1923–2015

Lee Kuan Yew
Architect of modern Singapore

"As for me, I have done what I had wanted to do, to the best of my ability. I am satisfied."
Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's visionary founding Prime Minister and architect of the country's rise from a fledgling island nation expelled from Malaysia to one envied worldwide for its rapid economic progress, far-sighted political leadership and all-round efficiency, died this morning.

He was 91.

Mr Lee's death came a few months shy of the 50th anniversary of the Republic's independence on Aug 9.

In a brief statement announcing the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, PMO said in statement issued just past 4am:

"We won't see another like him"

"The Prime Minister is deeply grieved to announce the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore," PMO said in statement issued just past 4am.

At about 6.20am, the Cabinet also issued a statement: "We will always remember his sound guidance, his constant questioning, and his fatherly care for Singapore and for all of us. Let us dedicate ourselves to Singapore and Singaporeans, in the way that Mr Lee showed us."

Mr Lee's last public appearance was on Nov 7 last year, at the 60th anniversary celebrations of the People's Action Party's (PAP) — which he founded in 1954 — held at Victoria Memorial Hall.

PAP chairman Khaw Boon Wan said in a statement that Mr Lee had devoted his whole life to Singapore. Mr Khaw said: "Millions of Singaporeans have improved their lives because of his dedication and sacrifice. As we mourn his passing, let's also re-dedicate ourselves to building on his legacy, for the Party and for Singapore.

Mr Lee had been warded at SGH since Feb 5 after coming down with severe pneumonia. Despite a later statement that his condition had improved, he never recovered. His condition worsened progressively last week, statements from the PMO said, and a final update on his deterioration which arrived on Sunday afternoon said his condition had "weakened further". At 4:05am today, the announcement that Singapore had been bracing itself for and dreading for more than a month was made.

The Republic now enters a seven-day period of national mourning — from today to Sunday — for its founding leader, a man who inspired awe and was regarded as an intimidating presence at the start of his tenure as Prime Minister in 1959, but who later became synonymous with Singapore's success and was widely viewed with respect and admiration — even if it was grudging in some quarters.

As a mark of respect to Mr Lee, State flags on all Government buildings will be flown at half-mast during the week of mourning.

A private family wake will be held today and tomorrow at Sri Temasek — the Prime Minister's official residence on the Istana grounds. From today to Sunday, condolence books and cards will be placed at the Istana's main gate for the public to pen their tributes to Mr Lee. Condolence books will also be opened at all overseas missions.

Mr Lee's body will lie in state at Parliament House from Wednesday to Saturday, for the public to pay their respects. A State Funeral Service will be held at 2pm on Sunday at the National University of Singapore's University Cultural Centre.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the eldest of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's three children, addressed the nation this morning via live television.

With his voice choking with emotion at times, he spoke in English, Mandarin and Malay. In his English speech, he said: "The first of our founding fathers
Lee Kuan Yew
Age: 91

Passed away peacefully on 23/03/2015

Dearly missed and fondly remembered by

Mdm Kwa Geok Choo (deceased)

Children & Spouses:
Lee Hsien Loong  Wong Ming Yang (deceased)
          Ho Ching
Lee Wei Ling
Lee Hsien Yang  Lim Suet Fern

Grandchildren:
Li Xiuqi         Li Shengwu
Li Yipeng       Li Huanwu
Li Hongyi       Li Shaowu
Li Haoyi

Private Family Wake :  Sri Temasek, Istana
23/03 (Monday) to 24/03 (Tuesday)

Lying in State :  Parliament House
25/03 (Wednesday) to 28/03 (Saturday)

State Funeral Service :  University Cultural Centre
29/03 (Sunday) 2pm

Private Cremation Service :  Mandai Crematorium
After State Funeral Service

The public may pay their respects at Parliament House
from 10am to 8pm during the Lying in State

Condolences may also be expressed at
www.rememberingleekuanwey.sg

The family respectfully requests no wreaths, flowers or condolence advertisements

Donations received will go to “Education Fund”, “NTUC-U Care Fund”, “Garden City Fund” and the community self-help groups
He was a selfless leader. He shared his experience, knowledge, ideas and life with us. He was my leader, mentor, inspiration, the man I looked up to most. He made me a proud Singaporean. Now he is gone. I mourn but he lives on in my heart. On behalf of Marine Parade residents, I offer our profound condolences to PM Lee Hsien Loong and his family.”

President Tony Tan said: “Mary and I are deeply saddened by the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. We extend our deepest condolences to his children Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Ms Lee Wei Ling and Mr Lee Hsien Yang, and their families.”

In his three-page condolence letter to the Prime Minister, Dr Tan paid tribute to Mr Lee’s achievements, such as how he rallied Singaporeans together after forced separation from Malaysia in 1965. “Many doubted if Singapore could have survived as a nation but Mr Lee rallied our people together and led his cabinet colleagues to successfully build up our armed forces, develop our infrastructure and transform Singapore into a global metropolis,” Dr Tan wrote.

Condolences from world leaders also streamed in, with Australia’s Prime Minister Tony Abbott and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key among the first to pay tribute to Mr Lee.

Mr Obama said his discussions with Mr Lee during his trip to Singapore in 2009 were “hugely important” in helping him to formulate the US’ policy of rebalancing to the Asia Pacific. “(Mr Lee’s) views and insights on Asian dynamics and economic management were respected by many around the world, and no small number of this and past generations of world leaders have sought his advice on governance and development,” he added.

Obituaries also appeared on the websites of international media, including The New York Times, The Financial Times, The Economist, the BBC and the South China Morning Post.

The outpouring of grief reflected the stature of a man who led a team of equally visionary leaders and oversaw Singapore’s rise by formulating policies aimed at overcoming the myriad challenges faced by a tiny nation set amid what he described at the outset as a “volatile region”.

His ideas spanned the gamut, from Singapore’s place in the larger world, the defence of an island just 50km across, housing, education and economic policies, to the seemingly mundane, but which he explained were equally critical; these ranged from the orderly rows of trees seen across the island, for example, to the 1970s relegation of males with long hair to the back of queues to blunt the appeal of Western hippie subculture, which was deemed unhealthy for the country’s development.

At every turn along the way, and even after he stepped down from his last post in Cabinet following the May 2011 General Election, Mr Lee ceaselessly reminded Singaporeans of his prescription for the country’s success — or lit into its ills — with his signature blend of a politician’s oratory, a courtroom lawyer’s ability to wield a rapier to opposing arguments and a knack for persuasion. The merits of his arguments were always discussed, sometimes debated, but the astute observer always arrived at the same conclusion — that Mr Lee never stopped thinking about the challenges facing this country.

As he put it himself memorably: “Even from my sick bed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel something is going wrong, I will get up.”

His visionary leadership drew praise from all over the world, and the success of Singapore gave it a relevance and weight in global affairs that few small states ever achieve. Former US President Bill Clinton, for example, called him “one of the wisest, most knowledgeable, most effective leader in any part of the world for the last 50 years”.

Other world leaders were similarly effusive in their praise, and many, including heavyweights such as China’s Deng Xiaoping and Britain’s Margaret Thatcher, eagerly sought his views as they themselves sought to transform their countries.

To be sure, Mr Lee had his share of detractors. He went after what he deemed political “ducks” with a vengeance, resorting sometimes to surprisingly sharp language: He once described how he carried a figurative hatchet in his bag, a weapon he would use against “troublemakers”.

His use of lawsuits against political opponents and Western media outlets which were accused of meddling in Singapore politics drew much criticism, as did his iron grip on the local press — he insisted at the outset that there was no “Fourth Estate” role for it, and that its business was as a nation-building entity.

Mr Lee also waded into areas citizens deemed private, such as his ventures into social engineering via the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme or the Speak Mandarin And Not Dialects campaign, and drew flak as a result. Policies such as the banning of chewing gum, meanwhile, drew a mix of criticism and ridicule internationally.

Heremained unapologetic, however, insisting that whatever he did was in the better interests of Singapore. He stood by his belief, which he explained starkly in an interview published by National Geographic magazine in 2010, that to be a leader, “one must understand human nature. I have always thought that humanity was animal-like. The Confucian theory was man could be improved, but I’m not sure he can. He can be trained, he can be disciplined”.

It was a theme he touched on several times, including as early as 1987, when he shrugged off criticism of his theory thus: “I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yes, if I did not, I had not done that, we wouldn’t be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that while I have erred, but I’m not sure he can. He can be trained, he can be disciplined”.

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**EARLY YEARS**

Mr Lee Kuan Yew was born on Sept 16, 1923, the eldest child of Mr Lee Chin Koon and Madam Kooi Neo. His relatively prosperous family included three brothers, Dennis and Freddy Lee, and a sister, Monica.

A natural at school, he topped the state examinations. An outstanding student, he went to London and earned a law degree from Cambridge. The war years and his time in London stirred a political awakening in the young Mr Lee.

Upon his return in 1948, Mr Lee and his wife — the love of his life and the woman he once described as smarter than himself, Madam Kwa Geok Choo — set up the law firm of Lee & Lee. His law career was short-lived, however, and after a few years, he turned his gaze towards politics.

A brief but necessary retelling of this period, shorn of much of the complexity of those times, saw him set up the People’s Action Party and lobby for self-government from the British and enter into merger with Malaya. It was what he firmly believed was necessary for the survival of a tiny island with no natural resources to speak of.

The merger ultimately collapsed, undone by sharp differences in political and economic policies between the ruling parties on both sides, which boile d over into racial unrest between the Chinese and Malays.

On the morning of Aug 9, 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Federation. Hours later, at a press conference, a visibly emotional Mr Lee explained why he had believed — for the “whole of my adult life” — that merger was the right move, but that separation was now inevitable, and called for calm. It was a “calamitous moment,” he said, and the indelible image of him with tears in his eyes came to be. It was a powerful testament to the anguish that separa tion brought in him.

For a nation suddenly cut adrift, uncertain of what the future would bring — or, indeed, if there was one — his vow that there would be a place for all in Singapore managed to bring a measure of solace, and some steel, to the occasion.

**THE ARCHITECT OF MODERN SINGAPORE**

From the beginning, he and his team set out to remake Singapore in every sense of the word. The larger details of how they set about to do it and the results they achieved have been the subject of much academic tomes, and much more besides.

From rehousing a squatter population in Housing Board flats with modern amenities, to conjuring up the defence of Singapore from practically nothing, to formulating an economic policy that took a fledgling nation — to borrow the title of his book — From Third World to First, Mr Lee had a leading hand in all.

There were numerous other decisions he took that have been the subject of much less public lore, but which had significant claim to the success Singapore has enjoyed. The policy to adopt English as the lingua franca for Singapore, the approach to foreign relations, and the decision to strip the airport in Changi instead of redeveloping the old Paya Lebar site, are among them.

Essentially, as recounted in the book, Lee Kuan Yew: The Man And His Ideas, the preservation for the transformation of the nation boiled down to three elements: his view of the problem, his analysis of how it could be solved, and his assessment of Singapore society and what was needed for it to grow.

The government can create a setting in which people can live happily and succeed and express themselves, but it is what people do with their lives that determines economic success while we moved from an agricultural society to an industrial society. We had the advantage of knowing what the end result should be by looking at the West which went through that period. We knew where we were, and we knew where we had to go. We said to ourselves, ‘Let’s hasten, let’s see if we can get there faster.’

As Singapore’s success rounded into view, Mr Lee was often praised for his farsightedness. Less well-known, but just as important, was his obsession with detail, which ranged from how buttons should work down to the state of cleanliness of the toilets at the airport.

His prescience for excellence across all areas rapidly filtered down to the citizenry and, together with what has come to be known as the Pioneer Generation, Mr Lee and his team delivered the proverbial “ einmal” in the political, economic and social environments.

**His intentions were telegraphed early, and moves were put in place after the 1984 General Elections. Much discussion of a handover ensued, and by the time Mr Goh Chee Choon retired as Singapore’s second Prime Minister on Nov 28, 1990, the momentous event was viewed as routine.**

Mr Lee then appointed Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, in a role akin to that of sage, and one which afforded him the opportunity to give his thoughts and advice on the issues confronting Singapore, though, by his own admission, he was keen to let the second generation leadership run things and make the key decisions.

His views were also sought on matters beyond Singapore. Many leaders around the world, as well as leading media commentators, considered him an oracle of sorts on geopolitics, one to be tapped for his wellspring of insights into global affairs.

Much of what he thought of the world, expressed by expression, he was viewed, first and foremost, as a pragmatist whose firm ideas of what would work and what would not were unclouded by theories. In an interview with the late Thomas J. Lickona, he said: “I am not great on philosophy and theories. I am interested in them, but my life is not guided by philosophy or theories. I get things done and leave others to extract the principles from my successful solutions. I do not work on a theory. ‘Instead I ask: what will make this work? ... So Plato, Aristotle, Socrates — I am not guided by them. I read them cursory because I was not interested in philosophy as such. You may call me a ‘utilitarian’ or whatever. I am interested in what works.’

With the template for the transfer of power, Singapore set the nation under went a similar process on Aug 12, 2004, when Mr Lee Hsien Loong was sworn in as the country’s third Prime Minister.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew was subsequently awarded the Sir Antony Gormley sculpture of him in his cabinet, while Mr Goh assumed the mantle of Senior Minister.

In his speech at the swearing-in ceremony of the younger Mr Lee, President S.R. Nathan neatly encapsulated the generations and their role in the changeover.

Mr Nathan added: “The political changeover also marks a generation- al change. Mr Lee Kuan Yew led the way from the days of independence and made Singapore succeed. The second generation, under Mr Goh, had the less obvious but equally challenging task of building a nation that, in peace and prosperity, was getting better and life more comfortable. Mr Lee Hsien Loong now leads the post-independence generation, who have grown up amidst peace, comfort and growing prosperity. Mr Lee and his government must engage the young on external and domestic issues which affect their future, update policies to reflect the aspirations of a younger generation of Singaporeans and adapt their style to stay in tune with the times.”

“Singapore was never meant to be sovereign on its own. To survive, we had to be different, indeed exceptional. We progressed and thrived because we built strong institutions founded on sound values — integrity, meritocracy, equality of opportunities, compassion and mutual respect between Singaporeans.”

“Mr Lee and his government must engage the young on external and domestic issues which affect their future, update policies to reflect the aspirations of a younger generation of Singaporeans and adapt their style to stay in tune with the times.”

As Minister Mentor, Mr Lee’s perspective on what is different and what is continued. When he spoke in public, it was usually to remind Singaporeans of what worked for the country, and why it was necessary to do so. At his last press conference, his speech on Singapore’s National Day address on Aug 16, 2015, for example, he offered his views on one of his pet topics — bilingualism.

Speaking before a crowd clearly enthralled that he had turned up despite feeling unwell, he said: “Education is the most important factor for our next generation’s success. In Singapore, our bilingualism policy makes learning difficult unless you start learning both languages, English and the mother tongue, from an early age — the earlier the better.”

During his years as Minister Mentor, actors on the global stage continued to seek his views; he was a frequent guest on forums that included world-wide business leaders and appeared every now and then in the pages of leading publications.

With his passing, the stature he continued to enjoy, the high-powered board of French giant, Total, held its meeting in Singapore, instead of Paris, for the first time. During the meeting, Mr Lee announced that after 50 years on the board, intended to step down.
n behalf of the people of Singapore, I would like to convey my most heartfelt condolences to you and your family on the passing of your dear father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Mr Lee dedicated his entire life to Singapore from his first position as a legal advisor to the labour unions in the 1950s after his graduation from Cambridge University to his undisputed role as the architect of our modern Republic. Few have demonstrated such complete commitment to a cause greater than themselves.

Mr Lee was elected into the British Legislative Assembly in 1955 and became Singapore’s first Prime Minister after leading the PAP to victory in the 1959 general elections when Singapore was granted full internal self-government. At that time, Singapore faced problems of high unemployment, poor infrastructure and a hostile external environment. To secure Singapore’s access to land, water and natural resources, Mr Lee led Singapore to join the Federation of Malaysia before declaring independence from Britain in 1963. However, the problems were exacerbated when Singapore lost its economic hinterland after our forced separation from Malaysia in 1965. Many doubted if Singapore could survive as a nation but Mr Lee rallied our people together and led his cabinet colleagues to successfully build up our armed forces, develop our infrastructure and transform Singapore into a global metropolis.

