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SINGAPORE 2065

Leading Insights on Economy and Environment from 50 Singapore Icons and Beyond

Edited by Euston Quah

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Recently, Wired.com featured an article titled, “*Here’s How People 100 Years Ago Thought We’d Be Living Today.*”¹

The article showcased several Victorian postcards that imagined how the future would look like. My favorite is one of a seahorse cavalry. Of course, seahorse cavalries have no place in a modern military force. Divisions of armored tanks, an invention with unimaginable firepower has long replaced cavalries. If few saw the possibility of so formidable a weapon, then even fewer could have imagined advancements as transformational as that of computers and information technology. Today, with the touch of a button, we have the wealth of human knowledge at our disposal. Indeed, the future is mercurial and filled with boundless possibilities. Any attempt at such an imagination is bound to be a “prisoner of the present” – in the words of Barry Desker, a contributing author of *Singapore 2065*.

As Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence and the laudable progress that accompanied it, the tiny nation state cannot help but ponder about its uncertain future in a tumultuous world. Will Singapore continue to remain relevant to the global economy? Will it be able to overcome mounting challenges and difficulties? Will it live up to its promise of prosperity and progress for its people? While we cannot predict what the future will look like, we nonetheless have some ability to shape it. Hence, *Singapore 2065* asks, *how* can Singapore continue to remain relevant to the global economy, how can it overcome new challenges, how can it live up to its promise.

¹ Miller G. (2014). Here’s How People 100 Years Ago Thought We’d Be Living Today.
<http://www.wired.com/2014/05/victorian-postcards-predict-future/>.

In an attempt to find answers to these complex questions, Dr. Euston Quah assembled the greatest minds in Singapore – from politicians to public servants, from leading academics to business leaders. Cumulatively, the book offers incisive insights into the likely challenges and opportunities brought about by the changing realities in the upcoming decades – climate change, rapidly evolving technology, shifting demographics, geopolitical rebalances and rising income inequality. And these changing realities are not confined to the Singapore context; nations around the world find themselves confronting the same questions. If anything, Singapore’s size and vulnerability to shocks amplify the need to address these questions.

The impact of climate change on our environment constitutes, perhaps, the most universal challenge. In “Sustainable Singapore: Taking the Long View,” contributing author and Singapore’s Minister for Environment and Water Resources, Vivian Balakrishnan, observed that Singapore, being a small and low-lying island, will be “adversely affected by rising sea levels, rising temperatures, and more extreme weather occurrences”, such as prolonged dry spells. Water, already a scarce resource in Singapore, will become even scarcer.² Hence, since 1972, Singapore has begun to implement what it calls the Four National Taps strategy – in addition to catchment and imported water (which are subject to rainfall patterns), Singapore’s water agency has diversified its sources, including reclamation of used water (called NEWater in Singapore) and desalination. To guard against the environmental impacts of climate change, Minister Balakrishnan and the water agency he leads plan to build up the capacity of NEWater and desalination, which he calls “weather-resilient sources”, to provide for 80% of Singapore’s water demand in the next 50 years.

Beyond adapting and building resilience against the impacts of climate change, Minister Balakrishnan also underlined the need to tackle its root cause – carbon emissions. As a small country and a minor contributor of emissions (0.2% of world emissions), Singapore, on its own, is limited in its ability to shape global emissions. As such, it needs to work closely with other countries. Capitalizing on its position as a hub in South East Asia, Singapore is increasing

² As part of the Independence of Singapore Agreement, Singapore signed an agreement with Malaysia that guarantees supply of water from Johor Malaysia. Singapore’s dependence on Malaysia has on several occasions, given rise to increased tensions.

“awareness and dialogue of urban sustainability issues” through summits and conferences, for business leaders and policy makers alike, both in the region and around the world. And should Singapore be successful in its efforts in shaping global discussion and in building resilience against adverse climate conditions, there is reason to believe that the city-state can thrive in the next 50 years.

Singapore is also coming into a new stage of development, where social issues have increasingly entered the limelight. During Singapore’s independence years, it used to be that economic issues commanded the greatest priority – as a resource poor country with mounting unemployment, the imperative at that point was to provide the basics, such as food, water, education and housing. For that reason, the social and political dimensions of development took a backseat; ordinary citizens were content to abstain from political participation and let the elites run the show, for the elites have demonstrated results.

This is changing. In *Singapore’s Social Compact Trilemma*, contributing author and Vice-President of the Economic Society of Singapore, Yeoh Lam Keong, wrote that “the demand for democratic development is driven by an increasingly large proportion of politically active, well-educated younger cohorts, informed and connected by social networking technology as never before in history.” A recent manifestation of this trend is the controversy over openly gay singer Adam Lambert’s plans to perform at a New Year Eve’s concert in Singapore. In the days after the plans were announced, a petition to remove the performance and a counter-petition have both gained thousands of signatories.

Yeoh suggests that with development comes the “unavoidable and irresistible social demands for both political legitimacy and stable governance”, of which polity and society are supporting pillars. Yeoh identified five areas in need of major political reform for Singapore: “free media and speech, guaranteed access to public information, strong rights of association and organization in civil society, a non-partisan civil service and stronger and more supportive government-civil society links.”

The transition towards greater social participation has been observed to be a tumultuous affair in many countries.

That Singapore requires the development of “democratic institutions and practices from even lower starting levels” raises the difficulty of such reforms. In the next 50 years, whether Singapore will be able to successfully navigate this transition can make or break the fabric of its society. Yeoh suggests that it remains unclear, “how smooth and successful or fractious, disruptive and contentious” this transition will be. But what is clear is that genuine governmental participation is required to give such a transition the best chances of success.

“The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented,” so wrote Nobel laureate Dennis Gabor (quoted by Chen Show Mao, a contributing author and Member of Parliament). The tone in *Singapore 2065* is one of hope and cautious optimism. It purports that with diligent thought, earnest engagement and collective determination, the futures that we desire and envision can be invented. Indeed, history has repeatedly shown the audacity of the human race to be unconquerable. This imbues in me the hope that *Singapore 2065* is worth looking forward to.

Reviewed by,

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