

# Meritocracy and the Singapore Political System

Thomas J. Bellows

*A meritocracy presumes those with innate and demonstrated talent will be an elite. The implementation of meritocracy remains a guiding principle of the People's Action Party's (PAP) non-communist leaders who have governed Singapore since 1959. This article focuses on meritocracy, elected public officials and the PAP's recruiting to government a cohort from among Singapore's best and brightest. The success of the PAP, the world's longest-governing elected political party, is based on meritocracy, incorruptibility and effective policies. Important to understanding Singapore's meritocracy is political recruitment which has been refined for half a century. Compensation for the high flyers means elected officials and top civil servants are probably the highest paid in the world. The realistic justification is that you can retain outstanding persons. Comprehensive and effective anti-corruption measures combined with high pay means Singapore is one of the most corruption free governments in the world.*

*Keywords: Singapore; Meritocracy; People's Action Party; Political Recruitment; Elections*

## Introduction

Singapore emerged from World War II a British Crown Colony and achieved local self-government in 1959. Since 1959, for 50 unbroken years, Singapore has been governed by the People's Action Party (PAP). Singapore emerged from a brutal Japanese occupation with most of its residents submerged in poverty, confronting a crippled economy and at times severe communal tension. The obvious asset of a superb geographical location was sporadically impeded by a South-east Asia region in economic and political turmoil.

The city-state of Singapore is small, 273 square miles with a population in 2008 of 4,839,400 (Singapore Government, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Singapore's size makes communication, face-to-face contact and coordination easier than in most countries. Today, with a per

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capita income of over US\$30,000, Singapore is a developed country possessing most of the characteristics and qualities of life in the democratic world, often described as the First World.

Singapore obtained internal self-government with the May 1959 elections. The Legislative Assembly became fully elected, and voting was compulsory. External affairs and defence remained under British control. Local and British officials shared control of internal security. Internal self-government was followed by two years in Malaysia – September 1963 to August 1965. Singapore separated from Malaysia and became fully independent on 9 August 1965 (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Singapore's success can be attributed to two factors. The first factor is the superb geographical location between South Asia and East Asia. In terms of marine topography, there is no better port in South-east Asia. Nowhere along the main international arteries of transport – the Malacca Strait and the Sunda Strait – is there deep water close in, except for Singapore.

A few miles from Singapore River, at the southernmost tip of the island where two offshore islands form a narrow strait, a most untypical geological fault has created a deep fissure, an abrupt drop, hard against the land. Scored constantly by tides that sweep in and out of either end, this narrow strait saved Singapore from decay and possible extinction. By keeping the channels clear of silt it helped to make it one of the world's greatest ports. (Tregonning, 1964: 124)

The second reason for Singapore's success is an efficient and effective government the policies and implementation of which have been largely successful for 50 years. It should be obvious by now that an efficient government that nurtures and facilitates the optimal use of human and natural resources will govern a prospering country. Unfortunately, relatively few countries that became independent after World War II strove to establish a non-dictatorial, problem-solving political system. Fifty years ago, a distinguished political sociologist succinctly identified the obvious, which Singapore has followed:

Legitimacy involved the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society. . . . [Legitimacy] depends in large measure upon the ways in which the key issues. . . have been resolved. (Lipset, 1960: 77)

The early years of PAP rule were characterized by several political challenges (Bellows, 1970). But since the 1968 elections, no more than three opposition candidates have been elected to Parliament (so named after full independence), which has a current elected membership of 84 members. No opposition candidates were returned in the 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980 general elections. There are several reasons for these electoral wins, but the principal reason was effective policies by a meritocratic political leadership.

This article focuses on meritocracy as a defining trait of the Singapore polity. It is worth noting, though, that there is more openness and more pluralism in Singapore

than is generally recognized, and these continue to expand. The US Congress requires the Department of State to evaluate annually the human rights situation in approximately 190 countries. The 2007 Singapore report states: 'There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances. . . . There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees' (US Department of State, 2008: 1–3). The absence of such repression can be regarded as a minimal benchmark for a pluralizing society. The verifiable absence of such oppressive measures is relatively rare among a majority of the world's 200 political systems. Singapore deserves full credit, through it is seldom acknowledged, for deliberately eschewing such oppressive policies.

### **Meritocracy and Elitism**

Robert A. Dahl is a theorist whose generalizations and conceptualizations are grounded in the real world. Professor Dahl concludes that political systems are characterized by 'uneven control of political resources' (1991: 52). The first reason he lists is the specialization of functions in society or division of labour. Another reason is differences in social and biological inheritances (Dahl, 1991: 52–53). Even in full-fledged Western democracies, some individuals specialize in government—an elite if you will.

Meritocracy is a utilitarian formula that asserts those who purposefully contribute to a system's 'well being' will receive the greater rewards (Krauze and Slomczynski, 1985; Green, 1981; Pojman, 1999: 89).<sup>2</sup> Meritocracy is an integral component in Singapore's political system.

To assert that a small group of persons composes the critical group of decision-makers is not unusual. It is a norm in Singapore. The former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, now elevated to minister mentor, summarized political Singapore as it existed in its early years, and in many ways continues to exist today.