Even when Singapore’s urban development was still in its early phases, Mr Lee already had the vision of establishing Singapore as a liveable Garden City. Mr Lee initiated the ambitious project to clean up the Singapore River and Kallang River which were then heavily polluted by garbage, sewage and industrial waste. The Singapore River forms part of the Marina Bay, which is not only a valuable source of fresh water for our city state, but also a place which is enjoyed by Singaporeans and tourists from around the world. Mr Lee also set up the Housing Development Board to develop our public housing estates to give every citizen a stake in the nation. Today, because of Mr Lee’s farsightedness, Singapore is hailed as a model of sustainable and inclusive development for developing cities around the world.

Mr Lee made lasting contributions towards the building of a meritocratic and multi-cultural Singapore. As Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Mr Lee put in place measures to ensure that university places, government contracts, and appointments into public office would go to the most deserving candidates based on merit and regardless of race and religion. Mr Lee also established English as the common working language and the main medium of instruction in our schools so that all Singaporeans would have equal opportunities to learn, communicate and work regardless of race. Each ethnic group was encouraged to learn its mother tongue as a second language to preserve the cultural and community identity of the group. Because of these policies, Singaporeans today are able to leverage on our bilingual and bicultural edge to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves around the world.

A leader who placed service before self-interest, Mr Lee stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990 to allow for a smooth leadership renewal after he had built up a younger team of Cabinet Ministers. Nevertheless, he continued to serve and advance Singapore’s interests at home and abroad as Singapore’s Senior Minister from 1990 to 2004 and then as Minister Mentor from 2004 to 2011. He had spent more than 50 years in the cabinet and was the world’s longest-serving Prime Minister when he stepped down in 1990.

Through Mr Lee, Singapore earned international recognition and established diplomatic relations with major countries affecting our region. Mr Lee was one of the first to recognize China’s potential under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. Mr Lee’s brilliant intellect and candour of opinion led many international leaders and foreign diplomats to seek his views on developments in the region and around the world. Widely revered as a senior statesman, Mr Lee was conferred numerous international accolades throughout his political career.

Many aspects of our lives bear Mr Lee’s imprint - be it our HDB estates, our gardens, or the SAF. Without his remarkable foresight and relentless pursuit of Singapore’s development, the Singapore that we know today would not exist. Singapore was his passion and he continued serving Singapore till the last days of his life. Singaporeans owe an eternal gratitude to Mr Lee Kuan Yew. The greatest tribute that Singaporeans can pay him is to treasure and build upon the legacy that Mr Lee and his team have left us, and make Singapore an even better home for our future generations.

Our thoughts are with you at this time of sorrow.

@ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Total chairman Christophe de Margerie would have none of it, however, and declared: “I refuse his dismissal, your resignation. He is the best lawyer you can have whenever you wish. It will be always our pleasure.”

Despite his advancing age and differing role in government, one thing did not change: His commitment to Singapore and his determination to see to it that everything, no matter how trivial it seemed, worked the way he felt it should.

The keen observer would have spotted him in the unlikeliest of places. Here, being regaled by Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone as the travelling motor circus staged its first night race beneath the twinkling lights of Marina Bay. There, riding a golf cart through the soon-to-be-opened Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort and detailing its views on its attractions and workings.

He also continued to worry about the younger Singaporeans who would view the challenges facing the country, and tried to drive the lessons he had learnt to them through his books.

The watershedral general election of May 2011, beyond being historic in sending more opposition politicians to Parliament than ever before with the first loss of a Group Representation Constituency (GRC), also led to the end of Mr Lee’s decades in the Singapore Cabinet.

On May 14 that year, barely a week after the elections, Mr Lee and Mr Goh jointly resigned from Cabinet, and ex-}

**President Tony Tan’s condolence letter to PM Lee Hsien Loong**

Our thoughts are with you, wrote President Tan.

President Tony Tan’s condolence letter to PM Lee Hsien Loong

Mr Lee Kuan Yew speaking to a student during a visit to Raffles Girls’ Primary School. Mr Lee believed that education is the most important factor for the next generation’s success.

Photograph by Don Wong.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew in a rare public appearance at the National Day Parade in 2009.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the National Day Parade in 2011. Mr Lee returned to active duty behind the scenes, recurring in public appearances in Parliament, the cabinet and was the world’s longest-serving Prime Minister when he stepped down in 1990.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew. The greatest tribute that Singaporeans can pay him is to treasure and build upon the legacy that Mr Lee and his team have left us, and make Singapore an even better home for our future generations. Our thoughts are with you at this time of sorrow.”

**Our thoughts are with you, wrote President Tan.**
Singapore was his abiding passion, says PM in live address

“I am deeply saddened to tell you that Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away peacefully this morning at the Singapore General Hospital ...

The first of our founding fathers is no more. He inspired us, gave us courage, kept us together, and brought us here. He fought for our independence, built a nation where there was none, and made us proud to be Singaporeans. We won’t see another like him.

To many Singaporeans, and indeed others too, Lee Kuan Yew was Singapore. As Prime Minister, he pushed us hard to achieve what had seemed impossible. After he stepped down, he guided his successors with wisdom and tact. In old age, he continued to keep a watchful eye on Singapore.

Singapore was his abiding passion. He gave of himself, in full measure, to Singapore.

As he himself put it towards the end of his life and I quote: “I have spent my life, so much of it, building up this country. There’s nothing more that I need to do. At the end of the day, what have I got? A successful Singapore. What have I given up? My life.”

I am grieving beyond words at the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. I know that we all feel the same way. But even as we mourn his passing, let us also honour his spirit. Let us dedicate ourselves as one people to build on his foundations, strive for his ideals, and keep Singapore exceptional and successful for many years to come. May Mr Lee Kuan Yew rest in peace.”

ESM Goh leads leaders’ tributes to Mr Lee

The Republic’s leaders paid tribute on social media to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, with Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Mr Lee as Prime Minister in 1990, leading the tributes.

Mr Goh wrote on Facebook: “My tears welled up as I received the sad news. Mr Lee Kuan Yew has completed his life’s journey. But it was a journey devoted to the making of Singapore.

“His legacy is so monumental in its magnitude that Singaporeans — a safe, secure, harmonious and prosperous independent Singapore, our Homeland. He was a selfless leader. He shared his experience, knowledge, ideas and life with us. He was my leader, mentor, inspiration; the man I looked up to most.

“Today we lost a founding father of Singapore. I hope Mr Lee is able to be with Mrs Lee once again, and that they may rest in peace together. In this moment of grief, please join me in expressing our deepest condolences to Mr Lee’s family.

“I do not have the words to express my gratitude for everything that Mr Lee has done for Singapore. Our lives have been transformed because Mr Lee had a vision of a better life for all Singaporeans, and dedicated his entire life to that mission. Mr Lee and his team built a deep rapport with our pioneer generation, and together, they achieved what many thought was impossible.

“Mr Lee has lived a full and meaningful life. Let us come together as one people to build on his foundations, strive for his ideals, and keep Singapore exceptional and successful for many years to come. May Mr Lee Kuan Yew rest in peace.”

Mr Lee’s body will lie in state at Parliament House from March 25 to March 28, for the public to pay their respects. Those who wish to pay their last respects at Parliament House can do so from 10am to 8pm daily from Wednesday to Saturday.

The State Funeral Service will be held at 2pm on March 29 at the University Cultural Centre, National University of Singapore.

The State Funeral Service will be attended by the late Mr Lee’s family, friends and staff, the President, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Old Guards, senior civil servants, grassroots leaders and Singaporeans from all walks of life. The State Funeral Service will be followed by a private cremation at Mandai Crematorium.

Condolence books and cards will be available in front of Istana by the Main Gate from Monday to Saturday. The public can express their condolences and share memories of the late Mr Lee at the official website, http://www.rememberingleekuanyew.sg.

The public can call the 24-hour hotline at 6336 1166 with queries, or visit http://www.rememberingleekuanyew.sg and http://www.facebook.com/rememberingleekuanyew for more details.
Leaders around the world mourn a giant

Describing Mr Lee Kuan Yew as giant figure and paying tribute to his influence on the world stage, past and present world leaders mourned Mr Lee’s death this morning.

United States President Barack Obama said he was deeply saddened by the news. He called Mr Lee a remarkable man and “a true giant of history who will be remembered for generations to come as the father of modern Singapore and as one of the greatest strategists of Asian affairs”.

A visionary who led his country from Singapore’s independence in 1965 to build one of the most prosperous countries in the world today, he was a devoted public servant and a remarkable leader,” Mr Obama said. “Mr Lee’s views and insights on Asian dynamics and economic management were respected by many around the world, and no small number of this nation’s most important publications of world leaders have sought his advice on governance and development.”

Adding that he appreciated Mr Lee’s wisdom, Mr Obama said that his discussions with Mr Lee during his trip to Singapore in 2000 were “hugely important” in helping him formulate US policy of rebalancing to the Asia Pacific.

Mr Obama’s predecessor, Mr George W Bush, called Mr Lee the “father of today’s Singapore” who transformed his country and helped usher South East Asia into the modern era. “The Singapore he leaves behind is an influential force for stability and prosperity and a friend to the United States,” Mr Bush said.

United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron also said that Mr Lee “personally shaped Singapore in a way that few people have any nation”.

Mr Cameron said: “He made his country into one of the great success stories of our modern world. That Singapore is today a prosperous, secure and successful country is a monument to his decades of remarkable public service.”

He noted that the late Margaret Thatcher, a former British PM, once said that there was no Prime Minister whom she admired more than Mr Lee for “the strength of his convictions, the clarity of his views, the directness of his speech and his vision of the way ahead”.

Mr Cameron said: “His place in history is assured, as a leader and as one of the modern world’s foremost statesmen.”

Former UK PM Tony Blair said Mr Lee was “one of the most extraordinary leaders of modern times”.

“He was a genuine political giant. He was the first to understand that modern politics was about effective Government not old-fashioned ideology. Whether in the economy, social cohesion or law and order, he applied methods of rigorous analysis and detailed implementation,” said Mr Blair.

“He built Singapore into the success story it is today by intelligence, wisdom and determination in equal measure. As a result Singapore has a respect and admiration far above its size.”

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said his country mourned the passing of “a giant of our region”. “Fifty years ago, Lee Kuan Yew led a vulnerable, fledgling nation to independence,” he said. “Today, thanks to his vision and determination, Singapore is one of the world’s most prosperous countries, a financial powerhouse, and one of the world’s easiest places to do business.”

Mr Abbott said the region owes much to Mr Lee. “Here in Australia and beyond, leaders sought and learned from his wise counsel,” he added.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said Mr Lee’s courage, determination, commitment, character and ability made him a “formidable leader who held the respect of Singaporeans and the international community alike”.

He added: “I had the honour of meeting Mr Lee in 2007 during his last official visit to New Zealand. He was well known for his insights and foresight but what struck me most was his unwavering determination to see Singapore succeed.”

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon said Mr Lee was “a legendary figure in Asia, widely respected for his strong leadership and statesmanship”.

“During his three decades in office, he helped Singapore to transition from a developing country to one of the most developed in the world, transforming it into a thriving international business hub,” said Mr Ban. “As Singapore marks its 50th anniversary of independence this year, its founding father will be remembered as one of the most inspiring Asian leaders.”
when he breathed his last early this morning, the Republic's first Prime Minister had also been Tanjong Pagar's Member of Parliament for six decades — the longest-serving, and more remarkably, outlasting the last of his Old Guard leadership comrades by more than 25 years.

Mr Lee died at 3.18am today at Singapore General Hospital, where he had been warded since Feb 5 after coming down with severe pneumonia. He was 91.

When Lee Kuan Yew entered the scene as a raw opposition politician in 1955, Singapore was but a colonial outpost populated by a polyglot of migrants, common only in their desires to eke out a livelihood here.

He departs having guided Singapore through the trying first years of independence into a thriving economic miracle that is marvelled the world over for overcoming improbable odds.

Mr Lee has also elevated this fledgling nation's place on the world stage far beyond that of ordinary city-states, partly because of its extraordinary achievements, but also because many global leaders have been floored by his leader's astute analysis of geopolitical trends and developments — he continued this role even after handing over the reins after 31 years as Prime Minister by travelling the globe as a world-class pundit.

But Lee's enduring legacy is also the distinct brand of governance he had wrought, while the fundamental principles he adhered to in his 31 years as Prime Minister remains the bedrock on which Singapore's steady ascension continues.

Opinions about him vary, from respect and worship, to fear and disdain, but few can quarrel with this: Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew were, are, and will continue to be indissociable. Such is Mr Lee's imprint on Singapore.

If one had to distil the core principle of governance in Singapore, it would be meritocracy — Mr Lee determined early that the government should equalise opportunities and not outcomes, and rewards must be allocated on the basis of one's merits and abilities.

His firm belief stemmed from the "injustices" he saw in the 1950s when "the whites were on top" by default. "You might be a good doctor, but if you are an Asian, you would be under a white doctor who's not as good," he once recounted to a group of authors. "The injustice of it all, the discrimination, struck me and everybody else."

He also wrote in his memoirs: "It struck me as manifestly fair that everybody in this world should be given an equal chance in life, that in a just and well-ordered society there should not be a great disparity of wealth between persons, because of their position or status, or that of their parents."

That governance of a vulnerable state sitting in a volatile region had to be neutral in terms of race, language and religion was buttressed by the deep misgivings the Republic's first-generation leaders had with the Malaysian government's politics of communalism during the brief, unhappy merger between the two from 1963 to 1965.

On independent Singapore's founding on 9 August 1965, multiracialism was written into the Constitution — the first post-colonial state to do so.

It was the only way to forge a sense of nationhood for a people of mostly settlers, Mr Lee knew, and this togetherness was critical for a tiny island with a Chinese-majority population sitting amid far larger Malay neighbours.

"We took some drastic decisions at the beginning and shuffled the people together. Had we not done this, it would have led to a different Singapore," he recalled in the book Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going, referring to his Government's dispersal of racial enclaves among various kampong through balloting into public housing estates. Inter-racial mingling was key if the people were to identify themselves not only by their race, but also by their nationality, he decided.

"There must be a sense of self, a sense of identity, that you are prepared to die for one another," he added.

But diminishing the tendencies of communities to revert to communally-influenced behaviours was always going to be an arduous task. Racial enclaves again congregated in the various housing estate subsequently and a trend of voting along racial lines emerged in the 1980s.

Reflecting his resolve to entrench multiracialism in Singapore, Mr Lee introduced ethnic quotas for Housing and Development Board (HDB) blocks in 1989 and pushed through the Group Representation Constituency in 1988 to ensure every ethnic representation in Parliament, despite vociferous criticisms of these moves. Among other things, opponents said the quota constraints warped property transactions and the system was counter-intuitive to meritocratic ideals.

Mr Lee was unmoved. "In Singapore, what will identify a Singaporean with the changing circumstances? An acceptance of multiracialism, a tolerance of people of different races, languages, cultures, religions, and an equal basis for competition. That's what will stand out against all our neighbours."

The clearest testament to his multiracial, and meritocratic principles towards governance was in the choice of "race-neutral" English as Singapore's lingua franca, although Malay, as the language of the indigenous people, was retained as the national language.

"What motivated me? Internal stability and peace. We treat everybody equally. We judge you on your merits. This is a level playing field."

To his mind, getting the best results from a meritocratic society also meant the government must not supplant individual effort and responsibility; people must not lose the drive to provide for themselves. That, and seeing in Britain and Sweden how debilitating it was to subsidise a man for the rest of his life, was why he eschewed welfarism, despite being a loyal supporter of the Fabian school of thought in his youth.

