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The LKY legacy

Lee Kuan Yew isn't to blame if Singapore can't let go of him.

One of Lee Kuan Yew's most admirable acts of foresight was to usher out Singapore's first-generation leaders in order to hasten the rejuvenation of the People's Action Party. Giants like Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam and E.W. Barker retired from the government in the 1980s, when they were still younger than Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump were upon entering the White House. In the short term, this represented a massive underutilisation of talent. But that's how determined Lee was to make sure that the next generation—the likes of Goh Chok Tong, Ong Teng Cheong, Tony Tan and S. Dhanabalan—would emerge from the shadow of their seniors to secure the future of the party.

PAP exit management under Lee had one major omission, though. Himself. Lee felt he needed to stick around. Since his designated successor Goh Chok Tong did not object, Lee didn't accompany his first-generation comrades to the early retirement he had so strenuously advocated. After 1991, when Singapore got a new premier for the first time in 32 years, various terms were used to describe Lee's new position. Senior Minister. Minister Mentor.

Goalkeeper. Whatever the title, for the next 20 years, the simple political reality was that LKY was still around. At *The Straits Times*, word came from way above my pay grade that we were not to say he stepped *down*. He stepped *aside*.

It could have been much worse. He could have held on to the top job like Cuba's Fidel Castro, who also won power in 1959 but would only concede it to death, 47 years later. Or like Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, who has said he'll run for another five-year term in 2018, when he'll be 94. Or he could have done a Mahathir Mohamad, who never met a potential or actual successor he didn't eventually consider an enemy to undermine or incarcerate.

If Lee didn't join this club, it wasn't because he lacked self-belief or the stomach for undemocratic methods. Perhaps his autocratic tendency was tempered by his hyper-rational, unsentimental view of life. He knew time changes everything, and that people grow old, get weak, and die. So, while convinced that Singapore needed an omnipotent executive branch to run the place, he also knew its personnel would have to be rotated before they succumbed to their mortality. He also differed from the typical dictator in that his family was clean. Corrupt strongmen avoid the exit door because they fear it will lead them and their kin straight to prison. The Lees didn't have that problem.

Whatever the reasons, Lee Kuan Yew didn't follow the jealous despot script. Instead, he institutionalised a system of leadership renewal. Therefore, while the PAP as a party is unapologetic about its desire to dominate politics indefinitely, PAP leaders as individuals accept they have to make way for younger replacements.

Things could have been worse; but they could have also been better. Political self-renewal must mean more than replacing older leaders with younger ones. It may require systemic change as well. This is where the PAP fell short. Lee and his junior colleagues failed to adapt their governance model to the post-LKY era. They underestimated how much the system had evolved around Lee's style and philosophy. After three decades, the state had become like a corporate computer system patched together by a brilliant IT guy

who refuses to adopt off-the-shelf solutions used by other firms, and insists on installing his own custom-built software upgrades year after year. He is conscientious enough to train apprentices and write a voluminous troubleshooting guide. But only he knows how to get optimum performance out of his system. Eventually, the company will find out the hard way that it should have adopted more resilient open-source solutions that wouldn't depend on their champion IT guy being on call 24/7.

The globally respected operating system that Lee rejected while he was in office was the democratic template of checks and balances to avoid over-concentrated power. Robust institutions insure against the mortality and fallibility of human leaders. Lee placed his bets instead on a conveyor belt of able men unfettered by onerous constraints. This had been Lee's unique contribution to the founding generation. The master political strategist opened up space for brilliant policy entrepreneurs like Goh Keng Swee and Hon Sui Sen to work their wonders. He did this partly with his persuasive skills, but also by pushing aside legal, institutional and human obstacles in the way of an increasingly dominant administration.

Lee failed to acknowledge that this formula couldn't last indefinitely. His miscalculation produced at least two policy innovations that proved costly for the PAP, and for which the party is still paying a price. These were the elected presidency and the ministerial pay formula. Both were the products of a mind obsessed, as it always had been, with the challenge of protecting Singapore governance from the vagaries of public opinion and the popular vote. They were hatched during that period from the late 1980s to the 1990s when Lee was handing over to the second-generation leadership, and anticipating what might go wrong. And both became Frankenstein's monsters that made his successors' jobs harder, not easier.

The elected presidency was Lee's insurance policy against a so-called freak election that could bring the wrong party into power. The insurgents might only last a single parliamentary term, but they

could cause permanent damage in that time, Lee feared. They could raid the country's financial reserves and replace key public sector appointment holders with incompetent cronies. Lee decided that the office of the president had to be given the power to veto such plans. This new executive role would require the president to be directly elected by the people.

Lee's constitutional fix, meant to make Singapore more stable, ironically created one of its main sources of political uncertainty. The freak election scenario remains a whimsical notion; but in the meantime, presidential elections have opened up a new front to challenge PAP dominance. This has forced the PAP to shift more attention away from governance and towards politics—the exact opposite of what Lee spent most of his career trying to do. To fix the problem, PAP leaders have had to go through various contortions, including reducing the power of the president in relation to the unelected Council of Presidential Advisers, and lecturing Singaporeans that they must not politicise the presidency. The rancour surrounding presidential elections—and the attendant cost to the symbolic ceremonial stature of the head of state—had been predicted by Singaporeans who submitted thoughtful feedback during the Select Committee hearings on the constitutional amendments. Lee brushed aside their concerns.