The main burden of present planning and implementation rests on the shoulders of some 300 key persons. . . . If all 300 were to crash in one Jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate. That shows how small the base is for our leadership. (cited National Heritage Board, 2003: 90)<sup>3</sup>

The meritocracy discussed in this article is limited to elected public officials.<sup>4</sup> Meritocracy, or the process of selecting persons on the basis of requisite achievement standards, is not unique. However, to apply the principle rigorously and consistently to an entire political leadership is extremely rare. Merit in contemporary achievement-oriented societies often is measured by tests of cognitive, psychological and social skills, educational achievement, reputation, self-assurance and actual job performance. Such a society includes social stratification, with individuals rewarded in occupational positions/careers that provide varying degrees of influence, compensation and status. To be successful in recruiting the meritorious, the criteria should be understood by most citizens, who should also believe that those in leadership positions have qualified through achievement and elections. Singapore's socio-economic achievements have

persuaded a majority of the citizenry the virtue of meritocracy as an objective and its implementation.

Meritocracy in terms of political recruitment to and advancement in political office has remained an unwavering government principle from the time the PAP first came to power. Singapore's success today is principally a result of optimal policy decisions, by a political elite.

A meritocracy presumes that the outstanding, the high flyers, those with innate talent will be an elite. Elite in the Singapore context is concerned first with academic excellence and then job accomplishment. Those recommending a person for political office look closely at individual achievement, persistent effort and personal integrity. Inevitably, an elite, however achieved, is often associated with privilege, presumptiveness, arrogance and not being sufficiently in touch with the general public. A meritocratic political elite must be concerned with neither distancing itself from the citizens nor lacking sympathy or empathy. A meritocratic political elite manifests the unequal distribution of political influence. The measure in Singapore's case is personal excellence and successful public policy. All political systems, though, are characterized by an unequal distribution of power. A sustained meritocracy places the maximum emphasis on ability, effort and achievement. Singapore's current 20-member cabinet exemplifies a meritocratic elite. All ministers hold university degrees. Two are medical doctors and two lawyers. Eighteen have earned degrees overseas.<sup>5</sup>

Elitism may connote, in the eyes of many voters, a distrust of the masses, the voting public, or at the least, talking down to them. Halfway through his prime ministership, Goh Chok Tong referred to such concerns in a political system governed by a meritocratic elite:

We know people generally do not like to have one dominant party, no matter how good it is. Hence it is very important for the PAP MP's never to be overbearing in their approach. This is something we have to learn. Sometimes it's not that we're overbearing but it's the way we make our speeches or communicate. We tend to say 'You should do this,' 'You must do that' because it's so much easier to write that sort of message than to write beautiful speeches. So we can come across as authoritarian. (cited PAP, 1999)

### **The Singapore Way**

As a small, globalized city-state, Singapore must be able to identify challenges and opportunities and respond swiftly. The ability to look ahead domestically, to carve niches globally, and to constantly renew and reinvent itself are prominent traditions in modern Singapore's short history. Today, Singapore is the most globalized country in the world, a ranking it has held four of the past seven years (Globalization Index, 2007: 3).

Abraham Lincoln's 1854 summary of what governments should do is similar to what the PAP has accomplished since coming to power, although in very different circumstances. Lincoln (1953: 220–221) wrote: 'The legitimate object of government is

to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done but cannot do, at all or cannot, so well do, for themselves—in their separate and individual capacities’.

Within a few years of Singapore’s independence in August 1965, Singapore faced the closing of the British naval base (1970–1971), which directly and indirectly contributed 20% to Singapore’s GNP. After 1959, it confronted the challenge of 40,000 students graduating from middle school and fewer than 20,000 new jobs per year. Housing for most Singapore residents had been deplorable, and the Housing and Development Board (created in 1960) was charged with providing clean and orderly housing block apartments, sometimes at the rate of 27,000 per year.

Singapore is a predominantly Chinese city (75.2%) located within eye contact of two nations with Chinese minorities (Indonesia and Malaysia), ruled by Malay governments. Singapore’s Malay population is 13.6% of the country’s population, with a slightly higher percentage of Singapore residents being Muslim. Indians are 8.8% and others—Eurasians, Europeans, etc.—constitute 2.4%.<sup>6</sup> The government’s primary task was fostering an equitable prosperity and creating jobs, without a hinterland to create a fall-back cushion. Another formidable challenge was the requirement to foster multiracialism, allowing room for ethnic identity yet nurturing a sufficient common space for national identity to emerge. The dynamics of such challenges within a small geographic area (270 square miles today) required an active, adaptive and directive government. Virtually little could be left to chance.<sup>7</sup>

Since the PAP came to power in 1959, it has maintained its unbroken rule because of its steadfast adherence to meritocracy and its willingness to adapt forward planning as part of its *modus operandi*—a vision that focuses on the intermediate future (five to 10 years), as well as a vigilant excising of corruption from the political and economic systems.<sup>8</sup> In Singapore’s case, soliciting foreign direct investment remains a fundamental policy in the strategy of survival.

Given the unending need for policy innovation, the early struggle (1955–1963) with the pro-communists in the party, the parallel need to restructure and reinvigorate the domestic economy, as well as the ins and out of Malaysia experience, it is not surprising that a primary objective was structuring a proactive, effective government.

## **The Elections**

Along with the never-ending challenges to survive, prosper and nurture a national identity, Singapore has conducted regular elections. Parliament is elected for a five-year term, subject to early dissolution. These elections are competitive, although not the free-wheeling, no-holds-barred type occurring in Great Britain, Western Europe, Canada, the United States, South Korea or Taiwan. Since 1959, voting in Singapore has been compulsory and legislative elections are held regularly.