As he wrote in his memoirs: "We noted by the 1970s that when government undertook primary responsibility for the basic duties of the head of a family, the drive in people weakened. Welfare undermined self-reliance. People did not have to work for their families' wellbeing. The handout became a way of life. The downward spiral was relentless as motivation and productivity went down. People lost the drive to achieve because they paid too much in taxes. They became dependent on the state for their basic needs."

To this day, the People's Action Party (PAP) Government continues to tie individual effort and responsibility to many of its help programmes for the lower-income, such as the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme.

The creation of the Central Provident Fund (CPF) and the 3M health-care financing system (Medisave, MediShield, and Medifund) are other examples of the Government's drive to ensure that individuals themselves, and not the state, provide for most of their own needs.

Mr Lee realised that, as a country with no natural resources, the only way Singapore could survive, let alone thrive, was to have capable people leading it. His view was informed by how so many newly-independent former colonies had plunged into riots, coups and revolutions under inept leaders who had inherited sound constitutions from the British and French.

"Indeed, Singapore's vulnerabilities — an 80-storey building standing on marshy land — made imperative that the political leadership was made up of the cream of society's talent."

He said once: "Can you have a good government without good men in charge of government? American liberals believe you can, that you can have a good system of government with proper separation of powers between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, plus checks and balances between them ... and there will be good government, even if weak or not so good men win elections and take charge."

"My experience in Asia has led me to a different conclusion. To get good government, you must have good men in charge of government. I have observed in the last 40 years that even with a poor system of government, but with good strong men in charge, people get passable government with decent progress."

It was a challenge that Mr Lee had started thinking about barely one year into Singapore's independence.

And over decades, Mr Lee single-handedly devised the ways to spot and draft into government the capable, honest and dedicated, from schemes such as the Singapore Armed Forces overseas scholarships in 1971 to recruit the top brains — the PAP government has, over the years, had many of these scholars eventually become Cabinet ministers, including Prime Minister

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 10**
Lee Hsien Loong — to getting psychological the best way to convince them was to economic development.

dors, farmers and kampung dwellers, ing them skills and knowledge.

materials in Third World countries, that multinational companies were ex-

Swee deied the then accepted wisdom then-Finance Minister Dr Goh Keng Separation, for instance, Mr Lee and visionary in his policies, which enabled Singapore from squatter settlements and be less susceptible to corruption.

Mr Lee leading his Tanjong Pagar GRC team mates in thanking the residents for their support in the 2006 General Election, when he was Minister Mentor. (Photo: TODAY FILE PHOTO)

“Because of our relentless and unceasing search for talent both at home and abroad to make up for the small families of the well-educated, Singapore has been able to keep up its performance,” said Mr Lee.

Mr Lee, Mr Lee said: “I believed this sense of ownership was vital for our new society, which had no deep roots in a common historical experience.”

Mr Lee was nothing if not a keen straight-shooting style, were always keenly sought.

No less than former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger paid Mr Lee this tribute: “There is no second Lee Kuan Yew in the world. Normally one would say that the leader of a country of the size and population of Singapore would not have a global influence — but precisely because Singapore can survive only by competition with much more powerful neighbours, and precisely because its well-being depends on stability and progress in the area, his views were of great importance to the world. The larger context then the technical problems of the Singaporean economy and so he always had a tremendous influence on us.”

The doors of many world leaders, both past and present, were always open to Mr Lee — a mark of his stature and standing, given how few would have held out hope of survival.

Perhaps the most well-known testimony of Mr Lee as the seminal statesman came from Mrs Thatcher: “In every word I read and heard of every speech of Harry’s. He had a way of penetrating the fog of propaganda and expressing with unique clarity the issues of our times and the way to tackle them. He was never swayed.”

Mr Lee, throughout the years, had impressed, and forged close personal relationships with leaders around the world also benefited the Republic on many fronts, ranging from security and industry, in a bid to replicate these back home.

For instance, Mr Tony Blair’s New Labour came to look at the CPF system — where once British MFs had slammed Mr Lee’s remarks that Mrs Thatcher’s government needed to trim the excesses of the welfare state — while the Vietnamese asked him in 1991 to become their economic adviser despite openly attacking his stance during its occupation of Cambodia just years prior.

But more than his policies and programmes, Mr Lee’s insightful views of global developments and their impact on the world, delivered in his inimitable straight-shooting style, were always keenly sought.

Mr Lee contentiously waded into Mr Lee built, world leaders, such as Mr Richard Nixon, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, and Mr Deng Xiaoping, frequently expressed their admiration and respect for him more readily.

Many leaders — of developed and developing countries alike — came with or sent their delegations here, and continue to do so, to study Singapore’s systems, including of housing, social security and industry, in a bid to replicate these back home.

Mr Lee leading his Tanjong Pagar GRC team mates in thanking the residents for their support in the 2006 General Election, when he was Minister Mentor. (Photo: TODAY FILE PHOTO)

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leaders such as Malaysian Prime Min-
ister Tun Abdul Razak and Indonesia’s
President Suharto shared with Mr Lee facilitated the founding of the Association
of South-East Asian Nations in 1967, which helped foster a stable environ-
ment in which the Republic could grow.

And if not for Mr Lee’s place in the
eyes of the Australian, Indonesian, and
Taiwanese leaders, the Singapore Armed Forces might not have acquired
the permission for much-needed train-
ing space.

The close ties he maintained with
the United States laid the ground for the
1966 Sino-US Trade Agreement signed by
his successor, Mr Goh Chok Tong, in 1993. And the mutual respect between
Mr Lee and China’s Deng Xiaoping played a central role in Singapore’s being
able to tap into China’s economy ahead of
many others, such as the setting up of the
Suzhou Industrial Project in 1994 and the
Tianjin Eco-city subsequently.

Mr Goh noted: “Mr Lee’s good rela-
tions with them enable Singapore, and the
leaders who came after Mr Lee, to ride on those good relationships.”

One reason for Mr Lee’s prominence
as a statesman was the Western world’s
expectations of him as a great
man of sorts, with his “Asian values”
moved — he emerged as the spokes-
man for the West’s views on, Singapore.

The admiration was mutual; Mr
Lee’s intimate knowledge of
China stemmed from his early reali-
sation of her emerging importance,
and his efforts in pursuing closer ties,
particularly with Mr Deng — whom he
described as “the most impressive leader I had met”.

The admiration was mutual; Mr
Deng looked to emulate Singapore’s
growth model in attempting China’s
opening-up. After one of his visits to
Singapore, Mr Lee related in his mem-
oirs, Mr Deng said China “should draw
from their experience, and do even bet-
ter than them”.

After Deng’s endorsement, several
hundreds of delegations, most of them un-
oficial, came from China armed with
tape recorders, video cameras and
notebooks to learn from our experi-
ence. Singapore had been given the
impression of their supreme leader.

The awe-inspiring story of Sin-
gapore’s development was not achieved
by Mr Lee alone, and he acknowledged the
importance of Old Guard comrades such as Goh Keng Swee, S Rajaratnam,
Hon Sui Sen, and Toh Chin Chye in his
book: “I was fortunate to have had a
strong team of ministers who shared a
common vision. They were able men
determined to pursue our strengths ...
They helped me stay objective and
balanced, and saved me from any risk
of megalomania which could so easily
come with long years in office.”

But he largely set the tone and form
of the Republic’s political system, the
framework of which has endured to
date. One of these unique features was
an era of civil service machin-
ery — Mr Lee had exacting demands
on the bureaucracy, and indeed, never
hesitated to dish out a dressing down
when there was sloppiness — which was
also “sensitive and responsive to
the needs and moods of the people”.

The future of Singapore, Mr Lee once
said, was in the hands of “you, the ad-
min machinery; (and) my colleagues
and I, the political leadership”.

Thus, not only has the PAP
government kept up Lee’s unceasing ob-
session with succession planning,
its leadership has also, like Mr Lee,
continued to take a close personal inter-
est in appointments in a wide range of
institutions, such as statutory boards
and trade unions.

The PAP government’s “knuckle-
duster” approach to its opponents, be
they opposition politicians or press
critics, was a source of much criti-
cism, however.

He has invited relentless scrutiny
draws and labels such as “autocratic”
and “draconian” with his libel suits —
against politicians such as the late J B
Jeyaretnam and Mr Chee Soon Juan, as
well as publications including the Asian
Wall Street Journal — but Mr Lee’s
bottom line was that “wrong ideas have
to be challenged before they influence
public opinion and make for problems”.

Domestically, the press was free to
operate, as long as it kept to the nation-
building role he said was necessary for
a young nation, counter to the West’s
definition of it as a “fourth estate”.

Though Western advocates of de-
mocracy and human rights have at-
tempted since the 1970s to press their
standards on Singapore and other
Asian societies, Mr Lee would not be moved — he emerged as the spokes-
man of sorts, with his “Asian values”
argument, against the assertion that
there was only one path of governance.

In other words, peculiar local cir-
cumstances had to dictate the form and
workings of democracy, as he said in an
interview with Foreign Affairs maga-
nize in 1994: “It is my business to tell
people not to foist their system indis-
criminately on societies in which it will
not work ... What are we all seeking? A
form of government that will be com-
fortable, because it meets our needs,
is not oppressive, and maximises our
opportunities. And whether you have
one-man-one-vote, or some-men-one-
vote or other-men-two-votes, those are
forms which should be worked out.”

Although he could have held on to
power beyond 1990 — he was the world’s
longest-serving prime minister then —
Mr Lee decided not to do so, again with
Singapore’s interests in mind.

“The sooner I give up, the younger
I will be and the more active I can be
to make sure that the team succeeds.
I’ll be around to make sure that the
team can succeed. The later I give up,
the elder and slower I will be, the more
riskier its success,” he explained.

And although he had his choice of
successor — current Prime
Tony Tan — Mr Lee let the incoming crop
of ministers “contend amongst them-
theselves and decide who will be the leader”.

Although he continued as Senior
Minister and Minister Mentor, Mr Lee
accorded Mr Goh and Mr Lee Hsien
Loong, the Deputy Prime Minister and
his son, the protocol demanded of their
office, addressing them as “my Prime
Minister” and seeing them in their of-
voice, addressing them as “my Prime

Mr Lee Kuan Yew speaking at
the launch of his book My Lifelong
Challenge in 2011. PHOTO: GENEVE CHUA

cejas.

I’ve got three

children

I’ve got a

happy

marriage.

I’ve got a

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ask for more.
From mudflat to metropolis

‘Our strategy was to make Singapore a First World oasis in a Third World region’

The singular motif in Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s blueprint for this unlikely city-state’s success was an unrelenting drive to be outstanding — and the visionary knew the most dramatic display of this, following independence, would be by swiftly metamorphosing Singapore’s look and feel to his exacting standards.

This strategy of viscerally distinguishing the Republic to potential investors derived from Mr Lee’s astute conclusion that sound, far-sighted planning of its landscape was central to its lasting success, be it in fostering social cohesion, spurring economic viability or overcoming its vulnerabilities.

It was a discussion that had many of its physical developments. His ideas and thinking continue to influence new projects, such as Punggol Eco-Town and Marina Barrage.

GREENING A COUNTRY

Mr Lee’s first project of this strategy, creating a “clean and green” Singapore, was the most “cost-effective” and yet most far-reaching — a single-handed crafting of the Republic’s reputation as a fastidious Garden City.

He planted a mempat tree in Farrer Circus on June 16, 1963, to symbolise the birth of his annual Plant-A-Tree campaign — and marked its half-century in 2033 by planting a rain tree in Holland Village Park.

He sought to eradicate the “rough and ready ways” of people through anti-spitting and anti-littering campaigns and legislation — placing the Anti-Pollution Unit, set up in 1970, under the Prime Minister’s Office to signal his personal interest in the cause. He also resettled street hawkers into properly-designed food centres and markets.

This objective of creating a “First World oasis” to leapfrog the rest of South-east Asia, as the Israelis had done in their own region, was so that businessmen and tourists would pick Singapore as a base.

Describing the impact of showing off a neat and spruced-up city lined with shrubs and trees to visiting chief executives who were considering investing millions here, Mr Lee wrote in his memoirs: “Without a word being said, they would know that Singaporeans were competent, disciplined and reliable, a people who would learn the skills they required soon enough.”

This belief sprung from his own reactions in his travels: “What impressed me was not the size of the buildings, but the standard of their maintenance. I knew when a country and its administrators were demoralised from the way the buildings had been neglected — washbasins cracked, taps leaking, water-closets not functioning properly, a general dilapidation and inevitably, unkempt gardens.”

In 1973, a Garden City Action Committee was set up to report regularly to Mr Lee on national greening efforts. Ex-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong once remarked that Singapore was possibly the only country where gardening reports were read in Cabinet.

But Mr Lee pursued greening for more than the economic or aesthetic benefits. Ensuring the island was clean and green, and not only within privileged neighbourhoods, served the purpose of creating “a sense of equal-ness in this society” — critical for a fledgling nation made up of immigrants without a common historical experience.

“Greening raised the morale of the people and gave them pride in their surroundings ... We did not differentiate between middle-class and working-class areas,” he said. “No society like that will thrive. We were going to have National Service. No family will want to live in shanty huts with a hole in the ground or a bucket in an outhouse”, he said. “No society like that will thrive. We were going to have National Service. No family will want to live in shanty huts with a hole in the ground or a bucket in an outhouse”.

Over the decades, Mr Lee continued to act as Singapore’s chief gardener. Numerous tales are told of how he would send back notes of trees and plants he came across overseas that he thought would do well in Singapore.

Mr Lee’s support.

HOUSING

With a housing crisis on its hands in 1959, the People’s Action Party (PAP) had to set about tackling the challenge of re-housing Singaporeans from slum settlements into public housing blocks. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) estimated the Government had to build an average of 14,000 housing units per year from 1959 to 1968, but the private sector then had the capability to provide only 2,500 a year.

It was also a politically sensitive venture, having to break up the racial enclaves that were a colonial legacy and assuage Muslim fears that the demolition of many dilapidated small mosques was not “anti-Islam” (a programme to build new and bigger mosques with the community’s help was pioneered).

Redevelopment required phasing out 8,000 farms rearing 900,000 pigs and many fish-ponds. These farmers knew no other livelihood and, used to living in “shanty huts with a hole in the ground or a bucket in an outhouse”, they suffered “culture shock” and could not break their habits when moved into high-rise flats.

Many refused to use the lifts and some even brought their pigs, ducks
The defence of Singapore

‘National Service would bring political and social benefits’

With the impending British withdrawal, Singapore needed to build a Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) from scratch to avoid being cowed and intimidated by its larger neighbours. Mr Lee Kuan Yew assigned this responsibility to Dr Goh Keng Swee, who was a corporal in the British-led Singapore Volunteer Corps until it surrendered in February 1942.

After the prime minister’s letters for assistance to the Indian premier Lal Bahadur Shastri and Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser did not receive positive replies, Mr Lee instructed Dr Goh to proceed with assistance from the Israelis, but kept this under wraps in order not to provoke grassroots antipathy from Malay Muslims in Malaysia and Singapore.

While Dr Goh felt that Singapore should build up a regular army of 12 battalions between 1966 and 1969, Mr Lee proposed a small standing army with the capacity to mobilise a reserve force population.

Mr Lee preferred that the money be spent on infrastructure needed to raise and train National Service battalions than on the recurrent costs of a large army.

“National Service would bring political and social benefits ... I wanted the defence plan to aim at mobilising as large a part of the population as possible, in order to galvanise the people in their own defence while they had this strong feeling of patriotism as a result of their recent experiences,” Mr Lee wrote in his memoirs.

Dr Goh’s revised plan put up in November would mobilise a large section of the population while the regular component of the armed forces would consist of 12 battalions.

To attract and retain talent in the highest echelons of the SAF, Mr Lee later tabled a legislation to amend the National Service Ordinance in February 1967 so that those enlisted in the SAF as a full-time career would be guaranteed jobs in the government, statutory boards or private sector when they left full-time service and go into the reserves. The bill was passed a month later.

In 1971, Mr Lee proposed the SAF Overseas Scholarship scheme, which Dr Goh refined. Through the scheme, some of the best students were recruited into the SAF over the years.

