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Beyond Technocracy:
The culture of elite governance in
Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore

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"Beyond Technocracy: The culture of elite governance in Lee Hsien Loong's Singapore", Regional Outlook Paper No. 6, 2005

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Executive Summary

The Singapore regime has put a unique spin on the discourse of technocracy. Like the classical technocratic ideal, the Singaporean form of technocracy regards itself as being above sectional interests and ideology, but it acknowledges and embraces the pivotal role of political leadership. It obviates the tension between the political and the technocratic by absorbing the idea of the technocrat into the broader ideal of “the elite”, and then making membership of the “elite” a precondition of membership of either. The distinction between the political and administrative leadership is blurred without being obliterated. Both political leaders and senior bureaucrats need very high levels of leadership and managerial skills. Neither actor can manage without both components.

It was former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who set the standards for the Singapore Mandarinate. His deeply held conviction in the universal applicability of “talent” to any situation has been transformed into the basis and legitimating rationale of the Singapore political system. The legitimating myth of the primacy of innovative, problem-solving “talent”, unearthed through “meritocracy” and the quest for ever-higher levels of industrial efficiency in all aspects of society, business and government operates in tandem with another legitimating myth: that the government operates in a purely rational, scientific, problem-solving manner, free of ideological considerations. The mantra for this plank of legitimation is the purest distillation of technocratic ideology: “pragmatism”.

Of course, the argument is specious. Far from being the distillation of impartial rationality, the Singapore system of governance is systemically ideological and social, ethnic and class biases are pervasive. Yet the denial of the operation of ideology, or even politics, in the practice of government has a direct and profound effect on politics. It restricts the space for legitimate social and political discourse, de-legitimising the interrogation of aspects of the Singapore system that lie beyond the parameters of efficiency and effectiveness.

Despite the genuinely meritocratic elements of the system, the oil that lubricates the Singapore system is the exercise of personal power. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s curriculum vitae reads as an exemplary case study of the way that personal power, personal connections and related social advantages lubricate the meritocratic system. At every step of the way from childhood onwards he was greeted with the benefits of privilege and the kind of “luck” that rarely befalls those who have more ordinary parents. His entry into politics was smoothed by a team of civil servants who were assigned to manage him.

Singapore’s system of elite governance is remarkable for two features. The first is that it really does produce an effective system of government. If one puts to one side fixations on the ideals of democracy, freedom, social equity and racial equality, then it is hard to deny that the results of the system are impressive. The second feature is that the system is extraordinarily brittle, and the cadres who operate the system are remarkably sensitive to challenge and criticism. The imperfections and distortions in the system create some insecurity and tension, but these are not fatal. The ruling elite clearly believes that they are an acceptable price for peace, prosperity and a smooth, if imperfect system of elite regeneration.

* * *

To say that the culture of governance in Singapore is technocratic is a truism, but it is a very limited one. A technocracy is a system of governance that relies heavily on the technical skills of the people who run the system and make the decisions. It presumes that the system is able to rise above subjective considerations of politics, ideology and sectional interests. To borrow the words of sociologist Luigi Pellizoni, in a technocracy “the elite is suitably ‘protected’ against the rest of society and is able to perform its tasks efficiently”.¹ Rule is based on

supposed impartial, objective criteria derived directly or indirectly from disciplines such as economics, management, law, medicine, and engineering.² In the Singapore example, systems engineers have been given a particular place of honour at the upper executive level of this schema. A team of systems engineers was even entrusted to reform the education system at the end of the 1970s to make it efficient and to cut "wastage".³

In the most common platonic ideal of a technocracy, the key personnel will be found in a faceless bureaucracy, but this does not mean that a technocracy is just another word for bureaucratisation. Hegemonic bureaucracies can take pedestrian, regulatory forms; they can be nothing more than outlets for politics in societies where the formal government has little independent life.⁴ In fact the Singapore polity appeared to be edging towards mere bureaucratisation in the 1960s and 1970s as the government forged an alliance with the bureaucracy against its political rivals after a split in the ruling party in 1961, and then gradually established the bureaucracy as a seat of substantial political power, subservient only to the higher levels of Cabinet.⁵ The use of the term "technocracy", however, implies much more than just bureaucratisation. It describes the complete or nearly complete hegemony of "the modernist project" at the level of the nation state. By this I mean that the authority of bureaucracy in a technocracy is regarded as an expression of the power of cold, impartial reason itself – the power of nature, in contrast to the dubious emotive or selfish claims of religion, tradition, kings, sectional groups, or democratic politics.⁶ When this intellectual conceit is linked to a conviction by the nation's leadership (both inside and outside the bureaucracy) that the state must engage in a unidirectional drive towards "development", prosperity and, if it has not already been attained, "modernity", you have the makings of a technocracy.⁷

This coupling of modernist ideas and bureaucratic power was typically found in communist regimes and in developmental states. The communist experiments have provided no surviving examples of such a technocracy at work, and every showcase it offered (such as East Germany) proved to be a mirage generated by propaganda and subsidies. The developmental state did succeed in offering a number of showcases, the most notable of which was Japan during the heyday of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), when Japan was, in the words of Ezra Vogel, "Number One".⁸ Yet even this success story was tarnished as the technocracy proved inadequate to meet the challenges of the 1980s.

1. Singapore Ideal

The Singapore regime has put a unique spin on the discourse of technocracy. It has accepted much of the Japanese MITI model – right down to drawing its premiers from the ranks of the bureaucracy, as did Japan from 1957 to 1972.⁹ Furthermore, the current bureaucrat-turned-premier boasts the achievements of the Singapore system in explicitly technocratic terms: “It has ‘shielded civil servants from political interference... [giving them] the space to work out rational, effective solutions for our problems’ so they can ‘practice public administration in almost laboratory conditions’”.¹⁰ Yet the Singapore elite idealises what it believes is a higher form of technocratic governance, and naturally presents itself as the ideal and still-successful example. Like the classical technocratic ideal, the Singaporean form of technocracy regards itself as being above sectional interests and ideology, but it acknowledges and embraces the pivotal role of political leadership.¹¹ It obviates the tension between the political and the technocratic by absorbing the idea of the technocrat into the broader ideal of “the elite”, and then making membership of the “elite” a precondition of membership of either. The distinction between the political and administrative leadership is blurred without being obliterated. Both political leaders and senior bureaucrats need very high levels of leadership and managerial skills. Neither actor can manage without both components.

In the Singaporean ideal of technocracy, the professionally trained “elite” is mostly recruited into the Administrative Service (AS) of the civil service, into the leading ranks of the military, or into the leadership of a Government-Linked Company by a ruthless winnowing process called “meritocracy”, which judges candidates by academic performance, balanced to some extent by a consideration of a student’s Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) record. After this induction they are trained and judged according to a more rounded conception of “merit” that grades them according to factors like performance and initiative. The resultant “elite” dominates utterly both the political and administrative leadership of the country. The ideal specimen in this conception of the elite is not a colourless technocrat at all, but a proactive, courageous, politically-savvy problem solver who can lead people, whether as a civil servant or a politician.