The PAP’s winning electoral program is based on a platform of first tier, talented and virtuous rulers whose policies have nurtured long-term economic growth and prosperity in a highly competitive regional and international environment. There is

sizable renewal through the recruitment of new candidates at each election. The elected Legislative Assembly (1955–1965) was renamed Parliament after Singapore's independence in August 1965. Parliamentary elections were first conducted in April 1968. The PAP's Parliamentary electoral victory margins would be the envy of any electioneering political party. In the post-independence decades, the PAP's winning vote percentage has ranged between 59.3 and 86.7%. Table 1 depicts the PAP's electoral success in the four most recent national elections.

The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) has become a significant institution facilitating the recruitment of top quality PAP candidates. The GRCs were introduced just prior to the 1988 Parliamentary elections. Initially there were only three candidates per GRC. In each GRC, one candidate must be a member of the Indian, Malay or another minority group. Today there are 14 GRCs, all with either five or six members each, totalling 75 members of Parliament (MPs). The remaining nine MPs are elected from Single Member Districts. The voter has a single vote to cast for the preferred party list. The winning list is required only to receive a plurality vote. There is no runoff.

The principal justification for creating GRCs was to insure minority representation in Parliament. The government had noted 'a voting trend which showed young voters preferring candidates who were best suited to their own needs without sufficiently being aware of the need to return a racially balanced slate of party candidates' (Singapore National Heritage Board, 2006: 223).

Under the GRC system, first-time nominees, most of whom had minimal grassroots political experience, were able to avoid a potentially bruising one-on-one election contest.<sup>9</sup> Goh Chok Tong spoke directly to this point. An important consideration inducing a 'high flyer' to enter politics are the GRC. Senior Minister Goh identified the recruitment asset of the GRC a few weeks after the May 2006 Parliamentary election:

Without some assurance of a good chance of winning at least their first election, many able and successful young Singaporeans may not risk their careers to join politics. If you're fighting individually, you go through a steep learning curve and you may not have enough time. (cited Xueying, 2006: 1)

**Table 1** Parliamentary Elections: 1991 Forward

Date	Valid vote percentage	Seats won	First time PAP candidates
31 August 1991	60.97	77 of 81	12
2 January 1997	64.98	81 of 83	24
3 November 2001	75.3	82 of 84	25
6 May 2006	66.6	82 of 84	24

*Source:* Elections Department Singapore. Not every constituency is contested by an opposition candidate or candidates. Vote percentages are based on contested seats. Logic suggests opposition candidates select constituencies where they calculate the opposition is strongest. There are nine single-member districts. There are 14 single-ballot, multiple-seat Group Representation Constituencies (GRC). Each GRC returns five or six MPs.

Goh Chok Tong observed that for a first-time candidate being on a GRC electoral team ensures that ‘you have a bigger chance of winning’. The Marine Parade GRC led by Goh was not challenged in 2006 and carried four new MPs into Parliament (Xueying, 2006: 1).

One reason the opposition has not fared well is that it frequently does not offer specific, viable alternatives. The following account by Warren Fernandez describes a shortfall exhibited by many opposition candidates. Fernandez, now Deputy Editor and Foreign Editor of *The Straits Times*, is an astute observer of Singapore’s political scene. On occasion, though not in the following quote, he has been a thoughtful critic of the PAP.

Consider the case of Singapore Democratic Alliance candidate Sin Kek Tong. Five years ago, I interviewed him at a press conference held at an HDB void deck, in the run-up to the 1997 elections. What plans, I asked do you have for Braddell Heights, the ward he hoped to contest. ‘I have no plans,’ he replied cheerfully, insisting that he was only an opposition candidate. Out of desperation, my colleagues and I threw him a lifeline. What about upgrading, covered walkways, better transport? ‘Yes, yes, I will do that,’ he replied. ‘Any more ideas?’ (Fernandez, 2001)

Senior Minister Goh, over the course of a distinguished career, has occasionally alluded to political pluralism and the need for more independent input. Recently, he observed that ‘as our society evolves and the needs of the electorate change, our political system must continue to move in step’ (Goh, 2008). He said further that any changes in the future must be fair to all political parties ‘and give them an equal chance to win’. Mr Goh was speaking in the Hougang Constituency, a single member district controlled by the opposition. The current system guarantees there be a minimum number of the opposition MPs. The Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) system is capped at three. The NCMP allocates up to three opposition candidates who lost in an election to be nominated by the President to serve in Parliament. This ensures there will be a parliamentary opposition. Nomination occurs only if less than three opposition candidates win a parliamentary seat. The individual(s) nominated is/are the one(s) who scored highest among the losing candidates. Currently, two elected opposition MPs and one NCMP sit in Parliament.

## **The Economy**

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an overall measure of a country’s economy. By this standard, Singapore has performed well over the years. GDP growth plus low inflation as shown in Table 2 are measures of a prosperous nation. Singapore is among the wealthiest in the world with a per capita income in 2007 of US\$32,470 (World Bank, 2007).

Singapore’s overall prosperity through effective niching in the global economy is not without problems. Growing income inequality and those left behind—most often older

**Table 2** Singapore Economy

Year	Percent growth	Annual inflation rate
1997	8.3	2.0
1998	-1.4	-0.3
1999	7.2	0.0
2000	10.1	1.3
2001	-2.4	1.0
2002	4.2	-0.4
2003	3.5	0.5
2004	9.0	1.7
2005	7.3	0.5
2006	8.2	1.0
2007	7.7	2.1

Source: 'Historical Data', *Statistics Singapore*. Available at: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/hist/gdpl.html> and <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/hist/cpi.html>.

workers and those with minimal education—are prominent on the public agenda. Globalization, as in most globalizing countries has resulted in losers as well as winners, or at least several of the lower income deciles have not experienced the general prosperity. As Singapore strives to maintain an affluent economy, growing wage inequity is a problem. One of the significant issues facing the Singapore government is the fact that the bottom 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of wage earners experienced an income decline between 2000 and 2005 (Chua, 2007: 9). The shortfall experienced by many heartlanders is widely discussed and is a government concern.