“Without a yearly intake of about 10 of our best students, the SAF would have the military hardware but without the brain power to use them to best advantage,” Mr Lee said.

“I knew that we needed a strong SAF and I believe that still remains today. Without a strong SAF, there is no economic future, there is no security,” he said.

Mr Lee visiting the Flower Dome at Gardens by the Bay in 2011. TODAY FILE PHOTO

After Independence, I searched for some dramatic way to distinguish Singapore from other Third World countries and settled for a clean and green Singapore — greening is the most cost-effective project I have launched.

Mr Lee in his memoirs

Mr Lee had spoken of the importance of having a strong SAF on several occasions, including at the Temasek Society’s 30th anniversary dinner dialogue in 2012. “From the day we started, I knew that we needed a strong SAF and I believe that still remains today.”

WATER

Mr Lee realised water resource management had to be central to a state’s development plans decades before the world became aware of the importance of doing so — and made this a national priority he took a direct hand in.

Small wonder, since Singapore depended on its neighbour Malaysia for the bulk of its water supply. In 1971, Mr Lee set up the Water Planning Unit in the Prime Minister’s Office and asserted that “every other policy has to bend to the knees (for) our water survival.”

“There has never been a Prime Minister anywhere else who has had such interest in the environment in general, and water in particular,” said Professor Asit Biswas and Dr Cecilia Tortajada, authors of The Singapore Water Story, who were instrumental in PUB winning the Stockholm Water Industry Award in 2007.

There are few episodes more telling of Mr Lee’s foresight and political courage to make tough decisions for the long-term good than his plan to dam up all streams and rivers. The “most ambitious” part of this was the clean-up of the filthy Singapore River and Kallang Basin — a daunting exercise that, because the river drew hordes of squatters, hawkers and backyard industries, reluctant bureaucrats sidestepped until Mr Lee delivered an ultimatum in 1977.

It was an unpopular move that entailed moving out more than 40,000 squatters and 600 pig farmers, as well as relocating 5,000 street hawkers who were accustomed to doing business rent-free into proper buildings where they had to pay rent and utilities charges. Disgruntled, many of them voted against the PAP for years after.

But this “massive engineering job” of laying underground sewers for the whole island, streams and rivers were free of sewage and aquatic life would return, was undertaken with the determination to inch Singapore towards water self-sufficiency, addressing one of its greatest security vulnerabilities.

The project paved the way for waterways to become essential water catchment areas. The 15th of these was the Marina Barrage, which sprang from Mr Lee’s vision in the 1980s to create a fresh-water reservoir in the heart of the city.

And though the 10-year river clean-up cost a hefty US$240 million (S$325 million) and had a political price, Mr Lee’s vision was vindicated when land values along the riverbanks soared, as did tourism and business.

If not for Mr Lee’s political will and extraordinary insight, this mud-flat would never have physically transformed into the metropolis it is today.

Without this futurist, hosting pinnacle events on urban solutions and sustainable development such as the World Cities Summit and Singapore International Water Week would have been beyond the city-state’s reach.
The economic pragmatist

‘Live with the world as it is, not as we wish it should be’

He was a man unafraid to challenge the popular ideologies of the day; he had no truck with dogma. Right up to the end of his life, Mr Lee Kuan Yew believed in constantly adapting to the hard realities of a changing world, and to refresh his "mental map", he ceaselessly sought out the views of experts, academics, industry, political leaders, journalists and the man in the street.

But having listened and processed their arguments, he did not let himself be swayed if he absolutely believed something was in the best long-term interest of Singapore. Changi Airport — and a large part of the Singapore economic miracle — stands today as a symbol of this.

When Singapore wanted to expand its airport operations in the early 1970s, a British aviation consultant proposed building a second runway at the existing airport in Paya Lebar as that would entail the lowest land acquisition costs and the least resettlements.

Although the Cabinet accepted the recommendation, Mr Lee asked for a reassessment by American consultants, and then a further study by a committee of senior officials on the viability of transforming the RAF airfield in Changi into a commercial airport. Both said to stay with the Paya Lebar plan.

But Mr Lee was unsure whether that would be wise or sustainable for Singapore in the long run, recalling lessons he had picked up on his travels: "I had flown over Boston’s Logan Airport and been impressed that the noise footprint of planes landing and taking off was over water. A second runway at Paya Lebar would take aircraft right over the heart of Singapore city ... we would be saddled with the noise pollution for many years."

Reluctant to give up on his preference for the Changi site, he appointed the chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority, Mr Howe Yoon Chong — who had a "reputation as a bulldozer" — to chair a top-level committee for a final reappraisal. They reported that Changi was doable.

And so, despite the fact the 1973 oil crisis had just struck and growth in South-east Asia was uncertain following South Vietnam’s fall to the communists, Mr Lee took the "$800 million gamble" in 1975 to build the new Changi Airport — demolishing buildings, exhuming thousands of graves, clearing swamps, reclaiming land from the sea and completed the building in six years instead of 10.

To say the least, that “gamble” has paid off handsomely, entrenching Singapore as a vital tourism, aviation and economic node.

THE ACID TEST: ‘WOULD IT WORK FOR US?’

How Mr Lee turned around the “improbable story” of Singapore abounds with examples like this, where he stuck to a hard-nosed, pragmatic approach coupled with a visionary outlook in implementing solutions he believed would make Singapore survive and last, even if it went against so-called conventional wisdom.

“In a developing country situation, you need a leader ... who not only understands the ordinary arguments for or against, but at the end of it says, ‘Look, will this work, given our circumstances?’ Never mind what the British, what the Australians, what the New Zealanders do. This is Singapore. Will it work in this situation?’” he said.

Mr Lee demonstrated time and again his ability to put on the lenses of a pure empiricist who could rise above prejudices and preconceptions.

Early on, he ditched the Fabian school of socialism — a style of governance he had been so enamoured with during his university days in Britain that he had subscribed to the society’s magazines for years after his return. He saw that its ideals would not work in reality. “We have to live with the world as it is, not as we wish it should be,” he once famously said.

In the early years, in defiance of the prevailing theory then that multinational corporations were neo-colonialist exploiters who sucked developing nations dry of their cheap land, labour and raw materials, Mr Lee — acting on the advice of the Republic’s Dutch economic guru Albert Winsemius — actively courted foreign investors with a liberal economic policy which included attractive tax and fiscal incentives.

Dr Winsemius’ “practical lessons on how European and American companies operated” showed Mr Lee how Singapore could plug into the global economic system of trade and investments by using their desire for profits. He explained the bold decision thus: “The question was, how to make a living? How to survive? This was not a theoretical problem in the economics of development. It was a matter of life and death for two million people.”

Looking back, Mr Lee believed that staying pragmatic ensured Singapore's
survival and success. “If there was one formula for our success, it was that we were constantly studying how to make things work, or how to make them work better... What guided me were reason and reality. The acid test I applied to every theory or scheme was, would it work? This was the golden thread that ran through my years in office. If it did not work, or the results were poor, I did not waste more time and resources on it.”

LEAP OF FAITH

Living with reality did not mean resigning to fate or operating in ‘safe’ mode — on the contrary, Mr Lee was restless about innovating and turning adversity into opportunity. Many things could go wrong, he’d said, but: “The crucial thing is: Do not be afraid to innovate.”

Former civil service head Peter Ho said many of the big leaps forward in the early years of fledgling Singapore were “nothing more than acts of faith”.

“It is a myth that everything in Singapore was planned down to the nth degree, that nothing is expected to go wrong, and that the government operates in a fail-safe mode,” said Mr Ho.

“The first container port at Tanjung Pagar was a big risk, as the container was by no means a proven mode of transportation. But Lee Kuan Yew gave Mr Howe Yoon Chong, who was then Chairman of PSA, enough leeway to make the move to Tanjung Pagar.”

Indeed, Mr Ho added, “that willingness to try things out spawned a generation of state entrepreneurs who created, almost out of nothing, national icons like Singapore Airlines, DBS, ST Engineering, Changi Airport, Singtel, and so on. The national computerisation programme is another example, started in the Ministry of Defence, which transformed Singapore.”

Early on, Mr Lee and his team recognised the importance of science and technology to the economy (English was chosen as a medium for school education in part because it best conveyed such subjects).

CLIMBING ON OTHERS’ SHOULDERS

Mr Lee was also always looking for solutions for Singapore by drawing lessons from other countries’ experiences or seeking out experts. No need to reinvent the wheel, as he repeatedly said.

On his travels, he watched “how a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?” He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”. He took a society, an administration, is functioning. Why are they good?”.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM REFORM

While Mr Lee stood by unpopular decisions that were for the long-term good, he also knew when to change course to maintain Singapore’s relevance or capture future opportunities.

For years, Mr Lee had believed in strict regulation of the financial system and in protecting the local banks. But then the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis broke.

Recalled Mr Heng Swee Keat, who was then Mr Lee’s Principal Private Secretary and who later served as Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS): “Our stringent regulations and laws had cooled things down in the past, were now stifling growth and our banks were falling behind. Mr Lee was persuaded that our regulatory stance had to change.”

Mr Lee, who was then Senior Minister, came up with a calibrated broad plan that he discussed with and sought PM Goh Chok Tong’s approval for. This led to a major review of policies and the transformation of MAS.

In a 1999 interview, Mr Lee pointed to the game-changer of e-banking and the Internet. “If this government carries on the way I did over the last 30 years, protecting local banks to make them grow, then it’s in for trouble. We are a venue for 200 of the world’s biggest and most competitive banks. Unless we get ourselves up to a comparable level, we’ll be like New Zealand, where all their own banks have been taken over and are foreign-owned.”

Said Mr Heng: “If Mr Lee had not initiated the changes in the late 1990s, and sought to turn adversity into opportunities, we would not have become a stronger financial centre today. To prepare ourselves to open up our financial system in the midst of one of the worst financial crises is, to me, an act of great foresight and boldness. It has the stamp of Mr Lee.”

CASINOS, FI AND GAYS

To be part of the 21st-century world — and the ruthless competition for talent, tourism dollars and investors — meant delicately recalibrating some issues of huge social sensitivity to the world’s gaze.

In a 2007 interview, Mr Lee said Singapore took “an ambiguous position” on homosexuals — “we say, okay, leave them alone, but let’s leave the law as it is for the time being”. While places like China and Taiwan already had more liberal policies, he said: “But we have a part Muslim population, another part conservative older Chinese and Indians. So, let’s go slowly. It’s a pragmatic approach to maintain social cohesion.”

Mr Lee also reversed this early stance of long-held objections to holding Formula One races and allowing casinos in Singapore. He recognised that the F1 had a jet-set following and could generate economic spin-offs for Singaporeans.

The larger goal of advancing Singapore as a venue for 200 of the world’s biggest and most competitive banks. Unless we get ourselves up to a comparable level, we’ll be like New Zealand, where all their own banks have been taken over and are foreign-owned.”

For instance, within days of the October 1973 oil crisis, Mr Lee sent a clear signal to oil companies that the Government did not claim any special privilege over their stocks of oil in the refineries here.

Had the Government blocked these stocks from export, there would have been enough oil for Singapore’s own consumption for two years — but it would have undermined the country’s reputation for reliability, Mr Lee said.

He personally met the CEOs and managing directors of Shell, Mobil, Esso, Standard Oil of California and British Petroleum in November, to reassure them that Singapore would share in any cuts they imposed on the rest of their customers.

International confidence in the Singapore Government grew and the oil industry expanded into petrochemicals in the 1970s.

By the 1990s, Singapore had become the world’s third-largest oil-refining and trading centre, and the largest fuel oil bunker in volume.
The language of survival

‘Everyone should learn English and their native language is to become the second one.’

Few might have realised the significance at that time, but in making English Singapore’s lingua franca, a decision he made within only a few weeks of separation from Malaysia in 1965, Mr Lee Kuan Yew gave the Republic a fighting chance of overcoming the formidable crises post-Independence.

Adopting the international language of business, diplomacy, and science and technology was about the only way this resource-less tiny island could guarantee its survival after losing its economic hinterland in Malaysia. Unemployment was at 14 per cent and rising.

Mr Lee captured the move’s criticality in his memoirs: “Without it, we would not have many of the world’s multinationals and over 200 of the world’s top banks in Singapore. Nor would our people have taken so readily to computers and the Internet.”

Just as importantly, picking this race-neutral language demonstrated his government’s anti-communalsitic stance, helping to keep the peace in a newborn nation made up of a polygot-settler populace who had struggled for years with racial and religious strife.

“We treat everybody equally. We judge you on your merits. This is a level playing field. We do not discriminate our opponents: All three of his children were sent to Chinese-medium schools.

“All students had to learn their ‘mother tongue’, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, depending on their race, as a second language, and this became a compulsory instruction at the National Day Dinner in 1956, in response to an anti-communist crackdown by the then David Marshall Government.

“If Singapore students all turned out like those in the university hostel, Singapore would fail,” he said.

The nexus between language and culture was crucial to creating a rugged, tightly-knit society with “cultural ballast” because with the language go “the literature, proverbs, folklore, beliefs, value patterns”, he believed.

He later said: “I have no doubts that if we lose... our sense of being ourselves, not Westerners, we lose our vitality. So that was our first driving force.”


The imperfect implementation

Mr Lee himself, born to English-speaking parents, had started to pick up Mandarin again only at age 32 and “spent years sweating blood” to master it, a story he recounted in detail in his 2011 book, My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey. 

BILINGUALISM

For the sake of building “a community that feels together”, Mr Lee pushed through the bilingualism policy in 1964. All students had to learn their “mother tongue”, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, depending on their race, as a second language, and this became a compulsory and critical examination subject in 1969.

“We insisted on the mother tongue because I saw the difference between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated. The English-educated were rootless,” he explained to a team of authors, citing Raffles College students’ indifference although a massive riot was boiling at Chinese High School in 1956, in response to an anti-communist crackdown by the then David Marshall Government.

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IMPERFECT IMPLEMENTATION

But the force with which Mr Lee pursued English language proficiency met with opposition, most robustly from Nanyang University (Nantah) graduates.

They raised the issue of Chinese language and culture in the 1972 and 1976 general elections, after Mr Lee did away with vernacular schools and made Nantah, a source of pride among the Chinese community as it was the only Chinese-language tertiary institution outside China then, switch to teaching in English. The latter move was despite the reservations of many of his colleagues and when it failed, he forced Nantah to merge with Singapore University in 1978.

His most powerful riposte to these opponents: All three of his children were sent to Chinese-medium schools. (From age six, they also had Malay-language tuition at home.)

Mr Lee, born to English-speaking parents, had started to pick up Mandarin again only at age 32 and “spent years sweating blood” to master it, a story he recounted in detail in his 2011 book, My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey.

Mr Lee acknowledged as much during a parliamentary debate in 2004 on changes to Chinese language learning.

“The imperfect implementation of what he maintains was a sound policy, he said, caused interest in the Chinese language to be killed by the drudgery of rote memorising. He regretted not implementing the modular system earlier.

Reflecting on his belated realisation that language ability was, at best, only loosely linked to intelligence, Mr Lee admitted in 2009 that “successive generations of students paid a heavy price because of my ignorance”.

In November 2011, he started the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism to support ideas that would promote the learning of English and mother tongue. Even towards the end, at his last appearance at the National Day Dinner in his Tanjong Pagar ward shortly before his 90th birthday, he was exhorting parents to give their children an early start in bilingualism. TEO XUANWEI
A place for all

“This is not a country that belongs to any single community. It belongs to all of us.”

H e was the man who wove multiculturality into the very DNA of Singapore, in the conviction that a small nation could not be divided against itself and continue to exist. This was a Malay nation, not an Indian nation, Mr Lee Kuan Yew declared in 1965, upon Singapore’s split from Malaysia due to irreconcilable differences over how society should be organised.

While Malaysia chose bumiputra dominance and communal politics, Singapore would be the model multicultural nation, unique in the region. “Everybody will have his own Language, culture, religion,” he vowed.