The pay formula for ministers and senior civil servants was another radical idea born of Lee's frustration with an obtuse Singapore public. He was justifiably concerned that skyrocketing private sector pay would weaken the public sector's ability to recruit top talent. He was correct to conclude that the government could not let its remuneration lag too far behind. Where he went wrong was to decide that, instead of arguing it out in parliament every time it needed to revise its pay structure, the government should create an automatic formula pegging public officials' salaries to those of top earners such as lawyers, bankers and corporate chief executives.

Singaporeans could see the flaws in the idea. A league table of top salaries in fields like banking and corporate management would

show very high figures year after year, but those salaries were not going to the same people every year. Firms and individuals would enter and leave the list; they were in risky, competitive markets. Like boy bands, they might be at the pinnacle for only a few years. In contrast, the government's stars would continue to get top dollar for a couple of decades, their pay being pegged to the private sector's equivalent of Westlife in the 1990s, the Jonas Brothers in the 2000s, and One Direction in the 2010s. This just didn't smell right. Many Singaporeans also had deep concerns about so explicitly marketising the relationship between leaders and led.

But Lee Kuan Yew was determined to do what he had always done: use his political clout to create a structural fix that, he thought, would put an end to unproductive debates and let the government get on with the job. Concluding his marathon speech during the 1994 parliamentary debate on the formula, Lee declared, "I say I am prepared to put my experience and my judgement against all the arguments that doubters can muster. In five to ten years, when it works and Singapore has a good government, this formula will be accepted as conventional wisdom."

In the realm of embarrassing 1990s predictions, this one vies with 3Com founder Robert Metcalfe's statement the following year: "I predict the internet will soon go spectacularly supernova and in 1996 catastrophically collapse." For instead of depoliticising the question of public sector remuneration, Lee's formula bequeathed to his successors possibly the era's single most toxic policy move. Exactly as critics predicted, it infected government–people relations with cynicism and distrust.

The PAP had prided itself on its willingness to make unpopular decisions in the country's long-term interest, but now when ministers resisted the popular will, their motivations would be questioned—*of course* they don't care about the people, they only care about their high-paying jobs. The market-pegged formula also made people contemptuously unforgiving of inevitable mistakes—*this* is what million-dollar salaries get us? Another serious unintended but predictable consequence was to make the

civil service resistant to change, by disincentivising risk-taking among officers earning salaries many know they can't command elsewhere.

Lee Kuan Yew admitted to making mistakes, especially in pushing zero population growth too aggressively in the 1970s. But he couldn't really be faulted for that one, since practically all governments looking at similar demographic trends arrived at similar policy prescriptions. In contrast, Lee's ideas to restructure the presidency and public sector pay in the 1990s were idiosyncratically his own. And they were not cases of random error but systematic error, as scientists would put it. They resulted from his peculiar obsession with protecting the state from the unpredictability of democratic politics. He had more or less succeeded in doing so in earlier decades—like that special IT guy, constantly troubleshooting and tinkering. But he overestimated his ability to design plug-ins for Singapore's operating system that would continue to function smoothly after he left.

He does not deserve all the blame. As he phased himself out of day-to-day government, it was up to his younger colleagues to stress-test his legacy clinically and redesign the system accordingly. If they were too in awe of his status as supreme architect of PAP software, that was their fault, not his.

That's why my heart fell when he became the first casualty of the PAP's 2011 general election setback. Sure, it was ill-advised of him to spout warnings during the campaign that Aljunied voters would "repent" if they elected the opposition. But the strong anti-PAP swing was due to cabinet's collective blunders in the preceding years, which had little to do with Lee.

Shamefully, he—jointly with Goh Chok Tong—was allowed to announce his resignation a week after the election, and before colleagues whose presence in cabinet Singaporeans had been querying for years, like Wong Kan Seng. It was an undeservedly ignominious end to a government career that would be eulogised tearfully four years later.

Lee and Goh said they were doing it to indicate "that the PM can

and will revise and revamp his policies... to give PM and his team the room to break from the past, and... to make it clear that the PAP has never been averse to change". When he accepted their resignations a few days later, Lee Hsien Loong allowed their rationale to stand—to “leave it to me and my team of younger ministers to take Singapore forward into the future”—thus throwing out of the window two decades of PAP assurances that Lee Kuan Yew’s presence in cabinet had never been an obstacle to progress, since ministers had minds of their own.

For more than a decade, Lee Kuan Yew had been codifying his beliefs in his memoirs and other books. This exercise was a symptom of the PAP’s understandable anxiety that its unique formula for good governance would not survive him. But it also contributed to the old pragmatism of the PAP giving way to dogmatism. After LKY’s final, emotional exit in February 2015, the depth of his influence became even more apparent. LKYism became a kind of quasi-theology, with members of the governing elite falling over one another to cite his words and acts, and thus show that they were the legitimate interpreters and inheritors of Singapore’s ultimate oracle. Being “against Mr Lee’s values” emerged as a damning label to stick on opponents within the establishment. Lee had long been called the founding father of the republic, but in 2017, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean took the quantum leap of declaring that all of us—as individuals, not just collectively—are “sons and daughters” of Lee Kuan Yew. Of course, Teo did not actually possess the power to rewrite everyone’s birth certificate, but the remark revealed Lee’s place in the minds of the PAP’s senior leadership.

Teo’s declaration came during the parliamentary debate on the 38 Oxley Road controversy. This was a debate that engrossed the establishment and most ordinary Singaporeans. It centred on what to do with the building that was Lee Kuan Yew’s private residence during his adult life. The debate missed the point. The question we should be asking is how much room to give to the Lee Kuan Yew that will reside in the Singaporean mind long after his death.