### The PAP's Commitment to Meritocracy

Lee Kuan Yew has personified Singapore to much of the attentive world. His commitment to meritocracy is a goal shared by his closest colleagues (Lam and Tan, 1999), as well as his successors, and has become institutionalized in Singapore's political system. One of the PAP's most influential leaders was S. Rajaratnam, a founding member, party theoretician and publicist, who held several ministerial positions before retiring from politics in 1988. He summarized his philosophy of meritocracy: 'I believe in a hierarchy of merit simply because I cannot think of any other way of running a modern society—for that matter even a primitive tribal society' (cited Chan and Haq, 1987: 539).

This commitment to meritocracy is unwavering under the third generation of leaders represented by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who became prime minister in August 2004, succeeding Goh Chok Tong who served as prime minister for nearly 13 years. Lee Hsien Loong is the eldest son of Lee Kuan Yew. Under Prime Minister Goh, Lee Kuan Yew served as senior minister. After August 2004, Goh became senior minister, and Lee Kuan Yew became minister mentor.

From a young age, Lee Kuan Yew developed a belief in elitism based on intellectual merit (Barr, 2000). Years later, when he became prime minister, he began the process

of integrating the merit concept into the operational mechanism of the political system. This began to be operationalized in the political system when he became chief minister in 1959. This core criterion—recruiting, nurturing and judging potential leaders—remains in place today.

Kishore Mahbubani was widely regarded as Singapore's top diplomat when he was in the foreign service. He is now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Speaking to a group of young public administrators from Asia and Europe, he told them meritocracy, not democracy, 'is the key valuable which determines whether a country has good governance or not' (Tay, 2005).

The PAP government has instilled an awareness in most Singaporeans that competition and staying ahead are the only way Singapore can survive and prosper. The drive to achieve excellence is spread throughout most layers of society. As a Singaporean high flyer explained to the author, it is a race where you never slow down. When Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was asked in an interview whether living in Singapore would always be fast paced and would require high performance to succeed, his answer was forthright:

**Q:** Some parents have said they have considered going abroad because of their children's sake.

**A:** It is their choice. If they opt for a more leisurely life, there's nothing we can do.

**Q:** In their eyes, it is opting for a more balanced life.

**A:** Well, we hope they will not go away but that is their choice. But when you live in Singapore, you've got to understand the environment, you've got to understand the challenges that we face. We are not China or the US. This is our fate. We only have such a small piece of land and we've got to make a living for ourselves.

**Q:** So it will always be a pressure cooker?

**A:** It would always be in Singapore. You can't slow down. If I may give an example. Let's take the port of Singapore. Can you slow down? Why do you want to work 365 days a year and 24 hours a day? Slow down. Relax. Tanjung Pelepas [new Malaysian port] will take over. West Port will take over. And then what do we become? In this game, if you're not No. 1 or No. 2, you are nothing. And transshipment port goes to the other side, what do you do? So, we have to be realistic. (*Straits Times*, 2001: 2)

As Singapore moved from internal self-rule to full independence in August 1965, a political elite developed policies through which the new nation evolved and flourished. The cabinet, with some external input, forged policy, and the civil service implemented it. Popular input was exemplified in elections that can be judged competitive. There is no ballot box chicanery.<sup>10</sup> However, meritocracy and the measure of performance remain the key pillars of individual political success in Singapore.

Testing and evaluation, particularly in the upper political echelons, are a constant process. In a 2003 interview with *The Straits Times*, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew provided insights into the importance of performance and performance standards for evaluation. He spoke of his son, Lee Hsien Loong, soon to become prime minister:

The point is he's not taking over as my son, and I am not the one choosing or appointing him. He's been DPM for 13 years, time enough for everyone to get the

measure of him. If he hasn't proved himself, then he should not be PM. My concern is not whether he's the PM, but whether he's the best man for the job. I could have arranged to pass the baton directly to him instead of Mr. Goh Chok Tong. But then I'd have done Singaporeans a disservice, I would do him harm, and blot my copy-book. I held him back for a purpose, for him to prove himself and for people to judge his worth. He was only 38 years old in 1990 and had time on his side. (*Straits Times*, 2003b: 3)

## **Recruitment Process**

The importance of the recruitment function cannot be overstated as a pillar, perhaps the most important upright support of PAP policy. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew addressed this phenomenon when he spoke at the Russia-Singapore Business Forum: 'The most important duty of a successful leader is to ensure an orderly transfer of power to the right man. A failed succession means all you have done will be undone' (Oon, 2008).

Recruitment is the key to the unremitting renewal process. Open-ended recruitment and renewal means the permanent entrenchment of an ascriptive elitist establishment that becomes stale is avoided. Looking back over 45 years of PAP governance, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew declared:

The key to PAP's longevity is self-renewal, continually inducting younger men and women of ability and integrity, with high energy levels. It does not matter what their political views and philosophies are so long as they are pro-Singapore. Arguments on alternative policies and different futures can be intra-party (within the party) rather than inter-party (between parties). If we do not have these arguments within the party, they will surface as inter-party competition. (Lee, 2004: 1)

Recruitment criteria vary widely among the 200 political systems in the world today. Professors Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell identified the paramount criterion when recruitment is based on achievement rather than ascription. 'Technical expertise is the most obvious of these and becomes a matter of increased importance as elite role performance demands more complex activity intervening in other social processes' (Almond and Powell, 1978: 134).