Every wreathing of the lenses of harsh reality, however, Mr Lee believed would ensure racial harmony was never done. Forty-five years later, Mr Lee made a rare intervention in Parliament in 2010 — having interrupted his physiotherapy session — to bring what he felt was a needed reality check to those arguing for equal treatment for all races.

This premise was “false and flawed”, said the Prime Minister, pointing to Article 152 of the Constitution, which makes it the Government’s responsibility to “constantly care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities” — in particular recognising the special position of the Malays as “the indigenous people of Singapore”. It would “take decades, if not centuries”, he added, for Singapore to reach a point where all races could be treated equally.

What some did not understand was that, for Mr Lee, multiculturalism was the only way to ensure Singapore’s survival — and it would ever be a work in progress, an aspiration not to be confused with an ideology of race-blindness, because the facts of reality pulled in the opposite direction. That was the paradox Singapore had to grapple with.

FOUNDATIONS FOR HARMONY

In the initial years of Independence, many people advocated catering to the racial majority in Singapore. But Mr Lee and his team refused, having made clear from the start: “One thing we should not do is to try and stifle the other man’s culture, his language, his religion. That is the only way to ensure Singapore’s survival.”

That was the only way to ensure Singapore’s survival, he added, for Singapore to reach a point that a small nation could not be divided against itself and continue to exist. This freed Singapore from the premises that a small nation could not be divided against itself and continue to exist.

When dilapidated small mosques (surau) built on state land had to be removed for redevelopment, Mr Lee proposed a plan to replace each surau with bigger, better mosques in every housing estate through contributions from the Malay-Muslim community. Ex-Cabinet minister Othman Wok recalled: “He said he would instruct the Civil Service to prepare a circular for all Malay-Muslims working in the government service to donate voluntarily to the Malay-Muslim community various contributions towards community-based self-help groups that would strengthen communal relations.

Mr Lee’s ideal of a completely colour-blind policy, he wrote, “As part of our long-term plan to build Singapore and re-house everybody, we decided to scatter and mix Malays, Chinese, Indians and all others alike and thus prevent them from congregating. On resettlement, they would have to ballot for their new high-rise homes,” said Mr Lee, who grew up playing with the kids of Malay and Chinese fishermen from a nearby kampung.

But the Government soon found that when owners sold their flats and could buy resale flats of their choice, the enclaves re-formed. So, ethnic group ceilings were introduced in 1989. While this depressed prices for certain resale flats, Mr Lee wrote: “This is a small cost for achieving our larger objective of getting the races to intermingle.”

MOSQUE BUILDING

When it came to Singaporean Malays’ beliefs, nonetheless, special sensitivity was shown. A 1994 interview revealed the pragmatism of Mr Lee’s thinking.

“You cannot have too many distinct components and be one nation,” he said, “but there are circumstances where it is wise to leave things be … we put the Muslims in a slightly different category because they are extremely sensitive about their customs, especially diet. In such matters one has to find a middle path between uniformity and a certain freedom to be somewhat different. I think it is wise to leave alone questions of fundamental beliefs and give time to sort matters out.”

Another initiative that drew criticism was the formation of self-help groups. Another initiative that drew criticism was the formation of self-help groups. Another initiative that drew criticism was the formation of self-help groups.

In 1988, Mr Lee was one of the first to spell out anything less than the “hard truth”. But his approach enforced over the decades.

Beyond this security dimension, multiculturalism would also distinguish Singapore to the world. That’s what will stand out against all our neighbours,” he pointed out.

There would be equal basis for competition, with a meritocratic Civil Service leading the way, where ability, and not race, mattered.

Just as vital was the need to break up the racially-segregated housing enclaves that were a legacy from the British. “As part of our long-term plan to build Singapore and re-house everybody, we decided to scatter and mix Malays, Chinese, Indians and all others alike and thus prevent them from congregating. On resettlement, they would have to ballot for their new high-rise homes,” said Mr Lee, who grew up playing with the kids of Malay and Chinese fishermen from a nearby kampung.

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SELF-HELP GROUPS

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He noted that where people in the 1950s and 1960s voted for the party regardless of candidates, once the PAP’s dominance was established and people expected it to be returned to power, they began voting for the MP. “They preferred one who empathised with them, spoke the same dialect or language, and was of the same race,” said Mr Lee.

“I was going to be difficult if not impossible for a Malay or Indian candidate to win a Chinese candidate. To end up with a Parliament without Malay, Indian and other minority MPs would be damaging. We had to change the rules.” In addition, this would stymie Chinese chauvinist tendencies by any political party, he added.

GROUP REPRESENTATION CONSTITUENCIES

One controversial measure to ensure minority representation was the Group Representation Constituency scheme, which Mr Lee pushed through in 1988. He noted that where people in the 1950s and 1960s voted for the party regardless of candidates, once the PAP’s dominance was established and people expected it to be returned to power, they began voting for the MP. “They preferred one who empathised with them, spoke the same dialect or language, and was of the same race,” said Mr Lee.

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But Deputy Prime Minister S Raja rathnam, who crafted the National Pledge, was opposed, fearing the move towards community-based self-help groups would strengthen communal pulls, Mr Lee wrote: “While I shared Raja’s ideal of a completely colour-blind policy, I had to face reality and produce results. From experience, we knew Chinese or Indian officials could not reach out to Malay parents and students in the way their own community leaders did.”

Over the years, Malay students’ achievements improved. Mendaki’s progress spurred the formation of the Singapore Indian Development Association in 1991 and the Chinese Development Assistance Council in 1992.

In another instance, Mr Lee’s refusal to spellout anything less than the “hard truth”, as he saw it, continued to draw flak in the last years of his life.

His remarks that Islamic piety stood in the way of Muslims integrating with other communities — made in his book Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going, published in 2011 — upset many. Soon after, he issued a statement explaining that the comment was made two or three years earlier and that “ministers and MPs, both Malay and non-Malay, have since told me that Singapore Malays have indeed made special efforts to integrate with the other communities … and that my call is out of date. “I stand corrected, but only just this instance! I hope that this trend will continue in the future.”
**Team S’pore’s strong ministers, shared goals**

*The single decisive factor that made for Singapore's development*

The Singapore Story clearly did not come down to Mr Lee Kuan Yew alone. As he acknowledged: “I was fortunate to have had a strong team of ministers who shared a common vision. They were able men determined to pursue our shared goals.”

But in this regard, perhaps Mr Lee’s most critical accomplishment for a young Singapore was his exceptional leadership acumen in putting together the right team — unearth ing political gems and administrative mandarins specifically suited for the challenges of the day, and whipping into shape a civil service machinery to implement policy.

As those who worked with him have said, he had the uncanny ability to attract the best in the country.

**THE CORE TEAM**

From winning the high-stakes battle against the communists to surmounting the myriad post-independence challenges of unemployment, a housing shortage, securing international recognition and building an army from scratch — to name just a few — pivotal roles were played by stalwarts such as Goh Keng Swee and S Rajaratnam.

One of those roles over the decades was to keep Mr Lee in check. “They helped me stay objective and balanced, and saved me from any risk of megalomania, which could so easily come with long years in office,” he said of his core collaborators with whom, in 1954, he founded the People’s Action Party (PAP) along with others such as Toh Chin Chye, who chaired the party until 1981.

Of all his Cabinet colleagues, Mr Lee said later, it was Dr Goh who — his former economics tutor at Raffles College — who “made the greatest difference to the outcome for Singapore”. The architect of Singapore’s modern economy and armed forces, Dr Goh was a “hopeless” campaign orator and that was where their partnership was perfect — “I settled the political conditions so his tough policies we together formulated could be executed,” Mr Lee said.

In his eulogy for Dr Goh in 2010, Mr Lee described how he would “challenge my decisions and make me re-examine the premises on which they were made. As a result, we reached better decisions for Singapore ... His robust approach to problems encouraged me to press on against seemingly impossible odds.”

By contrast, Rajaratnam, Singapore’s first foreign minister, was the voice of the nation, the man who embodied the multiracial vision of Singapore in the National Pledge that he penned in 1966. A man of “great moral courage” and “enormous charm”, said Mr Lee in his 2006 eulogy, “his contribution was not in bricks and mortar ... but in ideas, sentiments and spirit”. Dr Toh in turn was the “redoubtable fighter” and “bulldog”; without him “holding the fort in the PAP, we might never have held the party together”.

In 1965, pressed to scramble together an army to cope with the impending withdrawal of British troops, Mr Lee freed Dr Goh from the Finance Ministry and replaced him with Mr Lim Kim San — “brought in two years earlier as Minister for National Development after his sterling work in resolving the housing shortage as head of the Housing and Development Board (HDB).”

In 1970, to successfully convert and commercialise former British army lands and facilities, Mr Lee promoted the “most capable Permanent Secretary”, Hon Sui Sen — the first chairman of the fledgling Economic Development Board — to take over the Finance portfolio. A measure of Mr Lee’s savvy decision: Euromoney magazine named him the Economic Minister of the Year in 1982, a year before he died in office.

**BUREAUCRACY’S BEST BRAINS**

It was not just political leaders that Singapore needed, but also mandarins to drive the bureaucratic machinery and, more crucially, build the economy — having set up several new industries, senior civil servants were nominated to top appointments when Mr Lee’s government found it hard to find people to run them.

Mr Lee, said Permanent Secretary to the Public Service Division Yong Ying-I, was a “superb judge of talent, with the magnetic leadership to draw outstanding people to work with him”. They included former heads of Civil Service Lim Siong Guan and Sim Kee Boon (who later, as chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, turned Changi Airport into an icon), as well as others who were “not only technically able, but also entrepreneurial, innovative and yet realistic”.

One was Y Pillay, whom Mr Lee described as “equal to the best brains in America”. He built Singapore Airlines into a world-class carrier and helped develop the financial sector, among other contributions. There was also George Bogaars, who headed the Civil Service and was chairman of Keppel Shipyard. One of Mr Lee’s schoolmates at Raffles Institution was the tough-talking Howe Yoon Choong, who declined when Mr Lee asked him to enter politics in 1953 — he believed Singapore needed civil servants. As CEO of the HDB in the 1960s, he fast-tracked the public housing programme, and as chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority, went against the advice of professionals and built Singapore’s first container port. He was finally drafted into politics and, as a Cabinet minister, championed the building of the Mass Rapid Transit system and Changi Airport.

Many of these best minds have described Mr Lee as having a zeal that could convert others — he was “a conviction politician”, a superb persuader and mobiliser who persuaded the Civil Service to also begin to believe that what Lee was fighting for was their fight as well”, said Ms Yong.

**INSTILLING AN EFFICIENCY ETHOS**

Beyond the people at the top, Mr Lee knew the importance of being backed up by an efficient administrative machinery as well to carry out his government’s programmes. His imprint is in the very ethos, processes and framework of today’s Public Service.

Right after separation, he personally drove the overhaul of a bureaucracy that had come ridden with hackadai-sical and complacent mandarins — one famous example was how he tore into officers after finding light switches that did not work in a government bungalow. Sloppiness would not be tolerated.

He set out in unequivocal terms the ethos he expected: “I want those who believe that joining the government service means automatically you are going up the ladder to forget it.”

He also drove the pace of change by keeping close tabs on key assignments and projects, with an exacting eye for detail. For instance, he asked for a monthly report on the progress of the NEWater project even after he stepped down in 1990.

The story is also told of how Mr Lee wanted a weekly report of the state of cleanliness of the toilets at Paya Lebar Airport. The then airport manager Mr Wong Woon Liang decided he had better ask for a daily report in that
Mr Lee, the People’s Action Party’s co-founder and its first Secretary-General, honoured with a standing ovation at the PAP60 commemorative event at the Victoria Concert Hall in November 2014. TODAY FILE PHOTO

ENGAGING AND MOBILISING

For all his toughness and demanding standards, Mr Lee also continually engaged civil servants to explain his thinking and ensure that the Public Service was working towards the same shared objectives — for instance, in the early days, he would take them along on community visits so that they could better grasp problems on the ground.

He would also hold meetings at which he would gather Members of Parliament, Permanent Secretaries, only those privy to your thoughts can understand,” he told them.

Charity of thought was a lesson he drilled home again and again. As Mr Heng recalled, Mr Lee’s favourite question was “So?”. “If you update him on something, he will invariably reply with ‘So?’.” You reply and think you have answered him, but again he asks, “So?”... His instinct is to cut through the clutter, drill to the core of the issue, and identify the vital points.”

Mr Ho added: “As civil servants, we were constantly amazed by Lee Kuan... From the time he came into our lives, he has engaged our dreams, mobilised our energies, and led us as if promising us to lead us to the promised land. He had the will to move us, believing he could rouse the people to take up the challenge. He seemed so sure he knew how to do it with certainty.”

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Former President S R Nathan, who worked with the Prime Minister who railroaded his proposals through a meek, spineless Cabinet... Ultimately, while he responded fully to the criticisms of his proposals from Cabinet colleagues, PM Lee was prepared to be persuaded to modify his position and accept the views of the younger ministers.

He set a personal example of thrift — he would roll up his sleeves and show the way... leadership... That is a very big factor in leadership... That is a very big factor in leadership

If something mattered to Mr Lee, he was prepared to roll up his sleeves and show the way... leadership... That is a very big factor in leadership... That is a very big factor in leadership

He was persuasive, but he can be persistent; and senior and younger Administrative Officers to discuss how Singapore was to progress further; they were invited to speak up and contribute ideas.

“When something was ‘So?’, he would ask for the details. ‘So?... That is a very big factor in leadership... That is a very big factor in leadership

He has an open recruitment system, proper appraisal systems, not just go by word of mouth of some individuals.”

To attract the best talent, he believed in ensuring competitive pay for all schemes of service. At the same time this would be a “clean wage” policy — he guided the service away from providing staff quarters and cars very early on. “Today, there are virtually no hidden benefits,” said Ms Yong.

He said: “The moment key leaders are less than incorruptible, less than stern in demanding high standards, from that moment the structure of administrative integrity will weaken, and eventually crumble.”

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Mr Ho added: “As civil servants, we were constantly amazed by Lee Kuan

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“His instinct is to cut through the clutter, drill to the core of the issue, and identify the vital points.”
A leader shaped by the post-war crucible

‘This lesson will never be forgotten’

Over his lifetime, Mr Lee Kuan Yew had to sing four national anthems: British, Japanese, Malaysian and finally Singaporean. This reflected the progression and momentous events of his life that shaped him into the leader he became. The Japanese Occupation and life as a student in Britain profoundly shaped his view of the world and human nature, while the political struggle for power and self-government honed his leadership style and tactics.

But it was in the pre-war years that Mr Lee’s initiation into the politics of race and religion took place.

With World War II raging in Europe in 1940, Mr Lee, who had planned to read law in London, took up a scholarship to study at Raffles College instead (after having come in first in Singapore and Malaya in the Senior Cambridge examinations).

It was at Raffles College that he encountered Malaysia, “a deep and intense pro-Malay, anti-immigrant sentiment” among indigenous Malays who had been given special political and economic rights, and who feared being overwhelmed by hard-working Chinese and Indian immigrants.

Coming from the Malay states, their attitude contrasted with that of the Singapore Malays, who were accustomed to equal treatment in a British colony that made no distinction among the races.

It was also at Raffles College that Mr Lee formed lasting friendships with some who would later become close political colleagues, including the late Toh Chin Chye and Goh Keng Swee, then a tutor in economics.

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The Japanese invasion in December 1941 disrupted studies at Raffles College and heralded the most important foundational years of Mr Lee’s life.

“The Japanese had shattered the colonial system and the myth of British superiority — the idea that, as many had believed, the British empire would last a thousand years. We literally saw a whole society disintegrate — it collapsed overnight. And we were serfs, to be trampled on, to do the Japanese’s bidding. And that did something to a whole generation; we said, ‘No! Why? This is my life, my country! I have something to say’.”

The Japanese were cruel, unjust and vicious. In his first encounter with a Japanese soldier, Mr Lee was slapped, made to kneel and sent sprawling with a boot. He worked as a clerk, as a transcriber for the Japanese, and ran his own businesses (such as manufacturing glue) to survive.

