraisal of performance and potential of all public officers.

Mr Lee deeply impressed me on his conviction that Singaporeans had to be relentless in striving for excellence, and desire to be the best we could be



Source: Roslan Rahman/AFP/Getty Images

To Mr Lee, Singapore was a gemstone

“Mr Lee was incredibly farsighted. He saw possibilities where others saw obstacles. He expanded our international space so that we would have room to grow. He was determined that Singapore should survive. Where others saw Singapore as a little speck on the world map, he saw a rough gemstone that could be polished and made brilliant.

Mr Lee set high standards. Singapore would still be a grotty and dirty city if not for his attention to small details, like the drains and toilets. In sprucing up Singapore and transforming it into a clean and green city, he was not only beautifying the city, but differentiating Singapore from other cities and demonstrating we could sustain the effort. By applying these standards to himself, he set the tone for the rest of the government. He also believed that the government should be judged on its actions, rather than words.

Mr Lee believed that adapting to change was part of Singapore's ‘karma’. He would often say we were too small to buck global trends. Singapore would need to change as the world changes by constantly adapting, being nimble and staying relevant. The biggest challenge has always been how to manage this change. Mr Lee was adept in bringing these challenges to the fore and stimulating a public debate, where he would bring out the ‘hard truths’ and persuade Singaporeans to do what was in their best interests. But he was wise enough to recognise his own limitations.

The Singapore Story is far from complete. It is still work-in-progress. We can only hope the fundamentals are not forgotten and we do not fall victim to our own success. Mr Lee's generation was unique, shaped by the historical forces and circumstances of their day. No one knows what the future holds. Mr Lee's greatest legacy was to show us all that if we have the gumption to succeed, Singapore's future can and will be secured.”

in everything we did. For Singapore, unlike for so many other countries, survival and success were two sides of the same coin. There are countries that are independent but not sovereign, and countries that are sovereign but not independent. Singapore must seek to be friends with all who would be friends with Singapore, but never forget that no one owes us a living and that no one else is responsible for our security. The drive to be exceptional in the way we think is not an option: it is destiny for Singapore.

There was a funny side, though, to all this drive for excellence. I had to sit in on lunches and dinners which Mr Lee hosted for many people. I noticed that the menu was always the same. So I asked the Secretary to the Cabinet, who has passed away many years ago, why this was so. He said that they had been experimenting for a long time on the menu, but Mr Lee often had one criticism or another. Finally, the current menu had not evoked any complaint from him, so they had stuck with it. Clearly this was a case where ‘satisfaction’ had been treated as ‘perfection’. I did notice, however, that Mr Lee enjoyed a much more varied palate on his overseas trips, where Mrs Lee often encouraged him to reach out for new experiences in food.”

– Lim Siong Guan, the former Head of Civil Service from 1999 to 2005, served as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's first Principal Private Secretary from 1978 to 1981

– Andrew Tan, Chief Executive of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, was Mr Lee Kuan Yew's Principal Private Secretary from 2002 to 2004

An unforgettable **THANK YOU**

Mr Soh Beow Koon, now 82, was the longest serving caretaker in Parliament when he retired in 2002 as Caretaker (Special Grade). Affectionately known as “Ah Koon” to decades of MPs, his duties included serving drinks to Mr Lee Kuan Yew and helping him to buy lunch.

After Mr Lee became Prime Minister in 1959, the leader would often walk between Parliament House and his office at City Hall for meetings. Ah Koon would accompany him on the walks, whenever he had to buy lunch for Mr Lee from the stalls behind City Hall (where the current Supreme Court stands).

“Then, we wore shorts and went about barefoot,” recounted Ah Koon in Mandarin. “When Mr Lee saw my bare feet, he asked me ‘Isn’t it hot for you to walk on the roads like this?’ I told him I was used to it.”

Shortly after this encounter, the caretakers were issued canvas shoes and their uniform was changed

to long pants. “We would get new shoes from Parliament when they wore out,” Ah Koon said with a smile.

For lunch, Mr Lee enjoyed a simple *nasi padang* meal or a plate of *char kway teow* with egg. In his 30s, Mr Lee preferred English tea with “some Carnation milk and three cubes of sugar”. As he grew older, the statesman began drinking Chinese tea, and finally, just warm water.

The faithful caretaker never made small talk with the leader but the pair still built up rapport over the years. “When he came into Parliament for meetings, he would look for me and make this hand gesture that he wanted warm water,” said Ah Koon, holding up his thumb and index fingers two inches apart to mimic a short glass of water.

Ah Koon recalled how he once spilled a cup of coffee onto then Minister for Culture Mr S Rajaratnam after Mr Lee bumped into the caretaker. Shocked, Ah Koon apologised profusely, but Mr Lee jumped in to say, in Mandarin, “Don’t worry about it. It was my fault.”

The caretaker, who watched the MPs debate and discuss national policies from the sidelines, said affordable public housing and the CPF Home Ownership Scheme introduced by Mr Lee impacted him the most. These policies helped him to buy the Clementi flat he has lived in for 30 years. “I was afraid my CPF wasn’t enough then, but it still came in useful and I was able to slowly repay the loan.”

When Ah Koon retired, a dinner was held in his honour. As he walked down the stage after receiving his farewell gift, he passed by Mr Lee who stood up, shook the caretaker’s hand and said, “Thank you” in Mandarin. “This, I will remember forever,” said Ah Koon, “because he knew I had served at Parliament for so long.”



Illustration by Lee Xin Li, based on a black and white photograph of Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the HDB’s third estate in Queenstown, in 1965. Source: www.facebook.com/PokPokAway