Alas the reality falls well short of the ideal. This is freely acknowledged at the most senior levels of the civil service,¹² which is focused on the task of perfecting the system: particularly avoiding the dangers of conformity in outlook and timidity in imagination and courage that currently beset the system. Their ultimate task is to identify those who have “helicopter quality”, which is a term coined by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to describe those candidates who have qualities of leadership, imagination, character and motivation to match their high intelligence.¹³ In the mind of the current premier, Lee Hsien Loong it is “the ability to see the big picture in perspective, and simultaneously zoom in on critical details”.¹⁴

At this point it would be reasonable to proceed by examining the set of institutional and social processes that produce the candidates for the “elite”. In this paper, however, I intend to limit myself to a study of the culture, rather than the mechanics of elite governance. I am especially interested in the self-image by which the ruling elite legitimises its unrivalled position of social and political supremacy and the role of personal connections and privilege, and the personal nature of power within the system. The logical place to start this study is at or near its apex and centre and knead our understanding outwards from there.

2. At the Apex: Talent

Singapore's new Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has a mantra. In April 2004, while still Deputy Prime Minister, he told students at the Nanyang Technological University that they must not be content to inherit and enjoy the Singapore built by their parents and grandparents. Instead he asked them to "change it, improve it and build on it".¹⁵ Several months later, a few days after becoming Prime Minister, he delivered a similar message at the National Day Rally:

We can never afford to be satisfied with the status quo, even if we are still okay, even if our policies are still working. People say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". I say, if it ain't broke, better maintain it, lubricate it, replace it, upgrade it, try something better and make it work better than before.¹⁶

As a rallying call, "change it, improve it and build on it" lacks revolutionary chic, but within the context of Singaporean politics, and uttered by Lee Hsien Loong, it does convey a certain frisson. It is the highest legitimating statement of Singapore's ruling elite, and the capacity to deliver on this promise is the basis on which Singapore's Mandarins – both the politicians and the senior civil servants – are judged.

While he was Minister for Health in 1982, the current Senior Minister, Goh Chok Tong expressed the mantra of perpetual improvement in terms of a quest for industrial efficiency. Having just declared Singapore's health system as being among the "best in the world", he then foreshadowed a complete overhaul of the system in a quixotic quest for industrial efficiency: "We should not rest on our laurels, looking down from Mount Everest. In organisational efficiency, in the pursuit of quality and excellence, there can be no highest peak", he declared.¹⁷ In February 2004, then-Acting Minister for Health Khaw Boon Wan took the quest for efficiency to imaginative new heights by defining the ultimate in health efficiency as a health-care system that has no patients!¹⁸

Yet Goh Chok Tong was judged harshly by this standard. For him the mantra of perpetual improvement was a burden. It was put to me by one who knows them that in the later years of his premiership Goh was overshadowed in matters of day-to-day governance by then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, partly because Lee is an indefatigable "policy wonk": always working, thinking, pushing.¹⁹ In the lead up to Lee's accession to the premiership, this perception was confirmed in newspaper articles and speeches recounting instance after instance of Lee taking policy initiatives across the spectrum of portfolios, including telecommunications, power, public health care, transport, media, the integrated introduction of reclaimed water into the reservoirs, and – as far back as 1997 – education.²⁰ "News" reports in this period were littered with glowing references to Lee's seemingly limitless capacity to master briefs and go to the heart of issues.

Goh Chok Tong was not naturally well-suited or well-disposed towards this style of work. Despite being well-liked because of his amiability, his failure to thrive according to the standards of the mantra – "change it, improve it and build on it" – will ensure that he will be remembered as the Prime Minister who managed the country well in between the reign of the two Lees. Apart from his foreign policy achievements, his legacy consists of a few innovations that are significant but not fundamental – such as his efforts to broaden the training and recruitment of the administrative elite beyond systems engineers, and some initiatives designed to help marginalised children receive a better education.²¹ If this sounds a bit cruel, please keep in mind that when asked in 2002 "What legacy would you like to leave as Prime Minister of Singapore?". He answered, "My goal is a modest one. What I wanted to do was to keep Singapore going. There's life after Lee Kuan Yew."²² It has not been documented, but it is no secret that by indirect machinations, Lee Senior manoeuvred Goh into the premiership precisely because he was a suitable stop-gap candidate between father and son.

It was Lee Senior who set the standards for the Singapore Mandarinate. His deeply held conviction in the universal applicability of “talent” to any situation has been transformed into the basis and legitimating rationale of the Singapore political system. Lee is convinced that the secret of good governance lies in the identification of those people with a genetic and almost tangible quality called “talent”. Identify them in school, pump all your resources into nurturing them, exposing their minds to an ever-steeper hierarchy of challenges, and then select the best. You then test these elites. You give them test after test so they can learn from experience and you can identify the upper limits of their ability.²³ In an interview with *The Business Times* in 1978, Lee was prompted to state explicitly that testing rather than training was the essence of the system he had instituted:

- BT: How adequate is the present population to produce the necessary number of leaders required?
- Lee: It depends on the qualities of the population, the genetic pool we have inherited. We got the leaders that we are capable of throwing up. There is a finite group of people, between the ages of 35 to 45, from which such a leadership must be drawn. ... I do not think you learn leadership ... This attribute called leadership is either in you or it is not.
- BT: If the leadership is there, what is the training period supposed to give the man?
- Lee: Really to show that he has got it, not that he is hiding the lack thereof behind a show of aplomb and erudition.
- BT: It is basically a testing period not a training period? Establishing that the qualities that are apparent are also real and that they can be used in decision-making?
- Lee: If you want to put it in an unkind way – yes.²⁴

It was as part of this testing process that Goh Chok Tong found himself launching a major reform of the health system in 1982.

Of course even before they have reached the rarefied heights that bring them under the personal gaze of the Prime Minister, progress is being monitored through official and unofficial reports. In 1982 Lee wrote some brief reflections on his 15 years of studying Public Service Commission scholarship award holders “and reading confidential reports on their work in the public service and the SAF”.²⁵ In 1984 he streamlined this process within the Civil Service by adapting the staff review and promotions system used by the Shell oil company.²⁶ Lee used to devote himself to combing the civil service and the military for talent to be drafted into the elite, resulting in Cabinet being utterly dominated by people recruited from the public sector.²⁷ The current Prime Minister seeks to recruit “in government, in the public sector, in business, in the professions, in community work, in arts and sports”,²⁸ though the recent record strongly suggests that there is still a strong reluctance to stray very far from the traditional hunting grounds.²⁹ The whole system is based notionally on the principles of “meritocracy, with the best man or woman for the job, especially as leaders in government”.³⁰ Lest it be thought that this is a casual claim, please realise that the words just quoted are the final 15 words of Lee Senior’s two-volume set of memoirs.

3. Legitimizing Ideology: Pragmatism

The legitimating myth of the primacy of innovative, problem-solving “talent”, unearthed through “meritocracy” and the quest for ever-higher levels of industrial efficiency in all aspects of society, business and government operates in tandem with another legitimating myth: that the government operates in a purely rational, scientific, problem-solving manner, free of ideological considerations. The mantra for this plank of legitimation is the purest distillation of technocratic ideology: “pragmatism”.³¹ Talk to any Singaporeans and they will assure you that their government is “pragmatic”, that Singaporeans are “pragmatic”: that even if there are problems and faults in outcomes, that the Singapore system of meritocracy and “pragmatic government” is only “logical”. This is one of the main features that give Singaporeans their perception of a special place in the world. Singapore is tiny, but while most of the world is bound by “ideology” and “politics”, Singaporeans punch above their weight because they operate as a “pragmatic” and inherently logical meritocracy. It is in this context that PM Lee Hsien Loong boasts that “many countries envy Singapore’s ability to take a longer view, pursue rational policies, put in place the fundamentals which the country needs, and systematically change policies which are outdated or obsolete”.³² Understanding this context also helps us to understand the nuances behind the boast by the current Minister for Health that the Singapore system of health care funding “is far from perfect, but it is probably the best healthcare financing model in the world today”.³³