Carl J. Friedrich of Harvard University succinctly defined political recruitment when he observed that 'recruitment . . . suggests primarily an activity on the part of the party' (Friedrich, 1963: 511). Almond and Powell described the significance of recruitment to successful political systems:

Historically finding generally acceptable ways to select the individuals to fulfill the top policymaking roles has been critical to political order and stability. A major accomplishment of stable democracies has been to regulate the potential conflict involved in leadership succession . . . When we generally refer to 'recruitment structures' we are thinking how nations choose their top policymakers and executives. (1978: 150)

Recruitment to political leadership positions is fundamental to maintaining top-quality leadership from generation to generation. Without a sustained renewal effort that includes systematic identifying, testing and replacing, it is unlikely that current standards of excellence could be maintained. Recruitment in Singapore frequently is described as renewal—new MPs, new ministers, fresh ideas.

By the late 1960s, the PAP's directorship concluded that future leaders would not in the ordinary course of events evolve to take over from the first generation of pacemakers. As Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 738) explained: 'By 1968 we recognized this was not going to happen'. Lee and a coterie of associates, 'scanned the most successful persons in the professions, commerce, manufacturing, and trade unions to look for men and women in their 30s and 40s whom we could persuade to stand as our candidates' (2000: 738). Recruitment is the cornerstone of a meritocratic system. However even if careful and rigorous recruitment standards are implemented, desired results are not always inevitable. Lee described some of the frustrations. While ability could be measured by academic and work performance, character on the other hand was not so easily gauged, compelling Lee to report 'some successes but too many failures' (Lee, 2000: 738). Consequently, the cadre of incumbent leadership adopted a series of psychological tests used by Shell Oil Company. This battery of tests measured analytical abilities, imagination and sense of reality. Two persons Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 740–741) identified as outstanding in their ability to assess candidates overall who would reach the top in administrative or political positions were Tan Teck Chwee, a long-serving chair of the Public Service Commission, and Lim Kim San who headed various ministries from 1963–1979.

A meritocratic system evaluates performance as the cornerstone of advancement. A prior critical step is recruitment. PAP selection of MP nominees provides some insights into how rigorous recruiting of the 'best' occurs. One photograph of nominated candidates describes the selected candidates as 'sieved and selected' (People's Action Party, 1999: 114).

The following procedures in this and the next paragraph relate to the late 1990s, but essentially this is the process at work today. The first step occurs when potential candidates are invited to an informal meeting over tea. Groups of six to eight meet with one of three ministers who are responsible for the initial screening. Some potential candidates then decline. Those still interested attend a second interview tea. One does not self-nominate in the PAP; you are invited. Potential candidates go through six sieves. This is a gruelling process with initial meetings drawing from a pool of over 110 attendees at tea parties. Candidates are recommended by ministers, MPs, party activists and friends of the party. The party maintains a file of possible candidates. Each file contains biographical data and records of work and community experience. 'The party machinery is geared towards scouring every nook and cranny of the land to track down the talent it must have' (PAP, 1999: 114).

If successful after the first two teas, potential candidates met with the Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In turn, successful individuals then interacted with Dr. Yeo Ning Hong who headed the screening committee. If the candidates remained

interested, they met individually with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew, then senior minister. The final interview is with the party's Central Executive Committee, a group of 16 to 18 persons. Today, tertiary education, with rare exceptions, is required in order for a person to be considered even initially. Those judged to possess potential qualities of becoming ministers are required to take a one-and-a-half day psychological test consisting of over 1,000 questions. Some potential MPs may be required to take this test if party interviewers so request. Although acknowledged as not fool-proof, the psychological test is believed to increase objectivity in the selection process. Intelligence has been measured by academic achievements and work record. Recruitment between 1979 and 1991 was handled by Old Guard leader Lim Kim San, recognized as an instinctive reader of people. Lim has noted that despite all the screening, you may not get the result you expected.

The man you think will run will stay and the man whom you think will stay will run. So nothing is certain. That is why the candidates are always tried in Parliament as MPs and they move up as they prove themselves. (cited PAP, 1999: 114–117)

The teas and interview schedule for the next election commences as soon as general election day is over. Speaking to a group of party activists barely six months after the May 2006 Parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: 'Meeting people for tea is already well in hand. We've already met lots of people' (cited Lap, 2007: 28). Parliament is elected for a maximum term of five years. The next general election is not due until 2011.

The first step in renewal recruitment is referral followed by the interview process described above.<sup>11</sup> A meritocratic elite is recruiting a future meritocratic political elite. Recruitment is the first stage. Not all those nominated will become ministers, ministers of state, etc. The identification of potential fourth-generation leaders has begun. Some may already be members of Parliament; other potentially top-tier individuals are being recruited for 2011. Dr. Ng Eng Hen, the education minister, is coordinating the 2011 recruitment effort. Based on precedent, the number of new MPs nominated, recruited and replacing incumbents will be 20–25. From this cohort and some from the 2006 election will emerge the next prime minister and most ministers. Dr. Ng confirms what Prime Minister Lee has often said. Future ministers, by 2016 or shortly thereafter, will then 'decide among themselves who is *primus inter pares*—first among equals. . . . This political manhunt is the top most priority for the PAP', Ng said (cited Xueying, 2008).