The Japanese Military Administration governed by fear. Punishment was so severe that crime was very rare, at a time when people were half-starved with deprivation. “As a result I have never believed those who advocate a soft approach to crime and punishment, claiming that punishment does not reduce crime,” Mr Lee said.

The Occupation was his first lesson on power, government and human reaction, he said. “I learnt more from the three-and-a-half years of Japanese Occupation than any university could have taught me. I had not yet heard Mao’s dictum that ‘power grows out of the barrel of a gun’, but I knew that Japanese brutality, Japanese guns, Japanese bayonets and swords, and Japanese terror and torture settled the argument as to who was in charge, and could make people change behaviour, even their loyalties.”

STUDENT LIFE IN ENGLAND

After the war, Mr Lee pursued his law studies in England. It was there, in the late 1940s, that he came to seriously question the continued right of the British to rule Singapore.

He was treated roughly as a colonial by some landladies and shopkeepers, treatment he resented from social inferiors. “And I saw no reason why they should be governing me; they’re not superior. I decided, when I got back, I was going to put an end to this.”

He took part in a discussion group called the Malay Forum, which pressed for an independent Malaya and a non-violent end to British rule. Its members included Dr Toh and Dr Goh, as well as Tun Abdul Razak, who would later become Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Mr Lee’s time in Britain also helped form his initial political philosophy.

In his first term at the London School of Economics — before he transferred to Cambridge, where he graduated with double first-class honours — Mr Lee was introduced to the general theory of socialism in political scientist Harold Laski’s lectures. He was immediately attracted to it.

“It struck me as manifestly fair that everybody in this world should be given an equal chance in life, that in a just and well-ordered society there should not be a great disparity of wealth between persons because of their position or status, or that of their parents,” he said.

But he would later alter his views on Fabian socialism. “They were going to create a just society for the British workers — the beginning of a welfare state, cheap council housing, free medicine and dental treatment, press for compensation for civilian victims of the Japanese Occupation. PHOTO: AP
free spectacles, generous unemployment benefits. Of course, for students from the colonies, like Singapore and Malaya, it was a great attraction as the alternative to communism.

“...what big problems contributing to the inevitable decline of the British economy.”

PAP AND THE FIGHT FOR SELF-GOVERNMENT

Returning home to Singapore in 1950, Mr Lee continued to witness the “injustice” of a whites-on-top society.

“You might be a good doctor, but if you are an Asian, you would be under a white doctor who’s not as good... The injustice of it all, the discrimination, struck me and everybody else,” he said.

This was a lesson that stayed with him when, later, he set up a merit-based, race-neutral Civil Service in independent Singapore.

Mr Lee started work at a law firm and became legal adviser to several trade unions.

In 1952, when negotiations between the Postal and Telecommunications Uniformed Staff Union and the government failed, the union carried out the first strike since Emergency Regulations were introduced in 1948, upon Mr Lee’s reassurance that this was not illegal. The publicity enhanced his reputation.

Mr Lee and his coterie, which included S Rajaratnam and Dr Toh, became convinced that the unions could serve as the mass base and political muscle they had been seeking. He linked up with left-wing Chinese-educated unionists such as Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan in 1954. And the People’s Action Party was launched on Nov 21 that year — born out of a marriage of convenience with the pro-communist trade unions.

The next year, the PAP won three of the four electoral seats it contested; Mr Lee won the Tanjong Pagar seat with the largest number of ballots cast for any candidate, and by the widest margin.

But as the party’s mass base continued to expand considerably, the Malay-Asian Communist Party set out to capture the People’s Action Party (PAP) itself.

In August 1957, during the party’s third annual conference, pro-communist elements managed to win half the central executive committee seats. However, five were detained during a government security sweep — and Mr Lee and his colleagues took the opportunity to create a cadre system, where only cadres could vote for the CEC and only the CEC could approve cadre membership.

In later years, Mr Lee would say of learning to be a streetwise fighter in the political arena: “I would not have been so robust or tough had I not had communists to contend with. I have met people who are utterly ruthless.”

MERGER AND DEFEATING THE PRO-COMMUNISTS

The British finally agreed to self-government for Singapore (except in matters of defence and foreign relations) — and Mr Lee became Prime Minister of Singapore at the age of 35, when the PAP captured 43 of the 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly elections of May 1959.

But still, the pro-communists were growing in strength among the unions, and Mr Lee could not simply move against them without losing the support of the Chinese-speaking workers. Union with Malaya thus provided the “perfect issue” on which to force a break with the party’s left-wing elements, which were opposed to the merger. After a vote of confidence was called in 1960 — a vote Mr Lee’s government barely won with 26 votes out of 51 — several assemblymen broke away to form the Barisan Sosialis.

The months that followed were the toughest, most exhausting fight for political survival yet for Mr Lee, against adversaries he later described as “formidable opponents, men of great resolve”.

Bringing the battle with the pro-communists fully out into the open, he campaigned at the grassroots, speaking daily in Malay, English and Chinese; and did a series of 12 radio broadcasts on the battle for merger, arguing why Singapore needed the hinterland for its economic survival.

When the merger referendum was held in September 1962, the PAP carried the day — 71 per cent of votes went to the form of merger that Mr Lee had campaigned for.

On Aug 31, 1963, Mr Lee declared Singapore’s independence from British rule and, on his 40th birthday on Sept 16, Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia.

INTO THE FIRE OF MALAY COMMUNALISM

The merger would prove to be short-lived — a costly experience that brought into violent conflict the two major races in Singapore, as well as the PAP and the Federal government. As Mr Lee put it, the party “had jumped out of the frying pan of the communists into the fire of the Malay communists”.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) leaders were determined to maintain total Malay supremacy. They were worried by the inclusion in the Federation of Singapore’s Chinese majority and that the PAP might make inroads in Malaysia — for Mr Lee openly and strongly opposed the bumiputra policy, calling for a “Malaysian Malaysia” where all Malays and non-Malays were equal.

UMNO leader Syed Ja’afar Albar’s stoking of racial flames reached a watershed during the race riots of July 1964. The Singapore Government’s memorandum that later set out the events leading to the riots concluded that those in authority in Kuala Lumpur did not restrain those indulging in inflammatory racist propaganda.

In September, a second wave of racial riots erupted in Singapore. And by December 1964, both sides were groping towards a looser arrangement within the Federation. While Mr Lee tried to find a compromise with Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the latter became more and more sold on total separation.

Goh Keng Swee eventually convinced Mr Lee that secession was inevitable — which was a heavy blow to Mr Lee, who believed Singapore’s very survival lay within Malaysia.

A MOMENT OF ANGUISH

On Aug 9, 1965, in a televised press conference, Mr Lee fought back tears as he formally announced the separation and the full independence of Singapore, saying: “Every time we look back on this moment when we signed this agreement which severed Singapore from Malaysia, it will be a moment of anguish. For me, it is a moment of anguish because all my life... you see, the whole of my adult life... I have believed in merger and the unity of these two territories.

But he and his team were determined to make Singapore succeed, despite the odds — and that in building the foundations for a new country, they would never forget what came before. “I would like to believe that the two years we spent in Malaysia are years which will never be forgotten, years in which the people of migrant stock here who are a majority learnt of the terrors and the follies and the bitterness which is generated when one group tries to assert its dominance over the other on the basis of one race, one language, one religion,” Mr Lee said in 1965.

“It is because of this that my colleagues and I were determined, as from the moment of separation, that this lesson will never be forgotten.”
When the gloves came off

‘In my bag I have a hatchet, and a very sharp one’

W

hen journalist Dennis Bloodworth in 1989 de-
scribed Mr Lee Kuan Yew as “bloody-minded and ruthless with
his adversaries. He stomps them into the ground”, he was using metaphors no
less graphic and remorseless than ones Mr Lee was wont to use about himself.

As he famously said in a book in-
terview: “Everybody knows that in my
bag I have a hatchet, and a very sharp
one. You take me on, I take my hatchet,
we meet in the cul-de-sac. That’s the
way I had to survive in the past. That’s
the way the communists tackled me.”

It was in the rough-and-dirty poli-
ticking of pre-Independence Singapore
that this Cambridge-trained lawyer
learnt to be a tough street-fighter, tak-
ing on the British, the communalists
in Malaysia and the pro-communists,
people who were “utterly ruthless”, in
his words. And that was the style with
which he took on his later adversaries,
or potential adversaries — be they un-
ionists, the media or political opponents.

“Anyone who takes me on needs to
put on knuckle-dusters,” he once said.

Indeed, in many instances, he saw
his own foes as foes also of the long-term
good of Singapore — and he was deter-
mined that nothing should undermine
all that had been achieved.

As he thundered at a 1980 General
Election rally: “You unscramble this –
the confidence, the organisation upon
which Singapore thrives – and you’ve
had it. And let there be no mistakes
about this – whoever governs Singapore
must have that iron in him or give it up!

“This is not a game of cards – this is
your life and mine! I’ve spent a whole
lifetime building this and as long as I
am in charge — nobody is going to
knock it down!”

THE LABOUR UNIONS

One of the earliest challenges for
Mr Lee’s team was the labour unions.

A landmark confrontation took place
two years after Independence.

The president of the Public Daily
Rated Employees’ Union, K Suppiah,
refused to negotiate over grievances
and launched an illegal strike – involv-
ing 2,400 workers and threatening to
embroil another 14,000. The strike’s
leaders were arrested and labour laws
were changed to ban all strikes in cer-
tain essential services.

This was a turning point in the na-
tion’s industrial history – from the “hap-
py, riotous 1950s” when union power
was on the rise, to a “highly vulnerable”
state where “the government could not
allow any union to jeopardise Singa-
pore’s survival”, according to Mr Lee.

He persuaded union leaders that to win
investors’ confidence and create jobs,
industrial peace was necessary.

And to enforce this peace – particu-
larly in a key entity such as in the na-
tional airline, Singapore Airlines – he
was ready to “break heads”.

Singapore Airlines at its birth in 1972
was a key project aimed at boosting
the international linkages the economy
needed, and Mr Lee had personally
secured the pact for SIA’s first and
most lucrative route then, to London.

So when its pilots association took il-
legal industrial action in 1980, Mr Lee
confronted them, threatening: “I do
not want to do you in, but I will not let
anyone do Singapore in.”

Fifteen ex-co members were
charged and convicted, and the asso-
ciation was deregistered and re-formed
as the Air Line Pilots’ Association Sin-
gapore (ALPA-S).

In 2003, following a leadership oust-
er at ALPA-S and a dispute with man-
agement that threatened to cost the
airline hundreds of millions of dollars in
losses, the Senior Minister summoned
14 of the union leaders to the Istana for
a two-hour meeting.

As he later told a global forum: “In
Singapore, when we decide that they
are breaking the rules of the game, the
unspoken rules as to how we survive,
how we have prospered, then either
their head is broken or our bones are
broken … So we are telling them, both
management and unions, ‘you play this
game, there are going to be broken
heads’. Let’s stop it.”

But the iron fist was not the only
Mr Lee had tried to cover up former National Development Minister Teh Cheang Wan's corruption. He lost the defamation suit and was ordered to pay S$260,000 in damages to Mr Lee. Other actions followed in 1995 and 1997, brought by other PAP MPs, and in 2001 Mr Jeyaretnam was declared bankrupt. Mr Lee said bluntly in 1997: “As long as Jeyaretnam stands for what he stands for — a thoroughly destructive force for me — we will knock him. There are two ways of playing this. One, you attack the policies; two, you attack the system. Jeyaretnam was attacking the system, he brought the Chief Justice into it. If I want to fix you, do I need the Chief Justice to fix you? ... He brought the Chief Justice into the political arena. He brought my only friend in university into our quarrel. How dare he?” Another Opposition leader who became the target of two libel suits by Mr Lee was Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) chief Chee Soon Juan — first after the 2001 GE and again in 2008 for an article in the SDP’s newsletter. In the latter case, Mr Lee took the stand along with fellow plaintiff Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The point Mr Lee was making in all this, said former Cabinet minister S Jayakumar, was: “He is prepared for a robust criticism of his policies. He can be criticised for foolishness, maybe even for incompetence, for arrogance, but his red line was: Not on reputation and integrity ... he would want to demonstrate that that is a red line, you justify it. He’s prepared to justify his record.”

THE MEDIA

To Mr Lee, the idea of a free press as the “fourth estate” was anathema. “Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primary purposes of an elected government,” he declared in 1974 to a General Assembly Of The International Press Institute. And that was what he set out to drill into the Singapore media — to act “as a positive agent in nation-building”. He would break nothing less.

In a speech to the Singapore Press Club in 1972, Mr Lee warned: “When any newspaper pours a daily dose of language, cultural or religious poison, put my knuckle-dusters on. Do not believe you can beat the state.” Indeed, former Singapore Press Holdings English and Malay Newspapers Division Editor-in-Chief Cheong Yip Seng described the 1970s as “the bare-knuckles phase in the turbulent history of government-media relations”.

In 1973, for example, Mr Lee demanded that a Sunday Nation writer be sacked for decrying the relentless pursuit of good grades — what Mr Lee saw as a critique of education policy.

The Newspaper and Printing Press Act of 1974 set the framework for greater government control of the media; later amendments restricted the circulation of foreign publications that engaged in Singapore politics or refused to grant the Government a right of reply. This was because Mr Lee believed the foreign press should be observers and not participants in domestic politics.

“If we do not stand up to answer our critics from the foreign media, Singaporeans, especially journalists and academics, will believe that their leaders are afraid of or unequal to the argument, and will lose respect for us,” Mr Lee wrote in his memoirs.

Over the years, restrictions were imposed on the local circulation of various international publications that refused to print in full the Government’s reply to articles: Time Magazine, the Asian Wall Street Journal, Asiaweek magazine, the Economist.

The Far Eastern Economic Review, in addition to having its circulation cut from 9,600 copies to 500 in 1987, also was hit with a libel suit, which Mr Lee won, in 1989. The International Herald Tribune came in for a couple of libel suits in 1994.

To criticisms that he came down too hard on the media and political opponents, Mr Lee countered: “Wrong ideas have to be challenged before they influence public opinion and make for problems. Those who try to be clever at the expense of the government should not complain if my replies are as sharp as their criticisms.”
The great persuader

‘Dominance of the public platform was my strength’

He did not crave to be popular; rather, Mr Lee Kuan Yew sought to persuade people to see his point of view.

A forceful orator in part due to his legal training, his ability to sway his listeners contributed greatly to Mr Lee’s effectiveness over the years. The man shaped in the turbulent power struggles of pre-independence Singapore grasped full well the importance of being able to win over the crowd, though he refused to be led by it.

A leader concerned with being popular was a weak leader, he believed, and he preferred to be feared than to be loved.

A leader concerned with being popular was a weak leader, he believed, and he preferred to be feared than to be loved.

Mr Lee did not mince words nor try to be politically correct. He once described himself as “a local Ronald Reagan” (referring to the charismatic former-actor-turned-United States President), able to “speak to the people over the blather of the media”, in reference to his success at defending his position against political opponents and the media.

Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, who heard Mr Lee speak to a crowd of hostile port workers at Tanjong Pagar in 1963, recounted: “Through his sheer charisma, eloquence and persuasiveness, and using a mixture of Malay and English, he was able to turn the meeting around.”

Gifts or not, communication and persuasion were something Mr Lee worked at relentlessly.

Working with the labour unions to build a political support base after his return from Britain, he learnt to speak the common people’s languages — Malay, Chinese and simplified English instead of the BBC-standard natural to him.

He took up Mandarin classes again with renewed determination in 1955 at the age of 32, and by the 1959 elections, had mastered it well enough to speak without a script. “I won the respect of the Chinese-speaking for working hard at their language,” he recollected.

For the 1961 Hong Lim by-election, Mr Lee “sweated blood to master Hokkien” — devoting an hour to learning it three to five times a week, so he could get his views across to the uneducated.