Of course, the argument is specious. Far from being the distillation of impartial rationality, the Singapore system of governance is systemically ideological and social, ethnic and class biases are pervasive.³⁴ Yet the denial of the operation of ideology, or even politics, in the practice of government has a direct and profound effect on the political discourse. It restricts the space for legitimate social and political discourse, de-legitimising the interrogation of aspects of the Singapore system that lie beyond the restrictive parameters of efficiency and effectiveness. This position was formalised in 1994 when then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, through his Press Secretary, declared politics per se to be the exclusive preserve of those with technocratic expertise and professional commitment to governance: “How can public consultations ... conceive an HDB upgrading programme, or design a Singapore Telecom Group? A share discount scheme? Or Edusave? Or Medifund?”.³⁵

The guardianship role of the technocratic elite is even written into the constitution. Since 1991 the elected position of President of Singapore has been formally and constitutionally reserved for people who have emerged as successful members of the technocratic elite. Some of the categories of eligibility include having been a minister, chief justice, a permanent secretary, chairman of the Public Service Commission or a chairman or chief executive officer of either an important statutory board, or a company with a paid-up capital of at least S\$100 million.³⁶ In any case all candidates are vetted by a committee of three, two of whom are the Chairman of the Public Service Commission and the Chairman of the Public Accountants Board. Once elected, the President cannot do much without the approval of another committee comprising politicians and more unelected technocrats.³⁷

Yet it goes further than just politics. Even the business of justice was formally declared the exclusive province of judges and lawyers by the abolition of the jury system in 1970, a move that was justified explicitly by the need to exclude amateurs from the court system.³⁸ Extraordinarily, even the ongoing pervasion of the “Asian values” discourse in Singapore, with its presumption that Singapore operates under a superior “Asian” value system to that held by the West, has not dented the hegemonic self-perception of Singapore as “pragmatic” and beyond ideology. It takes a particularly high level of obtuseness not to notice that belief in the superiority of a particular value system flatly contradicts assertions of impartial and

objective “pragmatism”, but the contradiction has not been fatal to either discourse because each one deters inquiry by claiming to be an obvious and self-referential set of truths. Furthermore, each of them has been generated by the same social milieu, and reflects the world view peculiar to Singaporeans in general, and Chinese Singaporeans in particular.³⁹

It might be thought that one advantage of this system of governance is predictability. Indeed, many outcomes from the Singapore system are entirely predictable. Just to take one instance, one major result of this system of “meritocratic” governance is Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. He could be the defining standard of the technocratic elite: someone who can pass any test, solve any problem, is sensitive to politics and who has defined the mantra of “change it, improve it and build on it”. Furthermore the Cabinet is now hosting two “rising stars” who are cut from the same cloth. Mr Khaw Boon Wan and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam have been plucked from successful careers in the civil service and tested fiercely in portfolios. They should be in the same mould. Days after taking up the premiership Lee Hsien Loong revealed that he had been closely involved in bringing them into Cabinet while he was still Deputy Prime Minister, and there is every reason to believe that he has been micromanaging their training and testing. Lee Hsien Loong has known and worked with Shanmugaratnam for 20 years from their time together in the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), and he has known Khaw for at least 13 years.⁴⁰

These three men are the epitome of the Singapore technocrat, but their collective story – and particularly the story of Lee Hsien Loong – demonstrates a central feature of the Singapore system of governance that is not celebrated by the regime, which is the highly personalised nature of power, a feature that seriously diminishes the transparency of the system, and disrupts its predictability. Patronage is a vitally important element in the rise of anyone in the Singapore political and administrative elite. “Talent” and paper qualifications are sufficient in themselves to attract the notice of those with patronage to disburse, but at some point one needs to plug into a patronage network. The earlier in life one is able to do this, the better. Ideally such links would come through one’s family, but networks forged at school, or through corporate, civil or military service can prove nearly as advantageous. Although there are elements of favouritism and nepotism in this system, the key is not found in such considerations. The absence of “talent” is sufficient to disqualify one from rising very high in the political and administrative hierarchy, no matter who your father is, but once a young man or woman has demonstrated “talent” (initially through success in examinations at school and university) one needs to be socialised into the “elite”. A substantial part of the networking and patronage is directed at socialising young bloods into the mindset and skill set of the “elite” to ensure the perpetuation of the system.

4. Personnel: The “elite”

This concept of “the elite” is central to the operation of the Singapore system. It grew in the mind of Lee Kuan Yew into a self-conscious, self-righteous class of talented and brilliant people with strong character, who are imbued with a collective sense of purpose and a consciously collective understanding of the thinking of the group.⁴¹ Its apex and core lie in the political and administrative leadership, but its outer circles include the talented among all walks of society. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently described the elite as “a core group of people who occupy key positions of power and influence, and set the direction for the whole society and country”.⁴² Lee Kuan Yew described this elite many times, but this sense of self-consciousness as an elite is perhaps best conveyed in a speech he gave in August 1966:

It is essential to rear a generation at the very top of society that has all the qualities needed to lead and give the people the inspiration and the drive to make it succeed. In short, the elite. ...

Every society tries to produce this type. The British have special schools for them: the gifted and talented are sent to Eton and Harrow and a few very exclusive private schools which they call “public schools”; after that they go to Oxford and Cambridge. And they have legends which say that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.⁴³

In this speech Lee also directly linked his elitism and his progressivism:

True, not every boy is equal in his endowments in either physical stamina or mental capacity or character. But all those with the potential to blossom forth must do so. That is the spearhead in the society, on whom depends the pace of our progress.⁴⁴

Lee's elite has many characteristics in common with the English concept of “class”, whereby members of the upper class can speak of someone being “one of us”, but in Singapore this has been mixed shamelessly with the Chinese concept of a scholarly “mandarinate” to produce a peculiarly Singaporean conception that has, in the minds of its members, the best of both worlds.

5. Lubricant: Personal power

I have said that I will not be considering the process of the selection and socialisation of candidates into the inner core of the elite today, but perhaps I should give an account of the bare outline. In essence it is a system that feeds people through a high-pressure, streamed national schools system that is dominated by exams, private tuition and rote learning from kindergarten to matriculation. This system generates a heavily conformist, materialistic and risk-averse approach to life in everyone, but most of the successful candidates pass through a handful of elite schools that add strong elements of both service and conceit to that recipe. The male students do their National Service and those with excellent matriculation grades are herded into a "scholar's platoon"⁴⁵ where they do officer training and are considered for SAF Scholarships.⁴⁶ By the time the men have finished 2½ years of NS, the brightest of the cohort – including the women who have not done NS – will have been offered bonded scholarships by one or other of the arms of government to study at a top foreign university, whereupon they return to Singapore to serve out their bond for their employer.⁴⁷ As junior members of the elite in their chosen bureaucracy, they join the clubs of the elite (Alpha Society, Temasek Society), attend the Civil Service College, and pass through more courses, tests, and extensive bonding sessions. They are also initiated into an exclusive world of wealth, privilege and social esteem from which it would be difficult to walk away. The most promising performers in the AS (whether because of "talent" or a combination of talent and connections) are funnelled through one or several of the six most powerful ministries that make up the inner core of the system (Prime Minister's Office,⁴⁸ Defence, Education, Trade and Industry, Finance, and Home Affairs) where the socialisation and networking are intensified commensurate with the demands of the job. In the SAF the most promising scholar-officers are herded into Delta Company, which serves a similar socialising and networking function.⁴⁹ Since the early 1980s there has also been an extensive amount of crossover from the SAF to the AS, statutory boards and Government-Linked Companies under a "dual career scheme", so a common culture has developed in which the distinction between the SAF officers and the Administrative Officers is often moot.⁵⁰ In 1993 dual-career SAF officers made up 10 per cent of the AS.⁵¹ The extent of the permeation of SAF officers into the AS in the 1990s is indicated by the rising prevalence of military terminology (such as "Standard Operating Procedure", SOP) in the civil service.⁵²