Prime Minister Lee says his successor should be in his 30s or 40s now and should have served at least two terms in Parliament. He stated he would not determine who his successor would be. His successor would not be like him as he had been like Goh Chok Tong. The current ministers and potential leaders will be the ones to determine his successor (*Straits Times*, 2008a).

The prime minister saw his job to develop as strong a team as possible, including star players. There were some potential top players elected in 2001 and 2006. It was

vital to recruit some top people in 2011 and 2016. By the 2016 elections he will be 69 and a new prime minister will need to be chosen (*Straits Times*, 2008a).<sup>12</sup>

A meticulous recruitment/renewal process has been in place since the 1960s. In 1983, Organizing Secretary Goh Chok Tong explained to a group of party activists essential elements that continue to this day:

It is painstaking effort. We look at every important nook and cranny where potential talent may be found—the business sector, the community organizations like the CCCs, RCs and management Centres, professional associations, the trade unions the civil service, and of course, the Party . . . Ability is important but the override factors are character and sincerity. However able one is, if there is a doubt about his sincerity and character, he is out. (Petir, 1983: 1)

Referral and recommendation possess certain ad hoc qualities. High flyers recommend high flyers as good doctors recommend good doctors. K. Shanmugan, a highly regarded lawyer and five-term MP, was appointed law minister in April 2008. When first asked to join politics, he responded, ‘Why me?’ (*Straits Times*, 2008b). He had been recruited by S. Jayakumar, a former law school professor and dean who has held numerous cabinet positions including minister for labour, foreign minister, minister for home affairs and is currently deputy prime minister. Shanmugan had been Jayakumar’s student when the latter was teaching at the National University of Singapore. ‘Professor Jayakumar said he had known since his first interaction with Mr. Shanmugan that the latter was “exceptionally bright” and would have a very good future’ (*Straits Times*, 2008b). Professor Jayakumar, who has been an MP since 1980 and currently chairs the PAP’s talent recruitment interview committee, emphasized: ‘The work goes on endlessly in recruiting talent’ (*Straits Times*, 2008b).

A commitment to meritocracy and recruiting for the public sector from among the best and the brightest means the effort to identify and recruit is relentless. The intensity increases for the immediate and mid-term future. Prime Minister Lee reiterated his concerns to a group of business leaders. Both events are ‘overdue’ (Hussain, 2008). He is 56-years-old and said he had to prepare for a transfer of authority that would occur ‘not so very long in the future’ (Hussain, 2008).

### **Compensation Criteria**

Meritocracy is neither easily achieved nor sustained. The Singapore government put in place substantial salary increases for high flyers beginning in 1972. The intention is to pay competitive market rates for senior civil servants, government ministers and elected representatives, and civil servants. Market rates are calculated on the basis of top management positions in the private sector. The Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared: ‘Every one of Singapore’s Ministers must come from the top of their cohorts’ (cited Quah, 2003b: 151).<sup>13</sup> Although there has been some ebb and flow of salaries, top compensation for uppermost talent remains a commitment.

Under the direction of Goh Chok Tong, a 1994 White Paper set forth the reasons a superior pay scheme should be put in place for the political leadership and top-level civil servants (Prime Minister's Office, 1994). A second round of adjustments occurred in 2000. The most recent adjustment was announced in March 2007, taking effect January 2008.

Pay for ministers and top civil servants is pegged to the compensation that might be earned in top private sector jobs. Under this salary formula, or benchmark, ministers are paid two-thirds of the median of the top eight performers in each of six professions: accounting, law, banking, engineering, multinational companies and local manufacturing. Salaries for ministers increased to US\$1.26 million beginning 1 January 2008 (*Asia Sentinel*, 2007). The prime minister's salary rose to US\$2.53 million. It should be noted that Lee Hsien Loong donated his salary increments to charity as did Goh Chok Tong when he was prime minister.

Prime Minister Lee explained that the salaries in 2007 had dropped to 55% of the benchmark and had to be corrected. Salary increases are not simply to recruit people because of competitive pay or losing very talented persons to the private sector. A principal concern is that competitive pay for the top and decent pay for all ranks in government service is one of the most effective means to eliminate corruption (Quah, 2007: 27–30). Minister Mentor Lee has regularly articulated the need for high-dollar remuneration:

Ministers who deal with billions of dollars cannot be paid low salaries without risking a system malfunction. Low salaries will not attract able men who are or can be successful in their professions or business. Low salaries will draw in the hypocrites who sweet talk their way into power in the name of public services, but once in charge will show their true colour, and ruin the country. (Newsintercom, 2008)

A thought-provoking and balanced article in *Petir*, the party's bimonthly publication, recognizes there was some unhappiness with raises: 'But the decision to raise the pay of top civil servants, especially that of ministers, has struck a nerve among Singaporeans' (Petir, 2007). The article mentioned a number of arguments for the raises, not the least to eliminate corruption. Referring to a US Senate hearing, it was noted the Asian Development Bank had lost US\$30 billion to corruption since the Bank's inception (Petir, 2007). Interestingly, the article stressed the definitive importance of recruitment: 'While a competitive remuneration would seem to be a necessity these days, it is of the ultimate assurance of good government. There is also the issue of finding the right people' (Petir, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

Top salaries, though, are adjusted according to performance, in this instance, Singapore's economic performance as measured by decline in the GDP. In 2009, the annual salaries of the president and prime minister are cut 19%, ministers' pay is cut 18%, and MPs receive a 16% pay cut. Singapore's GDP contracted 6.8% annualized in the third quarter of 2008 (Forss, 2008).