To learn a new language in his late 30s amid day-to-day work required “superhuman concentration and effort”, he recalled. “The first time I made a Hokkien speech in Hong Lim, the children in the crowd laughed at my mistakes — wrong sound, wrong tones, wrong sentence structure, wrong almost everything. But I could not afford to be shy or embarrassed. It was a matter of life and death.”

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On one occasion, Radio Singapore staff were alarmed when they looked through the studio’s glass panel and did not see me at the microphone. One of them spotted me lying on my back, flat on the floor in a state of collapse, as she thought,” Mr Lee recounted. He had, in fact, lain down “to recover from my exhaustion and recharge my batteries in between recording the three different versions of my broadcast”.

Those broadcasts showed Mr Lee to be a master storyteller, said former Singapore Press Holdings Editor-in-Chief (English and Malay Newspapers Division) Cheong Yip Seng, who was then a Senior Cambridge-year schoolboy. “Every broadcast ended with the listener in suspense and anxious for the next installment, the way ordinary folk at that time lapped up the kung fu serials broadcast over Rediffusion by Lei Tai Sor in Cantonese.”

He could “explain complex issues in simple terms, in a way the massses, usually in the thousands and then not well-educated, could understand. His deep, powerful voice rose and fell for emphasis and effect, and he spoke with great passion, determined to convince”. While radio had a wide reach, Mr Lee believed in also taking his message directly to the ground. After the merger referendum in September 1962, he visited constituencies to shore up support for elections the next year.

These 10 months between December 1962 and September 1963, Mr Lee said, were the most hectic of his life: He made as many as 10 speeches a day, in Malay, English and Hokkien or Mandarin. “I became a kind of political pop star,” he said.

**SPEECH THAT CHANGED HISTORY**

But possibly his most important speech yet came in May 1965, nearly two years after Singapore had become part of Malaysia, when he laid out his case against communal politics. His audience: The Malaysian Parliament.

He caused a sensation addressing them in Bahasa. Former Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok said: “I noticed that while he was speaking, the Alliance leaders sitting in front of us, they sank lower and lower because they were embarrassed this man could speak Malay better than them.”

Former Cabinet colleague, the late Lim Kim San, noted: “That was the turning point. They perceived him as a dangerous man who could one day be the Prime Minister of Malaysia. This was the speech that changed history.”

On Aug 9, 1965, Singapore was kicked out of Malaysia and became an independent state.

**AT RALLIES**

After independence, with the People’s Action Party making a clean sweep of Parliament seats for close to two decades, Mr Lee institutionalised the practice of addressing the nation in his National Day Rally, which was broadcast on television to reach as many as possible.

Speaking in English, Malay and Chinese in the year’s most important political speech, he would give an overview of the Government’s performance, spell out the key challenges and talk about policy changes — and, more often than not, remind his audience colourfully of Singapore’s vulnerabilities.

“With only notes, I would speak for one to two hours on the important issues of the day... I had to learn how to hold the audience, both at the National Theatre and over television, and get them to follow my thought processes,” Mr Lee said.

He felt at his best as an orator without a script. “I had better rapport with my audience when I expressed my thoughts as they formed and flowed in my mind, whereas if I had a script, I could not get my message across with the same conviction and passion.”

He was in his element in the election hustings, delivering fiery, no-holds-barred oratory in the evenings at mass rallies in the constituencies. But particularly memorable were his speeches at Fullerton Square in the midday heat to reach out to office workers.

“Sometimes there would be a heavy shower and I would be drenched while the crowds sheltered under umbrellas or took cover on the five-foot-way of offices around the square,” Mr Lee said. Former Cabinet minister George Yeo recalled one such wet Fullerton rally in 1980.

“So the umbrellas sprouted open and the crowds started flagging and you could sense that they would soon disperse. But (Mr Lee) did not miss a beat. He continued. He looked them in the eyes, he addressed them as if he was talking to each and every one of them personally.”

Mr Lee said: “The people stayed and I carried on. Although wet, I never felt the cold; my adrenaline was pouring out. The spoken word on television made a far greater impact than the written script in newspapers. My dominance of the public platform was my strength throughout my political life.”

His trademark combative and candour during the hustings, nonetheless, did not always sit well with a newer generation of Singaporeans. In the 2011 General Election, his remarks to reporters that Aljunied voters would have “five years to live and repent” if they voted in the Workers’ Party team sparked a storm.

Asked about the potential backlash, he said: “I am 87. I am speaking the truth. I do not want to be hypocritical.”

Whatever he wanted his interlocutors to hear, he engaged them such that they focused their entire attention on what he had to say... He also had a great ability to communicate his ideas to small and large groups... Depending on the situation, his audience might be made up of many who may not be well-versed in English. On such occasions, he would comment or criticise using a Malay or Chinese (dialect) expression that resonated with the average man and even humoured the audience.

Former President S R Nathan

Mr Lee felt at his best as an orator without a script. ‘I had better rapport with my audience when I expressed my thoughts as they formed and flowed in my mind.’ TODAY FILE PHOTO

“You see he has remarkable persuasive powers ... and he gets his way not, as some opposition people say, by dictating to other people, but by persuading them. He spends an awful lot of time persuading people.”

Late Cabinet minister Goh Keng Swee

Mr Lee in his memoirs

I have never been over-concerned or obsessed with opinion polls or popularity polls. I think a leader who is, is a weak leader. Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right. If nobody is afraid of me, I’m meaningless.”

Former President S R Nathan

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Former President S R Nathan
Political renewal, a life and death matter

‘My most important job was to get a team that could carry on the work’

While the obsession of many political leaders — especially those of new nations — was with holding on to power for as long as possible, Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s, from the very beginning, was the search for his successors.

In fact, it was barely over a year into his task of governing a newly-independent Singapore — when almost the entire Old Guard leadership were relatively young — that he expressed his worries in 1966 about the Republic’s “very thin crust of leadership”, for it was a “life-and-death” matter, in Mr Lee’s words, that developing countries such as Singapore had good political leadership.

And by the 1968 elections, his efforts to assemble a group of successors had begun — bright PhD holders such as Chiang Kai Shek and Wong Lin Ken were fielded, but he quickly learnt that political leadership required “other qualities besides a disciplined mind able to marshal facts and figures”.

“There is a heavy price to pay if mediocre and opportunists ever take control of the government of Singapore,” he once said, because this tiny, resource-less island had nothing except “its strategic location and the people who can maximise this location by organisation, management, skills and, most important of all, brains”.

“Five years of such a government, probably a coalition and Singapore will be down on her knees ... Once in disarray, it will not be possible to put it together again.”

HEADHUNTING

When then-Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen asked in 1976 to retire after one more election, what Mr Hon said had a “profound influence” on Mr Lee’s conviction that “my most important job was to get a team that could carry on the work, otherwise we would fail”.

“He said, ‘You know, when these chairmen and CEOs come to see me, they are not just looking at me, they are looking for who will be taking my place. Because their investments are going to go on a long time — 10, 15, 20 years — and I won’t be here’, ” Mr Lee recounted.

Helped by his closest collaborators, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S Rajaratnam, Mr Lee endeavoured tirelessly to work out a system that would uncover, from a tiny catchment area, potential successors who could excel in an environment with a small margin for error.

Mr Lee in his book From Third World To First

My experience has led me to conclude that we need good men to have good government. However good the system of government, bad leaders will bring harm to their people. On the other hand, I have seen several societies well governed in spite of poor systems of government, because good, strong leaders were in charge.

These efforts ranged from systematically scouring the country’s top executives, academics and civil servants to starting the Singapore Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship in 1971 to groom the best brains at a young age (by 1995, four former SAF scholars had entered politics and later became Cabinet Ministers — Lee Hsien Loong, George Yeo, Lim Hng Kiang and Teo Chee Hean).

Mr Lee even studied the headhunting processes of top multi-national corporations — he eventually adopted in 1983 Shell’s system of assessing a candidate’s “helicopter qualities” — and included evaluations by psychologists and psychiatrists in the People’s Action Party’s famous “tea sessions” with potential political recruits.

The attempts to inject new blood into the leadership were “not without stress”. “Several old-guard ministers were concerned about the pace at which they were being replaced,” he wrote in his memoirs.

PAYING COMPETITIVE SALARIES

Although the means of identifying able men and women were eventually settled, Mr Lee faced the challenge of convincing them to serve in politics.

The controversial solution he pushed through in 1985 of paying office-holders reasonable salaries — also aimed at deterring corruption — saw him lock horns with Opposition MPs for three hours in Parliament. The issue was revisited several times over the years, especially following Mr Lee’s radical proposal in 1995 to peg ministerial salaries, based on a formula, to the six highest-paid individuals in the private sector — and it remains contentious today for many Singaporeans.

Nonetheless, his response to the debate over the latest review of ministers’ pay in 2011 left no doubts as to Mr Lee’s continued conviction that this was how to get good people to step forward.

“To find able and committed men and women of integrity, willing to spend the prime of their lives, and going through the risky process of elections, we cannot underpay our ministers and argue that their sole reward should be their contribution to the public good,” he said in January 2012.

“We did not take Singapore from the Third to the First World by headhunting ministers willing to sacrifice their children’s future when undertaking a public service duty. We took a pragmatic course that did not require people of calibre to give up too much for the public good. We must not reduce Singapore to another ordinary country in...
the Third World by dodging the issue of competitive ministerial remuneration.” This was a “clean” wage, however — there were none of the frills of office, such as houses or a State plane, that other countries’ ministers enjoyed. Permanent Secretary of the Public Service Division Yong Ying-1 noted: “We are possibly the only country in the world where ministers are not driven around in chauffeured limousines, but drive themselves in their own cars to work and to many public engagements.”

In 2006, when the saga involving Hotel Properties came to light, Mr Lee wanted the issue of unsolicited discounts for purchases of new condominium units made by him and then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained in Parliament. There had been market talk that the two leaders had been offered units in all of HPL’s property projects. Following a parliamentary debate, no impropriety was found in the sales. Nevertheless, the saga led to new rules for ministers, such as having to clear all property purchases with the Prime Minister, whether for occupation or investment.

At the conclusion of the debate, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said he had not taken the decision to investigate the matter lightly, noting that much was at stake in terms of the reputation of the Government and the political cost, among other things. But, referring to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he said: “Integrity is the cornerstone of the PAP government. Senior Minister laid this cornerstone. It will survive the Senior Minister.”

The decision to give this a full and public hearing raised eyebrows internationally. “Almost anywhere in Asia, few would have cared. But this was Singapore, which takes pride in its image of incorruptibility,” noted an AsiaWeek article. (The discounts, incidentally, were treated as unsolicited gifts and given to the Government.)

To Mr Lee, there was no room in government for self-aggrandisement or personality cults. Until his bronze bust was unveiled at the Singapore University of Technology and Design in August 2013, in all of six decades there were no public statues or buildings, and only two schools of learning, named after him.

HANDING OVER THE REINS

What set Mr Lee apart from many leaders was the visible, planned manner in which he orchestrated handing over the reins in November 1990. He had originally aimed to step down in 1988, “believing the sooner I give up, the younger I will be and the more active I can be to make sure that the team succeeds … The later I give up, the older and slower I will be, the more risky its success”. As far back as 1980, he had announced a nucleus of seven names — including Mr Goh Chok Tong, Dr Tony Tan, Mr S Dhanabalan and Mr Ong Teng Cheong — from whom Singapore’s next leader would be chosen. He gave a landmark speech in the rain for an hour, urging Singaporeans to help him test out the second-generation leadership for the sake of Singapore’s leadership “self-renewal”.

Mr Lee let the younger ministers pick their own leader — after the 1984 election, they unanimously chose Mr Goh — and it was years later that he revealed that his first choice had been Dr Tan as he found Mr Goh “wooden”.

Weeks before he passed the baton to Mr Goh, Mr Lee told foreign magazine Worldlink: “I think my mission will not be complete until the system has been handed over and works without me. Whether my colleagues and I have succeeded or failed depends upon whether Singapore works without us.”

ETHOS OF STEWARDSHIP

Mr Lee remained in the Cabinet until 2011, first as Senior Minister, then as Minister Mentor. His staying on attracted criticisms periodically about whether he had truly relinquished power, particularly after it emerged that his son would be the third Prime Minister.

But Mr Lee himself, as well as Prime Ministers Goh and Lee Hsien Loong, asserted that his role had evolved to become a resource person, or a guardian to the younger team. Indeed, Mr Lee had begun the process of ceding the reins well before he officially handed over in 1990.

As he told a rally crowd in the 1988 General Election: “This time you are casting your vote not in judgment over my performance because I did not make the decisions … For four years, (Goh Chok Tong and his younger colleagues) have made all the major decisions. Yes, I presided over the Cabinet meetings, but even when I disagreed with them, I have not overruled them.”

“This had included, for instance, modifying his position to take in the younger ministers’ views on the shape of the elected President scheme, which was enacted in 1991, and not objecting to the plans to have casinos here even though he was once dead set against the idea … Speaking to a team of journalists interviewing him for a book in 2009, Mr Lee said: “As long as I’m of value, my value is to try and consolidate what we’ve achieved in Singapore. I’m not interested in consolidating any leader or any system. Having seen this place rise, I do not want to see it fall — it’s as simple as that.”

This ethos of “honest stewardship,” observed Ms Yong, has permeated beyond the political sphere with key ramifications. Singapore’s bureaucracy, unlike others, having delivered professionally-run companies such as Singapore Technologies, Keppel and Singapore Airlines, devolved power and deliberately withdrew from control. “To use power for the right purpose, and to be able to give it up and withdraw at the right time, is a critically important ethos we have imbibed from him,” she said. TEO XUANWEI
Policies for the bedroom and beyond

We would not have made economic progress if we had not intervened on very personal matters

Mr Lee Kuan Yew did not seek to remake only Singapore: he wanted to remake Singaporeans too. His government’s social engineering efforts ranged from changing social habits that were a legacy of coolie ancestors to even, controversially, who should have babies so as to breed talent.

“I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens,” he said in 1987. “Had I not done that, we wouldn’t be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse … we would not have made economic progress if we had not intervened on very personal matters.”

To make Singapore “a First World oasis in a Third World region,” he told The New York Times, “we built the infrastructure … The difficult part was getting the people to change their habits so they behaved more like First World citizens, not like Third World citizens spitting and littering all over the place.”

The carrot was used, and, more often than not, a big stick.

There were campaigns — more than 200 in the ’70s and ’80s — and the Keep Singapore Clean Campaign in 1965 was one of the first. There were fines for littering, jaywalking, spitting, urinating in lifts, failing to flush toilets and smoking in certain areas. (Mr Lee was himself a smoker who quit in his 50s when it caused him to lose his voice in election hustings)

With typically blunt imagery, Mr Lee said: “Mine is a very matter-of-fact approach to the problem. If you select a population and they’re educated and they’re properly brought up, then you don’t have to use too much of the stick because they would already have been trained. It’s like with dogs. You train it in a proper way from small. It will know that it’s got to leave, go outside to pee and to defecate.

“No, we are not that kind of society. We had to train adult dogs who even today deliberately urinate in the lifts.”

To improve the image of Singaporeans presented to tourists, a concerted effort was made with the launch, in June 1979, of the annual National Courtesy Campaign. Being polite, Mr Lee said in his speech, was a desirable attribute which was found in cultivated societies.

Still, it was another measure that the Republic became famous for around the world.

For many years, Mr Lee had been concerned about used gum stuck to pavements, buses and lifts, which made for costly maintenance, but had resisted a ban. But when the MRT began running in 1987 and vandals’ gum prevented doors from closing, the Government banned chewing gum in 1992.

BIRTH RATES

The Government’s reach extended to the bedroom. A population boom in the early years threatened to overwhelm the fledgling nation’s housing, educational and medical infrastructure, as well as strain the economy as well. So, the Stop at Two policy was born.

The Family Planning and Population Board was set up in 1966 to achieve zero population growth. Abortion was legalised and voluntary sterilisation encouraged among lower-educated women. Disincentives were imposed on those who had more than two — including reduced benefits in housing allocation, maternity leave and tax deductions, and lower priority for school places.