There is much more to be said, but that is for another day. So let us return our focus to the character of this system. Despite the genuinely meritocratic elements of the system, the oil that lubricates the Singapore system is the exercise of personal power, a feature that is common to both class systems and the traditional Chinese mandarin state. The personal character of power is demonstrated without much effort in the person of Lee Kuan Yew, who remains in Cabinet 15 years and two Prime Ministers after his retirement from the premiership, with the unlikely title of "Minister Mentor". He was previously "Senior Minister" for the duration of Goh Chok Tong's premiership, but now Goh holds that title. His presence in Cabinet must be most uncomfortable for Lee Hsien Loong. Not only does he have to work in the shadow of the founding father of modern Singapore, as did his predecessor, but in his case the man in question is his father. Even if Hsien Loong is really his "own man", who is going to believe it? Hsien Loong did not even get to announce the new line up. It was Lee Senior who announced that he would continue in Cabinet for as long as he was fit and able to serve, and it was Lee Senior who announced the new hierarchy (for protocol purposes) within the Prime Minister's Office, whereby he would be third in line behind Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.⁵³ An anonymous "government official" was left to confirm Lee Senior's announcement six days later.⁵⁴ Why does Lee Hsien Loong not simply remove him from Cabinet as is his constitutional right? Why did not Goh Chok Tong do so when he was Prime Minister? Regardless of the power they notionally possess or possessed by virtue of their institutional positions, they both understand that in or out of Cabinet, Lee Kuan Yew retains his personal networks and his personal power. He needs a seat in Cabinet only so that he can legally have open access to Cabinet and other official papers and legally retain his

privileged links to the Internal Security Department. On balance Lee Hsien Loong may not even want to see him gone yet because his own power networks are still underpinned by his father. In the case of Goh Chok Tong, his efforts as Prime Minister to build a personal and independent power base⁵⁵ were thwarted by both Lees – father as Senior Minister and son as Deputy Prime Minister. In the end, after being outflanked by father and son during a property scandal involving the Lee family in 1996,⁵⁶ Goh gave up trying to exercise real power and handed the reins of domestic government over to Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In any case, Goh's efforts were never going to be very complete because he had no relatives in government, or in the elite. It was probably this characteristic more than any other that made him an ideal stop gap between father and son.

Beyond the special place of the first family the operation of personal power is less spectacular, but nonetheless pervasive. According to one Permanent Secretary there were, in 2003, a group of six Permanent Secretaries who were of the same cohort, and who knew and trusted each other well. With a luncheon discussion or a couple of phone calls between members of this group, problems can be fixed without further ado. He went as far as to say that without networks in government, "it would be difficult to get things done".⁵⁷ A former Permanent Secretary made a different point that also highlights the personal character of power in the Singapore system. He spoke of the importance of finding yourself as a senior civil servant under a minister with clout, capable of getting things done. If a minister is afraid of being "shot down" at every step, then all the civil servants working under him will endure years of frustration.⁵⁸ In the Civil Service, they actually have a name for this personal capacity to get things done. It is called Emotional Quotient (EQ), modelled on Intelligence Quotient (IQ). The EQ is one of the factors by which the Civil Service measures and tracks an officer's "Current Estimated Potential" using the "Assessment Appraisal System" adapted from Shell oil.⁵⁹ Thus the Civil Service has actually developed a measure for the personal power (and competence) of senior officers.

6. Personal Power at Work

The description given above provides a satisfactory outline of the operation of personal power in the elite, but it fails to convey its extraordinary character. The following anecdote conveys an extreme example of the operation of personal power, showing that the person is often more important than the position he or she holds. In March 1998, Singapore's ruling elite treated observers to an extraordinary and highly edifying spectacle that turned the conventional relationship between political leadership and the civil service on its head. The event even began in a peculiar way, with a senior civil servant, rather than a politician, launching a new policy initiative. The Economic Development Board (EDB) was becoming concerned over the casualness with which scholarship holders bonded to the EDB were exercising their contractual right to buy themselves out of their bond to take up more lucrative offers. EDB Chairman Philip Yeo regarded honouring the bond as not just a matter of meeting contractual obligations, but as a moral obligation, and proposed a moral dimension to the solution: publicly naming (and implicitly humiliating) bond breakers.⁶⁰ In March 1998 the EDB put Yeo's plan into effect and began naming bond breakers publicly.⁶¹

In the public debate that followed, it emerged that the previous January a government MP had disagreed with Yeo over this approach in a meeting. In the excitement of the argument Yeo – a civil servant – called for the resignation of the MP and asked for the names of any other MPs who shared his views. When the MP complained in Parliament about this civil servant's conduct, two government MPs leapt to Yeo's defence.⁶² Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong finally settled the matter with a contribution that was just as remarkable as what had gone before. He devoted four sentences (one paragraph) to chastising Yeo for overstepping his brief, and 19 paragraphs to chastising the MP (his colleague). Lee began by emphasising the respect due to civil servants and the need for "mutual respect and appreciation" because "MPs and civil servants both play crucial but different roles in our body politic". He then criticised the MP's account of the meeting and his views and humiliated the MP by detailing the extent to which he had already backed away from his original position in the light of Mr Yeo's arguments. DPM Lee left the MP no room to move:

It is clear from the file note that Mr Chng [the MP] had argued that it was quite alright to break a scholarship bond, because it was just a matter of a legal contract and liquidated damages, and this is what provoked Mr Yeo.

... On Monday [in Parliament], Mr Chng Hee Kok, to his credit, no longer maintained that there was nothing wrong. ...

Mr Chng has told me that he had thought the matter over and modified his stand. Had Mr Chng taken this more responsible line in his meeting with Mr Philip Yeo on Jan [sic] 19, I do not think he would have provoked the reaction that he did.

The Deputy Prime Minister concluded by pointedly reminding Mr Chng that "MPs are opinion leaders" and that "the views they propagate in public speeches set the tone for society".⁶³

It must have been a relief for the MP to be told that he has some role, because he had been left in no doubt that his views counted for nought in policy formation. He might also have quite reasonably formed the opinion that his political colleagues and superiors regarded the civil service as a normal means of not only developing and implementing policy but even of announcing it. Furthermore, he knew that he could count on no loyalty from his parliamentary colleagues if he did not accept political leadership offered by a senior civil servant – or at least by this particular civil servant. The events of March 1998 had the appearance of an announcement that at the senior levels of the civil service the distinction between the political and the administrative elite is blurred. In fact it was merely a spectacular confirmation of this

reality, which is actually institutionalised in at least two ways. First, it is part of the formal job description of senior civil servants (Administrative Officers) that they “are responsible for formulating ... Government policy”.⁶⁴ Second, the most senior civil servants share with Cabinet Ministers the same hierarchy for the purposes of salary and seniority, and some, such as Phillip Yeo in 1998, have held ranks higher than that of a junior Minister, let alone a mere MP.⁶⁵ It is this blurring of the political and administrative leadership – which has long since been evident to Singapore-watchers⁶⁶ – that is the point of this anecdote. They are two facets of the same stone.