Meritocratic principles have worked well in Singapore, but meritocracy in any situation heightens the issue of appropriate rewards for those not in the top 1 or 2%. Under Singapore's system, however, financial rewards decrease for the top leadership if the economy declines.

### **Change, Challenges and Adjustments**

Change, especially exogenous change, is not always gradual, and challenge may be unexpected at the macro level. Singapore's globalization means the country is significantly exposed to the current global recession. Singapore's meritocracy will be tested to maintain the economy on a relatively even keel. One forecast suggests there will be a 2.9% contraction in 2009 and a rebound with 1.6% growth in 2010 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008: 9).

Political recruitment in Singapore, while firmly in place, is often a slow process. Prime Minister Lee reshuffled his cabinet in March 2008. One analysis concluded: 'Those hoping for far-reaching changes were disappointed by the reshuffle, the first since May 2006'. The commentary noted that the reshuffle 'did not represent the arrival of a new generation of politicians that some had hoped for' (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008: 9).

Shortly after the 2008 cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Lee acknowledged the urgency of recruiting, declaring 'there's no time to be lost' (*Straits Times*, 2008a). He noted that two elections after the next would be 13 years, which would put him at the age of 69. The Prime Minister declared recruitment is 'one of the most urgent jobs now' (*Straits Times*, 2008a). He was looking for people in their 30s and early 40s to make sure there would be a fourth generation of leaders in place by the time he was 69 years old (*Straits Times*, 2008a).<sup>15</sup>

Recruitment into the political elite is never a perfect system. See for example the remarks of Lim Kim San (previously noted, p. 35). Selection into Singapore's top strata, including future political elites, is marked early by the award of a major university scholarship. A high civil servant, Philip Yeo, speaking at an Economic Development Board/*Straits Times* conference, argued that merit is not enough for scholarship election. Youths from poorer families do not have the advantages of those from wealthier families. Yeo maintained the poorer applicants should be given special consideration and assistance. The Public Service Commission, which awards coveted scholarships, though, has reaffirmed its awarding of scholarships strictly on merit, regardless of family background (Lim, 2008).

Government scholarships are an important instrument to identify and nurture future high flyers, some of whom it is hoped will become members of the political meritocracy. The discussions over recruitment, merit and equal opportunity have been brewing for some time. Underpinning Singapore's meritocratic system is an uncompromising focus on the quality of the person without regard for community, language or religion. Quotas, it is said, would propagate negative stigmas. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, currently minister for finance and minister for education,

observed that quotas 'will reinforce the perception that minority groups have low skills and can only get jobs because of an incentive or quota' (Buenas, 2006). Mr Tharman emphasized skill development plus a national policy that opposes discrimination.

Meritocratic recruitment leaves as many or more disappointed or frustrated as are selected. In the 2006 elections, when 24 new candidates were selected, at least four of those who stepped down were unhappy not to be running again. Frustration by some at the party grassroots level occasionally goes public.

A number of party workers are urging for change in the criteria for the current system and election of candidates for Parliament. They claim the current system favours the rich and elite—the top professional and business achievers who are parachuted into office. It was pointed out that only a few MP candidates were people with good community links, such as social workers. It is unclear how many grassroots cadre are providing critical feedback, but there are voices critical of professional and business achievements being the only principal criteria for nomination. One grassroots members is quoted as saying: 'We have a crop of well-off MPs who have little empathy for the poor or needy, seeing failure as an individual fault. Political elitism and arrogance are undoing the PAPs strong record of achievements' (Seah, 2006). Such concerns may have some basis in fact. It is difficult, however, to see what a meritocratic elite can do other than recruit the over-achievers. Working on communication and relational skills is relevant, as Goh Chok Tong has emphasized.

The focus on recruiting the best and the brightest has sometimes meant bringing in the apolitical and those who might be inclined to oppose the PAP. Co-opting Singapore style means seeking out those believed to have the most potential. An important side-effect is that it becomes almost impossible for a nascent political opposition with a developed core of policy alternatives to become active on the political scene. There is no critical mass from which a sizable opposition will emerge.

Sinapan Samydorai of the Think Centre, a small group promoting more political openness, says the PAP is an expert in co-opting any bright spark who might be come a critic. He point to Raymond Lim, now minister for transport and second minister for foreign affairs, who once belonged to the defunct Roundtable that some believed might form the nucleus of an opposition (Economist, 2006). Change in terms of an organized, policy-oriented, substantial opposition appears unlikely. The high flyers who work to become a part of the political elite are recruited by the PAP. And, as noted earlier, the GRC facilitates such recruitment.

Change, though, does mean more popular input for the meritocracy to consider. One important signal affirming the continuation of gradual liberalization was a speech by Lee Hsien Loong made in January 2004, a few months before he became prime minister. Then Deputy Prime Minister Lee assured his audience he was an active participant in the liberalizing Goh administration. Lee declared that he valued diversity and said the government had no monopoly on knowledge and ideas. Government would, however, 'continue to lead from the front' (Lee, 2004: 3). He said

he recognized the complexity of the new world required broader input, and should draw on the expertise of all Singaporeans.

In today's world, a social science axiom contends that economic development falters without opportunities for individual initiative, the rule of law and socio-political stability. Today's electronic age is a sustained test for new polities to balance openness with a need for security, stability and effectiveness.

