For the Government, going beyond an old script

The Prime Minister’s National Day Rally on Sunday has been well-received by most Singaporeans, including critics of the Government. They have praised not only the significant policy shifts in healthcare, education and housing but also the commitment the Prime Minister made. One such shift was the promise to ensure that every Singaporean family that is working will be able to afford a Housing Board flat.

He also demonstrated that his Government had a vision extending well beyond the next 20 years. In the final minutes of the rally, Singaporeans were treated to a grand plan: Changi Airport will be expanded, and Paya Lebar Air Base and the maritime ports moved to Changi and Tuas respectively. Underlying this was a plan to transform the city-state into a hub of urban renewal where the city will be transformed, by the freeing up of vast tracts of land at Paya Lebar and our southern coast.

But, taken as a whole, what do the policy shifts and the vision of urban renewal signal? I would argue that they reflect a Government that continues to believe in the currency and relevance of its long-established script — but also one which is prepared to deliver its lines and perform its role differently.

RECALIBRATING OLD COMPACTS

First, consistent with the long-standing social compact in Singapore, the Government will continue to be active in a limited number of areas — specifically housing, education and healthcare. In these areas, the State is prepared to expand social protection, increase spending and ensure wider, more affordable access for a large swathe of Singaporeans.

What has changed in recent years is that rising inequality, population ageing and greater political contestation have created a new context that makes it necessary for the Government to recalibrate the balance between state and market, between social protection and individual responsibility. The result of this recalibration has been a gradual accretion of policies, since 2007, aimed at easing the higher cost of living experienced by older, and low and middle-income Singaporeans.

Second, the Rally demonstrated that under the People’s Action Party Government, Singapore’s policies will continue to be premised on the values of self-reliance and meritocracy. Indeed, the Prime Minister took pains to stress that meritocracy must continue to be one of the key organizing principles of Singapore society.

What has changed in recent years is that a more contested political environment now requires the Government to embrace a softer version of self-reliance and, a fairer and more compassionate form of meritocracy. But I would also contend that if the Government is genuinely committed to building a compassionate, fair and inclusive society, it will have to take the policy shifts announced further — and consider a few ideological ones. There are at least three fronts where this will have to occur.

THE PSLE SYSTEM

The policy changes in education do not seem to question the necessity of standardised national examinations for 12-year-olds. Instead, the announcements were focussed on the second order question of how the current Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) scoring system would be made less precise and less anxiety-inducing for parents.

Such a framing of the education debate ignores many of the contradictions of our education system. One of these is the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) assurance that “every school is a good school”, contrasted with the fact that our examinations system assesses students in relative, not absolute terms. It is not enough to be “good” if there are others who are better.

The MOE’s approach of defining “good” in absolute instead of relative terms sits uncomfortably with the internal logic of Singapore-style meritocracy. Consequently, the assurance rings hollow in the eyes of many. This is worsened by the fact, known to psychologists, that people tend to assess quality in relative terms rather than absolute measures.

What about the Prime Minister’s argument that a variegated education landscape with multiple peaks of excellence is superior to a flat landscape of merely good schools?

In his words, the latter scenario — where every school is different from the next — is a formula for mediocrity. While one seriously disputes that diversity and variety in our education system is superior to uniform mediocrity, this seems to ignore a third possibility: That we can have high standards across the board and a relatively low variance in performance.

Finland is commonly cited as an example of one of the education systems that seemed to have squashed the circle: High average standards, low variance in performance.

If we are serious about reducing the anxiety that people face when choosing a school, we need to have a more open discussion about the variance in the current education system, and how we should strive to reduce it.

PRIMARY ONE REGISTRATION

It is tempting to dismiss the Primary 1 registration system as broken, but the fact that it has endured with but a relatively minor tweak suggests otherwise. The system probably works well for a large number of Singaporeans, and a complete overhaul of it may not seem worth the risks.

But an overhaul may well be in order as the PI registration system still favours the connected — either alumni or sibling connections. Of course, this is not to suggest that six-year-olds should now take open exams to secure a spot in a primary school. Such an allocation system will inevitably benefit families better able to afford to prepare their children for an entrance exam.

Perhaps we should consider an alternative that, while not merit-based, is at least not un-meritocratic: Balloting. The Prime Minister argued that such a random process would result in uniformly mediocre schools; implicit in his conclusion is the concern that by

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MERITOCRACY AND POLICY SHIFTS

Making meritocracy work

Meritocracy in Singapore has always had an egalitarian streak. The belief is that through hard work and merit, people could achieve success irrespective of their race, wealth, connections or family background.

For a while, meritocracy led to significant social mobility. However, Singapore (as with other meritocratic societies) has arrived at a point where meritocracy can no longer insulate social mobility. This is because the successful can transmit their advantages to the next generation, resulting in an increasingly skewed playing field.

It is only fitting that the conversation should now shift to the extent by which the Government should level the playing field. This is especially so since its new mantra appears to be “compassionate meritocracy”, one in which those who have succeeded help those who have not done as well.

It may well be impossible to completely level the playing field. To do so, the Government would have to engage in massive redistribution to curtail the rich’s ability to procure advantages for their children. Such an approach is probably not tenable — neither economically nor politically.

But there is an entire range of intermediate responses. In the face of a vastly-skewed playing field and a complete lack of transparent avenues, we must find the best way through debate and democratic deliberation, where we would like to be a good society.

LETTER

A FAIRER MERITOCRACY

Scan the QR code using the reader app on your smartphone or visit tidysg.com/meritocracy for the letter by Sean Soe-Meng.

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