This is not to say that this incident is typical. Several senior figures have gone to great lengths in interview to emphasise that Philip Yeo is a law unto himself and an exception to the rule. They are undoubtedly correct to point out that Yeo's behaviour on this occasion was extreme and extraordinary, but my point is that it was an extreme and extraordinary example of a systemic phenomenon. Philip Yeo is hardly the only civil servant or retired civil servant with huge reserves of personal power, though he is probably the only one to flaunt it so publicly.⁶⁷ This personal power is earned through a combination of personal connections and a record of achievement, but once created it is as tangible as currency.

7. PM Lee Hsien Loong

The new Prime Minister's curriculum vitae reads as an exemplary case study of the way that personal power, personal connections and related social advantages lubricate the meritocratic system. Lee Hsien Loong was born in 1952 as the eldest son of two brilliant solicitors, one of whom was to become Prime Minister. His economic position was comfortable without being wealthy (at least not in his early life), but more importantly he had the immense advantage of being born into an English-speaking Chinese household. Even without other considerations, this made him part of a small privileged elite in the Singapore of the 1950s because the Chinese were the dominant ethnic group and English was the language of the colonial elite. After independence in 1965, his father successfully set out to make English – his own family's first language – the dominant language of the Republic and the prime language of education.⁶⁸ Lee, however, was not content with his children being just monolingual. Even at this early stage Lee Senior had developed a fixation with what he would later call the "cultural ballast" provided by one's "mother tongue",⁶⁹ and he sent Hsien Loong to top Chinese-medium schools (Nanyang Primary School and Catholic High School)⁷⁰ so he could also master Mandarin.⁷¹ Yet despite this immersion in a Chinese-language environment, Hsien Loong was failing his Mandarin, so his parents arranged for private tuition. This enabled him to barely pass his A Levels.⁷² His relative mastery of Mandarin was to put him in good stead since, unbeknownst to anyone else, his father was later going to place bilingual Chinese (English and Mandarin-speaking) at the apex of the political and administrative elite.⁷³

As if this was not enough of an advantage, just as Hsien Loong finished his senior years of school, as if on cue the first of the Junior Colleges (JCs) opened to offer elite students a specialist study and tuition environment to prepare for university. It is barely conceivable that this is a coincidence, but it remains a fact that Hsien Loong was in the first intake of the first JC, National Junior College (NJC), where against all common practice he was allowed to sit for the Cambridge A-levels in two stages. He matriculated with A1s in pure and applied maths and an A2 in physics in 1969,⁷⁴ and then returned as a part-time student to sit for the full set of examinations and improve his matriculation results, presumably to get a head start in Cambridge.⁷⁵ On the strength of his 1969 results alone he was one of eight winners of the prestigious President's Scholarship in 1970, and also won a Public Service Commission scholarship to Cambridge to study mathematics.⁷⁶ After attending NJC, he also voluntarily began his National Service while waiting to depart for Cambridge, even though, as a scholarship winner, he could have deferred.⁷⁷

As "luck" would have it, his decision to start his National Service early served him well. While doing his National Service the Ministry of Defence initiated a system of SAF Overseas Merit scholarships and Lee was in the inaugural group of five men to win one for his study in Cambridge.⁷⁸ Upon his return to Singapore in 1974 the SAF initiated a scholarship and leadership programme for serving officers. Unsurprisingly, Lee Hsien Loong was in the first intake.⁷⁹ All in all, Lee made good use of his study opportunities while he was in the SAF. From 1971 to 1974 he studied at Cambridge, where he graduated with Double First Class Honours in Mathematical Statistics and Mathematical Economics and a distinction in a Diploma in Computer Science. After a mere three years working as a regular officer in the SAF, he was posted to Fort Leavenworth, USA, where he studied at the US Army Command and General Staff College from 1978 to 1979. Upon completion of these studies he stayed in the US for another year as a Mason Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, graduating in 1980 with a Masters in Public Administration. By this stage he had risen to the rank of Major in the SAF, despite having only served for about three years on operational duty. Despite his inexperience he was made Director, Joint Operations Planning Directorate from 1981 to 1982, and then became Chief of Staff (General Staff) from 1982 to 1984, by this time having risen to the rank of Brigadier-General.⁸⁰ The SAF did not get very good value out of their investment, however, for Lee Hsien Loong left the SAF to run for parliament in 1984.

I have no precise knowledge of the operation of favouritism during his military career, so we can only speculate about the importance of his family name in his rapid and comfortable rise through the ranks, risking not much more injury than a paper cut.⁸¹ On his entry into politics, however, there is less need to speculate. Many months before the announcement of his entry into politics, civil servants in the Housing and Development Board (HDB) were told that their job was to prepare the ground in Ang Mo Kio constituency for an Army officer who was going to retire soon and enter politics at the upcoming election. In this case the business of "preparing the ground" involved ensuring that the creation of the first Town Council (another first for Lee Hsien Loong) went smoothly. Zulkifli Baharudin, an officer in the HDB, was put in charge, and apart from the administrative work of setting up a new municipal authority, he oversaw and engaged personally in door knocking, talking to hawkers and shop owners, making sure everyone was happy. Zulkifli says that this was his first political education and his first "real contact with the constituency". He said in interview that even without knowing that it was Lee Hsien Loong who was being parachuted into the electorate, the work was given a high priority because the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) "was going to fight the election on the basis that it is best able to manage and lead a new municipal entity".⁸² A few months before the election he was told that the new Member of Parliament was "the son of Mr Lee". After that, the work intensified, and he remembers it as the hardest working period of his life. Lest anyone is left with lingering doubts that the selection of Lee Hsien Loong's constituency for the first Town Council might have been an arbitrary selection, it is worth noting that the next assignment given to Zulkifli was setting up the second Town Council in Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's electorate, Tanjong Pagar.⁸³ It is doubly significant to this study of personal power, patronage and special opportunities that having proved his worth and – it was assumed – political reliability, Zulkifli was later invited to stand for Parliament as a PAP candidate.⁸⁴

The unofficial secondment of a team of civil servants into working for the re-election of the PAP government in an election is not extraordinary in itself. Entire ministries routinely devote their resources to the PAP during General Elections. I have interviewed two other civil servants who have worked in two different ministries who each took part in election work on behalf of the PAP during the 1991 election. One (in the Ministry of Information and the Arts) was involved in a ministry-wide exercise of monitoring and managing the press on behalf of the PAP. The other (in the Prime Minister's Office) was part of a team of civil servants who attended political rallies and reported on mood and responses among the crowds. This was a comprehensive exercise that involved overtime, scheduled shift work, taxi vouchers and full use of the civil service infrastructure. Another interviewee who was campaigning for an opposition candidate (Chee Soon Juan) during the 1996 elections was followed during his waking hours by two people he presumed to be ISD agents (from the Ministry of Home Affairs). The exercise was carried out without any serious effort at subterfuge, so the primary purpose of the exercise was presumably intimidation rather than surveillance.

The dedication of civil service resources on behalf of the PAP is therefore considered routine within the civil service, but the significant feature of Zulkifli's story is the special treatment accorded "the son of Mr Lee", even by the standards of PAP candidates. And make no mistake. At that stage of his career, Lee Junior's handling of his constituency was so clumsy that he would have been in trouble without this help. He tried to approach his early "walkabouts" like a military inspection, allocating a set time to each floor in each block and expecting his constituents to fit in to his schedule.⁸⁵ Not that you would have known that from reading the press reports at the time. The press at the time brimmed with adulatory reports about the PAP's new candidate for Ang Mo Kio, beginning with reporting the occasional political speech that he was allowed to make while he was still a serving officer in the army.⁸⁶ From there Lee was catapulted into test after test set by his father, all of which he "aced", riding on his energy, intelligence and problem-solving ability.