The right to criticize, advise, disagree and recommend with regard to policies is obviously expanding. The electronic age is leading to more frequent and open political expression. Prime Minister Lee announced a further opening up at a 2008 National Rally Day speech. The prime minister noted that cyber years are like dog years—one cyber year equals seven years in real life. The next Parliamentary election will allow the posting of election materials on podcasts and videocasts. Lee declared: 'We have to change to new rules, liberalise to allow people to participate more actively and flexibly'. He noted: 'We have to maintain or try to maintain accountability and responsibility, somehow'. Prime Minister Lee announced rules at the Speakers' Forum at Hong Lim Park will be further relaxed. Outdoor public demonstrations will be allowed at the Speaker's Corner. 'We will manage with a light touch. So I think there is no need for the police to get involved'. He also recommended online registration for those wishing to use Speaker's Corner, to speak or demonstrate. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew also spoke of the need for Singapore politics to evolve to be in sync with the changes in the world and in our society' (Lee, 2008: 1).

There are necessary bounds on political criticism and letting off steam. Given Singapore's geographical location and communal make-up, there are inevitable limits on public expression, limits viewed with scant sympathy by many in the foreign press. During a trip to New Zealand, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pinpointed concerns that explained long-standing restrictions on public discourse in Singapore: 'Our main concern is race, language and religion. There are issues where you can rouse people and words cannot be taken back and you can cause riots and bloodshed' (New Zealand Herald, 2006: 1).

Though political openness is expanding, it cannot be presumed this will undermine the principle of meritocracy. More popular input may well mean more policy responses and adjustments. Singapore's meritocracy principle as it operates today is unlikely to be challenged successfully without a substantial cohort of capable opposition articulating realistic and detailed policy alternatives. Today, the overwhelming majority of the meritocratic elite would prefer to be in government or in the private sector, not electioneering as an opposition candidate. Singapore's social and economic successes mean this is unlikely to change.

## **Conclusion**

The PAP's success results from a leadership of talent-meritocracy, effective policies, incorruptibility and adaptiveness. These are crucial factors that have made it impossible since 1965 for an effective opposition to emerge. The gradual pluralization

taking place in Singapore is one measure of PAP adaptiveness. Meritocracy and governance by talent and the virtuous remain in place, paralleled by a growing open space for public input.

This writer believes that Singapore is progressing towards a more open, discourse-oriented civil society, gradually and pragmatically while maintaining governance by the 'best and the brightest'. Stability, growth, adjustment and forward movement for a cosmopolitan city-state in a globalized environment require not only pluralism but also meritocracy. What one observer has termed 'CEO solutions: selective, top down, data-driven, command and control, one-dimensional solutions', are not as effective today as they have previously been for business organizations or political systems in this era of rapid globalization (Beattie, 2004: 7). One should also consider the recent observation of a foreign executive who had lived in Singapore three years: 'Keep an open mind. The people who run such a successful society in Singapore couldn't have got it all wrong' (*Straits Times*, 2003a: 11). Today, meritocracy, specialization, achievement and more popular input characterize Singapore's political system.

Several who write on Singapore believe there should be a linear correlation between Singapore's political system and the more free-wheeling older democracies. Critics devote considerable effort pointing to Singapore's shortfalls as measured against an established Westminster democracy. There are political discontinuities, but not to the extent many analysts allege. Singapore's sustained social and economic success, its meritocratic principles and its evolving pluralism elevate Singapore as one of the most stable and successful political systems in the world today.

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### Notes

- [1] Singapore citizens constitute 3,164,000 and permanent residents 478,200. The balance is foreign workers, most on temporary work passes (Singapore Government, 2008).
- [2] It has been argued rather convincingly that those societies that reward 'those who contribute to its well-being and punish those who purposefully undermine it survive and prosper better than a society that lacks these practices' (Pojman, 1999: 98).
- [3] Lee stated this on 3 March 1974.
- [4] For discussions of the civil service, see, for example, Quah (2003a) and Bellows (1989).
- [5] It might be noted that the entire cabinet is male.
- [6] Percentages calculated from Singapore Department of Statistics (2007). These percentages are based on Singapore's resident population: citizens and permanent residents.
- [7] For a quick summary of the economic challenges confronting Singapore in this decade, see the Forum on Economic Restructuring report (Koh *et al.*, 2002). This report under the direction of Professor Tommy Koh, head of the Institute of Policy Studies, was forwarded to Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

- [8] See two excellent works by one of Asia's leading scholarly experts on corruption, Quah (2003a: 106–28; 2007).
- [9] For succinct presentations of the PAP arguments favouring the GRC system and those who claim the GRCs were designed to wake opposition parties, see Quah (2001: 298).
- [10] A published op-ed piece and a long letter to the editor suggesting modifications in the electoral process are Tan (2002) and Nair *et al.* (2002). These Roundtable authors noted some liberalization in the political system and made recommendations for further liberalizing the electoral process. The Roundtable was a non-partisan discussion group founded by 10 professionals in 1993. At the tenth annual meeting in April 2004, members voted to dissolve the Roundtable because it had done what it could, broadening opportunities for public discussion.
- [11] A corollary of the search for new talent and renewal means an equal number step aside. A few may go to important non-elective positions; others withdraw from the policy arena.
- [12] The prime minister was interviewed by *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*.
- [13] Quah provides a detailed analysis of this policy's evolution and the continuing commitment to competitive salaries for top officials.
- [14] For the need to raise civil service salaries, see H. L. Lee (2007).
- [15] The Prime Minister was interviewed by *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*. The quotes are newspaper-edited excerpts from that interview.

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