At this point it is worth noting that he really is intelligent and hard working. His path through life was cleared by family connections, but family connections are not sufficient to win a double first from Cambridge University, or to hold down very senior positions in a highly professional army. He did these things and then went on to do more as a Minister. His first

test was to tackle the recession of the mid-1980s as the Chairman of the Economic Review Committee. From there he went from strength to strength. He had a dream run through the sensitive and powerful Trade and Industry and Finance ministries and became a Deputy Prime Minister in 1990. His progression was interrupted only by a cancer scare that set back his succession to the premiership by a few years. Without belittling the scale of his achievements, it is important to note that he had an immense advantage over and above his innate “talent” in that he had much greater freedom to act than any other member of Cabinet apart from his father. Whereas his more experienced and more senior Cabinet colleagues had to take tiny, incremental steps to unwind any of Lee Kuan Yew’s initiatives,⁸⁷ from the start Lee Hsien Loong was fearless in striking down sacred cows, beginning with the Central Provident Fund.⁸⁸ He could afford to be. He could live up to the mantra, “change it, improve it and build on it” with a freedom enjoyed by almost no one else in the country. As Prime Minister (and even as a disproportionately powerful Deputy Prime Minister) he was also able to invite others into his aura of autonomy, though their autonomy is heavily circumscribed because it is dependent on his patronage. Current beneficiaries of Lee’s largess include the “rising stars” he has been nurturing in Cabinet – especially Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Khaw Boon Wan. Thus Lee’s mantra is a circumlocutious cry of self-legitimation that is personified in Lee Hsien Loong himself and his father. Others may share in it only insofar as their education and “talent” allows, and insofar as they have been socialised into the world of the elite.

8. Conclusion

The Singapore system of elite governance is truly a remarkable beast. Under the legitimating ideology of meritocratic elitism it delivers an effective and thoroughly modern style of technocratic governance that is nevertheless riddled with distortions and failings that threaten to make a mockery of the basic principles of its legitimacy. Worse, some of these distortions – notably the exercise of personal power and the operation of privilege and connections – are intrinsic to the operation of the system to the point where the legitimating ideology starts to look like a threadbare cover for the perpetuation of a dynasty. And yet the system works. There is enough talent in the dynasty and enough truth in the myths of meritocracy, elite governance and pragmatism to ensure that the city-state is in safe hands, and that it is likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. If the reality were allowed to stray too far from these ideals then the whole system would degenerate into crony politics – and that is not going to be allowed to happen. The imperfections and distortions create some insecurity and tension, but these are not fatal to the system. The ruling elite clearly believes that they are an acceptable price for peace, prosperity and a smooth, if imperfect system of elite regeneration.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- ¹ Luigi Pellizzoni, "The myth of the best argument: Power, deliberation and reason", *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 52 no. 1 (2001), p. 64.
- ² The pre-eminent profession in a particular technocracy and in theories of technocracy varies considerably. See Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1977), especially pp. 144–65.
- ³ Goh Keng Swee and The Education Study Team, *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979), p. 3–1. The identification of the Education Study Team as comprising system engineers was made by Mr Herman Hochstadt, who was Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education at the time of the review. (Interview with Herman Hochstadt, Singapore, 7 January 1993, with Mr Daniel Chew on behalf of the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore).
- ⁴ Junko Kato, *The Problem of Bureaucratic Rationality: Tax Politics in Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 17–21. B.C. Koh, *Japan's Administrative Elite* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 1, 2. An example of a polity with a dominant regulatory bureaucratic was Thailand/Siam during most of its post-1932 history. See J.L.S. Girling, *The Bureaucratic Polity in Modernizing Societies: Similarities, Differences, and Prospects in the ASEAN Region* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1981), pp. 9–14.
- ⁵ James Minchin, *No Man is an Island: A portrait of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew*, Revised Edition (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), p. 118, and; Chan Heng Chee, *Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the politics gone?* (Singapore: Department of Political Science, University of Singapore, 1975).
- ⁶ For an exposition of my views of modernity and the modernist deification of rationality, see Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The tepid war* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, 2004), pp. 98–100.
- ⁷ Junko Kato, *The Problem of Bureaucratic Rationality*, p. 21.
- ⁸ Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 1982), and; Ezra Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979).
- ⁹ Lee Kuan Yew was the architect of the Singapore system and so was not a product of it, but his two successors were both ex-bureaucrats. PM Goh Chok Tong was recruited from Neptune Orient Lines, a Government-owned company, and PM Lee Hsien Loong formerly held a senior position in the military bureaucracy, to whence he had been seconded from the civilian bureaucracy. (See Senior Minister Goh's curriculum vitae on the Singapore Cabinet website, at <<http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/>>; "Lee Hsien Loong to leave the army", *The Straits Times*, 1 September 1984, and; Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, p. 247.
- ¹⁰ Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2005 Administrative Service Dinner, 24 March 2005. Cited on Sprinter [Singapore Government news service] <<http://www.sprinter.gov.sg/>>. Accessed 30 March 2005.
- ¹¹ It may be significant that the Singapore solution to the dilemma of the tension between the political and the bureaucratic leadership is theoretically the opposite of the Marxist solution. Marxism sought to abolish the need for politics by reducing government to rational administration, whereas the Singapore system celebrates the political. It seeks to bring rational administration into harmony with the political. See Herman R. van Gunsteren, *The Quest for Control: A Critique of the Rational-Central-Rule Approach in Public Affairs* (London; New York; Sydney; Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), pp. 11, 12.
- ¹² Until April 2005, the two most senior members of the civil service are Mr Lim Siong Guan, Head of the Civil Service and Mr Eddie Teo, Permanent Secretary in the Prime Ministers' Office (Public Service Division). Their views are set out in a number of speeches that are reproduced in *Ethos*, the journal of the Civil Service College, which is available online at <<http://www.ipd.gov.sg/ethos/ethos.html>>. Accessed 22 March 2005.

- ¹³ See Eddie Teo, "Can public servants be leaders?", *Ethos*, September 2003. Available at <<http://www.ipd.gov.sg/ethos/ethos.html>>. Accessed 22 March 2005, and; Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2005 Administrative Service Dinner, 24 March 2005.
- ¹⁴ Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2005 Administrative Service Dinner, 24 March 2005.
- ¹⁵ *The Straits Times*, 6 April 2004.
- ¹⁶ Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally 2004 Speech, Sunday 22 August 2004, at the University Cultural Centre, National University of Singapore. Cited on *Sprinter* [Singapore Government news service] <<http://www.sprinter.gov.sg/>>. Accessed on 9 November 2004.
- ¹⁷ Goh Chok Tong, Singapore Government Press Release. Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Minister for Health and Second Minister for Defence, at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) Nite 1982, 6 March 1982. Available at National Archives of Singapore, at <<http://www.museum.org.sg/NAS/nas.shtml/>>. Cited 10 May 2004.
- ¹⁸ *The Sunday Times*, 29 February 2004. At the time Khaw was Acting Minister for Health, but he has since been made a full minister.
- ¹⁹ The interview was conducted in Singapore in 2003, but I am not free to cite my source. Some interviews conducted in the course of this research have been de-identified at the request of the interviewee, and in accordance with procedures approved by the Behavioural and Social Science Ethical Review Committee of the University of Queensland. Such interviews will be identified by the date on which the interview was conducted. No two interviews referred to in this paper were conducted on the same day.
- ²⁰ See "Reformer at work", "Being Hsien Loong" and "Taking one for the team", in *The Straits Times Interactive*, 12 August 2004, and; Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2005 Administrative Service Dinner, 24 March 2005", when he told of how "in 1997, when we needed to strengthen and invigorate the Ministry of Education, I sent [Lim Siong Guan] to MOE [Ministry of Education]. As the Permanent Secretary, he motivated the teachers and principals in all the schools, and was a principal architect of the 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' programme."
- ²¹ Examples of such innovations include the introduction of Edusave and compulsory schooling.
- ²² "Singapore's Premier on the power of the Lee family", *Business Week*, 24 June 2002.
- ²³ Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 115, and; Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (London: Curzon; Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), pp. 97–136.
- ²⁴ Lee's interview with Roy Mackie and Quek Peck Lim, of *The Business Times*, 16 September 1978, cited in *ibid.*, p. 124.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ²⁶ Lee's address to the PAP Ordinary Party Conference, Petir, November 1984, p. 2. The continuing operation of the Shell appraisal system is confirmed by my interview with Bilahari Kausikan, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 15 April 2003.
- ²⁷ Between 1980 and 1994, only two ministers were recruited from the private sector. In the 1998 intake of new blood, only two members of Cabinet had been recruited from the private sector. See Ross Worthington, *Governance in Singapore* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 145. Of the 19 men currently in Cabinet as of April 2005, (excluding Lee Kuan Yew, who is a special case), only three (Tony Tan, Ng Eng Hen and Yeo Cheow Tong) were recruited from the private sector. Four were recruited from the SAF, four from the AS, three from Government-Linked Companies, three from Statutory Boards or the government hospitals, and two from university. See the Singapore Cabinet website, at <<http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/>>.
- ²⁸ "PM spells out role for the elite in Singapore", *The Straits Times*, 20 March 2005. The Administrative Service has even introduced an embryonic system of mid-career entry to try to bring in outside perspectives and ideas. (Teo, "Can Public Servants Be Leaders?").

²⁹In the 2001 General Elections there was a major exercise to inject “new blood” into the government. Of the seven new MPs appointed to the Ministry (as distinct from those appointed to Cabinet) in this round of generational change only two (Dr Ng Eng Hen and Dr Balaji Sadasivan) came from private sector backgrounds (as medical doctors in private practice). The other five came from:

• the Administrative Service (Mr Khaw Boon Wan, formerly of the Ministry of Health and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, formerly of the Ministry of Education and the Monetary Authority of Singapore),

• government-linked companies (Mr Raymond Lim, formerly of DBS Securities and Temasek Holdings, and Mr Cedric Foo, formerly of Neptune Orient Lines and Singapore Airlines) or

• a government instrumentality (Dr Vivien Balakrishnan, formerly CEO of Singapore General Hospital).

See the curriculum vitae of these seven men on the Parliament of Singapore website at <<http://www.parliament.gov.sg/>>. Accessed 31 March 2005. In fact it is notable that Khaw and Shanmugaratnam are now running ministries in which they used to be senior civil servants. This suggests that there is an element of narrowing as well as broadening, in the recruitment focus.

³⁰Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings; Times Editions, 2000), p. 763.

³¹Langdon Winner provides a description of the role of “pragmatism” in classical technological politics in Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: The MIT Press, 1977), p. 259. His description could apply to the Singaporean elite’s world view almost without amendment: “Decisions made in the context of technological politics, therefore, do carry an aura of indelible pragmatic necessity. Any refusal to support needed growth of crucial systems can bring disaster. The alternatives range from utterly bad service, at a minimum, to a lower standard of living, social chaos, and, at the far extreme, the prospect of lapsing into a more primitive form of civilized life.” The only variation one might suggest to make this quote completely apropos for Singapore would be to replace fear of lapsing into a lower form of civilisation, with fear of becoming swallowed by its bigger, but more backward neighbours.

³²Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2005 Administrative Service Dinner, 24 March 2005.

³³Khaw Boon Wan, Ministry of Health Budget Speech (Part 1) on Wednesday, 17 March 2004 by Mr Khaw Boon Wan, then-Acting Minister for Health. Available on the Singapore Government website <<http://www.moh.gov.sg/>>. Accessed on 5 April 2004.

³⁴For the author’s developed thoughts on the ideology and the social, ethnic and class biases inherent in the Singapore system, see Michael D. Barr, “Perpetual Revisionism in Singapore: The Limits of Change”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2003), pp. 77–97, Michael D. Barr and Jevon Low, “Assimilation as multiracialism: The case of Singapore’s Malays”, to appear in *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 6, no. 3 (October 2005), and; Michael Barr, “Singapore”, Chapter 7 in Robin Gauld (ed.), *Comparative Health Policy in the Asia-Pacific*, Health in Asia Series (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2004), pp. 146–73. Also see note 47 for two simple examples of systemic distortions based on gender and ethnicity.

³⁵“PM Goh remains committed to consultation and consensus politics”, *The Straits Times*, 4 December 1994.

³⁶Kevin Tan, “The presidency in Singapore: Constitutional developments”, in Kevin Y.L. Tan and Lam Peng Er (eds), *Managing Political Change in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 63.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 58, 59.

³⁸Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Crucial Years* (Singapore; Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1980), p. 520. In 1976 then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said he abolished the jury system because when he was practising law he “discovered how easy it was to get the first police statements, the further statements and go through them

with a fine tooth-comb, confuse the witness and the jury. And we have now allowed the accused and counsel to face the impartiality of a judicially trained mind and a trained hearer of witnesses who will decide what is the truth." See Lee Kuan Yew's Question and Answer Session Following Address at a Press Club Luncheon in Canberra, 21 October 1976. Cited in Lee Kuan Yew, *Prime Minister's Speeches, Press Conferences, Interviews, Statements, etc.* (Singapore: Prime Minister's Office, 1959–90).

- ³⁹The operation of this peculiarly Singaporean Chinese culture is studied in some detail in Barr and Low, "Assimilation as Multiracialism", but briefly, this peculiarly Singaporean type of "Chineseness" is materialistic, concerned with education as measured by grades and certificates, obsessively concerned with social mobility and, above all, is *kiasu* – a Hokkien word meaning "afraid to lose", which in Singapore parlance has come to refer to a manic fear of losing out on something or to someone.
- ⁴⁰Khaw joined the Prime Minister's Office as Principal Private Secretary to Goh Chok Tong in 1992 while Lee was Deputy Prime Minister. Khaw then became Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (1995–2001) in which role he worked closely with Lee Hsien Loong as Minister for Finance and Deputy Prime Minister. (See Khaw's curriculum vitae on the Singapore Cabinet website.)
- ⁴¹Barr, Lee Kuan Yew, pp. 97–136.
- ⁴²"PM spells out role for the elite in Singapore", *The Straits Times*, 20 March 2005.
- ⁴³Lee Kuan Yew, *New Bearings in Our Education System*, (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, [n.d., c.1966–67]), p. 10.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁴⁵Interview with Zulkifli Baharudin, Singapore, 26 March 2003. Zulkifli was briefly a member of the "scholar's platoon" for his cohort.
- ⁴⁶Interview with someone who was a member of a "scholar's platoon", was nurtured by a group of officers and "invited" to apply for an SAF Scholarship while on NS in 1992. (Interview, Singapore, 28 March 2003.)
- ⁴⁷The exclusion of women from NS effectively (but not absolutely) excludes them from SAF Scholarships. As the importance of the SAF and SAF Scholarships has grown during the 1980s and 1990s, this has become a systemic point of gender discrimination. On a similar note, it should be noted that no SAF Overseas Scholarship has ever been awarded to an ethnic Indian or a Malay. (Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000), p. 239). The discrimination against Malays even seems to extend to Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) Scholarships. When MINDEF ran a special promotional feature for their scholarships in *The Sunday Times*, 7 March 2004, they could not even find one Malay scholar to showcase.
- ⁴⁸In Singapore the PMO is not usually put in a class of its own above the other ministries, but for the purposes of this paper I am treating it as just another ministry.
- ⁴⁹Interview, with an SAF scholar, Singapore, 3 April 2003.
- ⁵⁰Interview with a Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore, 15 April 2003; Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, p. 232, and Worthington, *Governance in Singapore*, pp. 23, 24.
- ⁵¹Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, p. 232.
- ⁵²Conversations with retired and serving civil servants.
- ⁵³"Lee Kuan Yew says to stay in Singapore cabinet", Reuters News Service, 27 July 2004.
- ⁵⁴"Goh to become No. 2 after stepping down as Singapore premier", *Asian Political News Service*, 2 August 2004.
- ⁵⁵Ross Worthington has made a valiant effort to unearth the intricacies of Goh's efforts to build a power base in *Governance in Singapore*, pp. 148–53, but I fear that his efforts were premature and his assertions are unreliable.
- ⁵⁶See several articles in *The Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 25 May 1996 and 1 June 1996.
- ⁵⁷Interview with a Permanent Secretary, Singapore, 8 May 2003.
- ⁵⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹Teo, "Can Public Servants Be Leaders?".
- ⁶⁰*The Straits Times*, 14 August, 1997.
- ⁶¹*Ibid.*, 1 March 1998.

- ⁶² Ibid., 10, 11 March 1998.
- ⁶³ The Sunday Times, 15 March 1998.
- ⁶⁴ Worthington, *Governance in Singapore*, p. 21.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 322, note 52.
- ⁶⁶ See, for instance, Raj Vasil's observation in 1992 that "the distinction between [the senior civil servants] and the political rulers" had been removed. "During the last 15 years, many top civil servants have wielded as much power, if not more, as some ministers. Many of them enjoyed direct access to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Often the Prime Minister dealt directly with them, without going through the second generation ministers responsible for the different departments." See Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore*, First revised edition (Singapore: Mandarin, 1992), p. 145.
- ⁶⁷ Others include Lim Siong Guan, Eddie Teo, SR Nathan, Howe Yoon Cheong, Andrew Chew, George Bogaars, Sim Kee Boon, Ngiam Tong Dow, Lee Ek Tieng, and J.Y. Pillay. This list is not exhaustive.
- ⁶⁸ "English stream students fare best", The Straits Times, 25 February 1978.
- ⁶⁹ Barr, Lee Kuan Yew, pp. 150–57.
- ⁷⁰ The Straits Times, 10 August 1967.
- ⁷¹ Eastern Sun, 20 February, 1968.
- ⁷² "BG Lee's poor grades for Chinese language", The Straits Times, 21 January 1999. Lee Senior later dismissed the suggestion that students who receive private tuition in Mandarin have an advantage over those who do not, which raises the question of why he arranged for tuition for his own son. ("Drop dialects at home and help your child do better in school", The Straits Times, 17 November 1980). Tuition has become a commonplace feature of Singapore life since the 1990s, but was almost unheard of in the 1960s. (Interviews with several people who were students in the 1960s and 1970s; and interview with Mr Rudy Mosbergen, given to the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 1994, p. 389 of the official transcript. Mr Mosbergen was a teacher in the first half of the 1970s, and then became Assistant Director of Curriculum at MOE.)
- ⁷³ Note that Lee Kuan Yew learnt Mandarin as an adult and by the early 1960s had acquired a satisfactory level of Mandarin.
- ⁷⁴ "PSC chooses eight new President's Scholars", The Sunday Times, 31 May 1970; "President's Scholar Lee to do national service stint first", The Straits Times, 1 June 1970.
- ⁷⁵ "President's Scholar Lee to do national service stint first", The Straits Times, 1 June 1970.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ The Straits Times, 20 May 1971.
- ⁷⁹ Worthington, *Governance in Singapore*, p. 260, note 136.
- ⁸⁰ The chronology of Lee Hsien Loong's military service is pieced together from his entry in Low Kar Tiang and Peter K.G. Dunlop (eds) *Who's Who in Singapore* (Singapore: Who's Who Publishing, 2000), pp. 128, 129; Lee Hsien Loong's entry curriculum vitae published on the Singapore Government website, <http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/p_pmlee.htm>. Accessed 21 March 2005; "The scholar and Hokkien 'peng'", The Straits Times Interactive, 12 August 2004; "The 3 pillars of a secure society – by Col Lee", The Straits Times, 3 May 1984, and; "Lee Hsien Loong to leave the army", The Straits Times, 1 September 1984. Lee's promotion to Brigadier-General came some time between 3 May and 1 September, just before his departure from the army.
- ⁸¹ The government admits that prior to 2000 the sons of prominent persons doing National Service were identified and classed as "White Horses", but in an exercise of extraordinary optimism, it asks Singaporeans to believe that the purpose of this classification was to avoid favouritism. ("White horse' classification for NSmen existed prior to 2000", Channel NewsAsia, 11 November 2003, at <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/Singaporelocalnews/view/56686/1/html/>>. Accessed 12 November 2003.)
- ⁸² Interview with Zulkifli Baharudin, Singapore, 26 March 2003. The introduction of Town Councils was itself an exercise in cementing the technocratic character of the political

leadership. As Town Councils were introduced, MPs became notionally responsible for managing them. The government's political message was that MPs from the Peoples' Action Party are professionals who are competent to manage the Councils professionally, but the Opposition candidates are all amateurs.

⁸³ Interview with Zulkifli Baharudin, Singapore, 26 March 2003.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Zulkifli declined the invitation to stand for parliament as a PAP candidate, but later accepted a government invitation to become a semi-independent Nominated MP.

⁸⁵ "Being Lee Hsien Loong", The Straits Times Interactive, 12 August 2004.

⁸⁶ See, for instance, "The 3 pillars of a secure society – by Col Lee", The Straits Times, 3 May 1984; "Lee Hsien Loong to leave the army," The Straits Times, 1 September 1984; "Farewell to the SAF", "From refuge to respect: Brig-Gen Lee on the army's rise in stature", "Goodbye sir! Don't forget us sir!", 20 September 1984; "Brig-Gen Lee appointed Political Secretary", The Straits Times, 22 September 1983; "It's official: Lee Hsien Loong is a candidate", "Dad's a hard act to follow", "What his friends think of him", The Sunday Times, 23 September 1984, "Tinker, tailor, soldier – and newsmaker", "Hsien Loong on the motto of a new politician: He quotes the Bard in his first speech as a PAP candidate", "It's door-to-door on the campaign trail in Teck Ghee", "The talented, the enthusiastic and the not so keen reservists", "Why not the PM's son?", "Why not a soldier?", The Straits Times, 24 September 1984 and; "Hsien Loong meets the press and fields questions with ease: Judge me on my own merit – Brig-Gen Lee", The Straits Times, 27 September 1984.

⁸⁷ See Barr, "Perpetual Revisionism in Singapore".

⁸⁸ "Reformer at Work", The Straits Times Interactive, 12 August 2004.