But by 1980, population growth had fallen below replacement level — to 1.5 per cent, from 2.8 in 1970 — which the Government realised only upon analysis in 1983.

Referring to criticism that it had been wrong, Mr Lee wrote: “Yes and no.” Without lower population growth, unemployment and schooling problems would not have been solved, he argued. “But we should have foreseen that the better-educated would have two fewer children, and the less-educated four or more.”

In hindsight, “we would have refined and targeted our campaign differently” right from the 1960s, he said.

In recent years, the Government poured money and effort into trying to get Singaporeans to have more babies, but the low birth rate has persisted. Mr Lee dismissed as “absurd” the accusation that the Stop at Two policy was to blame. Couples’ reluctance was caused by changed lifestyles and mindsets, he wrote, which no amount of financial perks could alter. “I cannot solve the problem and I have given up,” he said, leaving the task to the new generation of leaders.

GRADUATE MOTHERS SCHEME

Even more controversial was what arose from that 1980 census about better-educated women having fewer children. Mr Lee articulated his controversial eugenics idea of breeding talent in his 1983 National Day Rally, televised live to the nation.

He told Singaporeans with trademark bluntness: “If you don’t include your women graduates in your breeding pool and leave them on the shelf, you would end up with a more stupid society … So what happens? There will be less bright people to support dumb people in the next generation. That’s a problem.”

He wrote later in recollection: “The press named it the Great Marriage Debate. As I had expected, the speech stirred a hornet’s nest.”

The next year, Mr Lee and then Education Minister Goh Keng Swee decided to grant graduate mothers priority in the best schools for their third child. The controversial Graduate Mothers Scheme proved divisive among the public and the Cabinet, with egalitarians such as Deputy Prime Minister S Rajaratnam outraged. The backlash contributed to the People’s Action Party’s 12-percentage-point drop in votes in that year’s General Election, and the scheme was dropped soon after.

But Mr Lee continued to hold on to his view that humans were gifted unequally by nature. He had cited studies of identical twins brought up separately, which found evidence that about 80 per cent of a person’s make-up was from nature and the rest from nurture.

While government policies could help equalise opportunities at the starting point, he wrote in Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going: “I tell people frankly God has made you that way … I can give you extra tuition, better environment, but the incremental benefits are not that much. And their peers with bigger engines will also make progress. So the gap will never be closed.

Still … we are always trying: Give them extra tuition, give them extra attention, encourage them. So when I receive an honorarium for my speaking engagements, I donate the money to give out scholarships and prizes to the lower end to encourage them to do well and upgrade from ITE to polytechnics and so on. Occasionally, some do make it.”

One measure of this era that did survive, however: The Social Development Unit (now called the Social Development Network), set up in 1984 to facilitate socialising between men and women graduates. While the Government’s matchmaking efforts drew some ridicule over the years, Mr Lee averred: “Traditional methods of choosing marriage partners had been ruptured by universal education. The Government had to provide alternatives to the family matchmakers of old.”
All the world was his stage

Mr Lee built close ties with both Asian and Western leaders, who valued his unique insights

In 1967, when Singapore was two years independent and he was a young Premier of only 44, a report described Mr Lee Kuan Yew giving a talk at Harvard University. As he spoke about the escalating Vietnam War and the role of the United States, the Crimson university newspaper suggested: “Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of the city-state of Singapore, is a Mayor who talks as though he may one day be a world statesman... His concern for the fate of South-east Asia, fortified by his spectacular economic successes and his ambitious style, makes Lee a potential international strongman.”

Five decades on, this description seems prophetic. Mr Lee is to be credited with leading Singapore’s early transformation from Third World to First, as reflected in the title of the first volume of his memoirs. More than any other member of the founding generation of local politicians, he shaped politics and ensured continuity. Singapore’s survival and success are his touchstones.

Yet, more than this, Mr Lee is remembered not only as the first Prime Minister of Singapore; his influence has transcended our city-state.

PRAGMATISM PLUS

Mr Lee came to power in a generation of nationalists who sought independ-ence from the Western powers in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Jawaharlal Nehru of India. These charismatic leaders captured the headlines of that tumultuous era and live on in their national histo ries. Not all, however, have enjoyed the same longevity or continued to enjoy standing and relevance.

Yet Mr Lee was never an idealist nor a demagogue of Third World ideology and utopian theories. One might even say that he does not leave behind a coherent, theoretical framework or populist slogan. He was famously pragmatic to focus on what works. But this did not mean he had no regard for principle. Rather, he blended the two.

In a recent assessment, Ambassador-at-Large and former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bilahari Kausikan remarked: “He understood that international order is the prerequisite for international law and organisation. So while you work towards an ideal and must stand firm on basic principles, you settle for what is practical at any point of time, rather than embark on quixotic quests.”

A major factor that shaped Mr Lee’s world view was his experience of the Japanese occupation, as he himself has alluded to on several occasions. The illusion of colonial superiority and of Singapore as the “impregnable fortress” was so suddenly and savagely torn apart that the experience anchored Mr Lee to an unsentimental view of human nature and a focus on power. This was reinforced by events in the early history of Singapore: Konfrontasi with Sukarno’s Indonesia, the exit from Malaysia, and the withdrawal of the British bases in 1971.

NIMBLE AMONG THE GIANTS

These experiences drove Mr Lee to be a shrewd and nimble diplomat to ensure stability and security for Singapore in a difficult world. A key part of Mr Lee’s foreign policy can in this context be understood as efforts to engage with the powerful and especially with the US. During the Cold War, Mr Lee and Singapore made every effort to befriend America as the dominant superpower in Asia in the post-WWII world and bulwark against communism.

Survival was moreover not only accepting American protection and, while Singapore did not become a US ally, Mr Lee emphasised a broader engagement. As Mr Chan Heng Chee, former long-serving Ambassador to the US, recounted: “For Lee Kuan Yew, the US role in Asia was not just a military one. The US offered markets, technology and investments to the region that no other power could match. This was essential for the emergence of the four Asian tigers and the ASEAN (Association of South-east Asian Nations) countries.”

Another important dimension in Mr Lee’s foreign engagements arose as he developed a close relationship with China. Beginning from Deng Xiaoping’s historic visit to Singapore in 1978, Mr Lee made every effort to engage the reforming China, politically and economically.

Yet as he developed this relationship with China, Mr Lee was not one to indulge in the idea that China and Asia’s future could be separated from the American role. Instead, with his knowledge and access to the reforming China, Mr Lee played a major role in helping America and the West better understand China.

When the Tiananmen incident on June 4, 1989, triggered US threats of sanctions and boycotts, Mr Lee articulated a view of human rights and “Asian values” that responded to Western criticism. While not the only Asian spokesman with such views, then and now still controversial, his testimony held weight among world leaders not only because of his innate understanding of China, but because he had built up long-standing ties and trust.

Conversely, Mr Lee also shared other somewhat less welcome insights into China. This was never easy. He believed that China and the rest of Asia would benefit from the continued presence of the US.

In his keynote address after receiving a lifetime achievement award from the US-ASEAN Business Council in Washington, DC, in 2009, Mr Lee said: “The size of China makes it impossible for the rest of Asia, including Japan and India, to match it in weight and capacity in about 20 to 30 years. So we need America to strike a balance.”

His comments were misconstrued by some netizens and commentators in China. But throughout, Chinese leaders — from Deng Xiaoping and Mr Jiang Zemin to Mr Hu Jintao and Mr Xi Jinping — have understood that this and

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while maintaining the freedom to be itself as a sovereign and independent nation. Both parts of the equation — a maximum number of friends and freedom to be ourselves — are equally important and interrelated.

“Friendship, in international relations, is not a function of goodwill or personal affection. We must make ourselves relevant so that other countries have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity as a sovereign and independent nation. Singapore cannot take its relevance for granted. Small countries perform no vital or irreplaceable function in the international system. Singapore has to continually reconstruct itself and keep its relevance to the world and to create political and economic space. This is the economic imperative for Singapore.”

Yet Mr Lee also forged close personal friendships with world leaders, an affinity that has helped Singapore in many areas, from security to economics. His personal ties with regional leaders such as late Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and Indonesian President Suharto smoothed the way for the founding of ASEAN in 1967. His views on the region, and also on the United Nations, were influential in shaping the way the region thought about things. Singapore has been a key player in the region and the world at the international stage — as few others could. When Mr Lee requested an audience, he got it — whether it was an interview with CNN and other international media, a personal audience with Chinese leaders or behind-the-scenes discussions in the capitals of the West.

Among testaments to his strategic insights was being called The Grand Master by eminent American strategic thinker H R H Bush, who said: “In my long life in public service, I have encountered many bright, able people. None is more impressive than Lee Kuan Yew.”

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has also said: “This was no second Lee Kuan Yew in the world. Normally one would say that the leader of a country of the size and population of Singapore would not have a global influence... But precisely because Singapore can survive only by competition with much more powerful neighbours, and precisely because its well-being depends on stability and progress in the area, his views and his influence are of much greater significance than the technical problems of the Singaporean economy and so he always had a tremendous influence on us.”

Mr Lee himself said at the age of 89 in Oct 2009, he looked back and said: “I continue to make appointments to meet people. You must meet people, because you must have human contact if you want to broaden your perspective. Besides people in Singapore, I meet those from Malaysia, Indonesia, and, from time to time, China, Europe and the United States. I try not to meet only old friends or political leaders, but people from a variety of fields, such as academics, businessmen, journalists and ordinary people.”

Asked how he wished to be remembered, he said: “I do not want to be remembered as a statesman... I do not consider myself as a statesman. I put myself down as determined, consistent, persistent. I set out to do something, I keep on chasing it until it succeeds. That is all... Anybody who thinks he is a statesman ought to see a psychiatrist.”

His role and reputation built not on any single statement or thought. Mr Lee was valued on the world stage because of his decades of engagement across the region and the world at the highest level, and his ability and effort to analyse and present what he saw in the clearest, unvarnished way. He spoke and acted in a way that was unique to him, valued by so many and respected across the region and the world at the international stage — as few others could. When Mr Lee requested an audience, he got it — whether it was an interview with CNN and other international media, a personal audience with Chinese leaders or behind-the-scenes discussions in the capitals of the West.

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In doing this, Mr Lee lived up to the imperative he set for Singapore’s survival: Make Singapore relevant to others, so it is in their interest to have Singapore around.

His departure leaves the international stage empty in a way that no one in Singapore or indeed across Asia can readily fill. Simon Tay and Denyse Yeo

Simon Tay is chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) and associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Law. Denyse Yeo was an editor at the SIIA.
The special relationship with China

Mr Lee played a vital part in Beijing’s transformations and in building bilateral ties.

The relationship between China, one of the largest countries in the world, and Singapore, a little red dot in South-east Asia, has been widely regarded as special or unique. Mr Lee Kuan Yew has been instrumental in building this relationship.

Over the past few decades, China has successfully made two simultaneous transformations.

Internally, it has lifted itself from being one of the poorest economies to becoming the world’s No 2.

Externally, it has broken out of isolation to become part of the international system.

Why has Singapore under Mr Lee succeeded in building a special relationship with China?

The answer is simple: Mr Lee, and Singapore, have been important part of China’s dual transformations.

He once told journalist Tom Plate, in Giants Of Asia: Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew: “The ideas that Deng Xiaoping formed, if he had not come here (in the 1970s) and seen the Western multinationals in Singapore producing wealth for us, training our people so as a result we were able to build a prosperous society, then he might never have opened up ... opening up the coastal SEZs (Special Economic Zones) that eventually led to the whole of China opening up by joining the World Trade Organization ...”

THE PRE-DENG ERA

Since the late Deng, Chinese leaders have appreciated Mr Lee’s contribu-
tion to China’s modernisation, viewing him as his close friend. Even though this relationship began under Deng, the initial effort was laid by Mr Lee in the pre-Deng years.

Up to 1970, China did not recognise Singapore’s existence as an independent state and Mr Lee was often derided as a “running dog of United States and British imperialism.”

When the US began to normalise ties with China under then President Richard Nixon, Mr Lee saw a chance to improve Singapore’s relations with China.

He visited China in 1976, meeting Mao Zedong and his successor, Hu Shoufong. Although Mao and Hu did not impress Mr Lee very much, ties between the countries slowly improved.

Mr Lee’s first visit to Beijing helped cement Singapore’s commercial ties with China. At the same time, Chinese perception of Singapore began to change.

However, real change in the Singapore-China relationship took place only after Deng returned to power in the late 1970s.

LEE AND DENG

Deng was the Chinese leader whom Mr Lee most respected. Although Deng did not make any published comments on Mr Lee, he spoke about Singa-
apore during his landmark Southern Tour to Chinese cities in 1992: “There is good social order in Singapore. They govern the place with discipline. We should draw from their experience and do even better than them.”

His comments soon unleashed a wave of Chinese study visits to Singapore.

Yet, the Republic had influenced Deng earlier on, starting from his re-
form or “open door” initiatives in December 1978 to allow foreign business-
eses to set up in China.

He had visited Singapore only a month earlier and showed great interest in its social and economic development experience. Mr Lee believed that what Deng saw in Singapore had shocked him and strengthened his resolve to open up his country to the world.

Deng’s 1992 comment was a reaffirmation of the Singapore model that he had seen 14 years earlier.

Why did Deng trust Mr Lee and the Singapore model? First, both leaders shared a high level of mutual respect and trust, partly due to their similar pursuit of national interest and pragmatism in solving problems they encountered.

In celebration of the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and China, Mr Lee and then Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping, who was on an official visit to Singapore, unveiled the Deng Xiaoping marker at the Asian Civilisations Museum in November 2010, when Mr Lee was Minister Mentor.

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Why did Deng trust Mr Lee and the Singapore model? First, both leaders had a strong mission to build up their countries’ long-term national interest as a priority. Mr Lee’s engagement with China during the Cold War was in Singapore’s national interest. Simi-
larly, Deng believed that listening to Mr Lee’s analysis of the world was in China’s national interest.

Third, the men shared a high level of mutual respect and trust, partly due to their similar pursuit of national interest and pragmatism in solving problems they encountered.

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Mr Lee recounted in his book From Third World To First what he told Deng during his 1978 visit to Singa-
apore: “ASEAN (Association of South-east Asian Nations) governments re-garded radio broadcasts from China appealing directly to their ethnic Chi-
inese as dangerous subversion ... Deng listened silently. He had never seen it in this light ... He knew that I had spoken the truth. Abruptly, he asked: ‘What do you want me to do?’”

Not long after, China stopped broadcasting to South-east Asia.

AFTER DENG

In 1992, the Chinese Communist Party held its 14th National Congress and formally incorporated Deng’s theory on a socialist market economy into the party’s charter. Deng had retired from politics and rarely appeared in public. But the solid foundation laid by him and Mr Lee helped drive the bi-
 lateral relationship forward. As China continued its steady growth, economi-
 c and business ties between the two countries deepened.

The main reason is that Singapore has constantly made itself relevant to China’s development by sharing its experiences and best practices. In 1994, when China initiated a new wave of indus-
trialisation, the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park was estab-
lished. In 2007, when China’s environmental problems became a hot issue before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the idea to jointly build an eco-city was broached and later developed into the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city.

Other key projects include the Si-
no-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City, Singapore-Chengdu High-Tech Park and the Sino-Singapore Jilin Food Zone. These projects provide avenues for existing and aspiring lead-
ers from both sides and at different levels to meet each other regularly to strengthen personal ties.

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said: “Mr Lee’s good rela-
tions with China’s leaders enabled Singapore and the leaders who came after Mr Lee to ride on those good relationships.”

LEE AS CHINA’S INTERLOCUTOR TO THE WORLD

Singapore’s relationship with China is special not only because Mr Lee (and Singapore) have contributed to China’s modernisation, but also because he (and Singapore) have helped the world, particularly the West, and China to understand each other.

No leader appears to be as candid as Mr Lee; he often reminded China how to integrate itself into the world. At times, his comments ruffled feather
ners, particularly among the younger generation of Chinese. But China’s leaders understand that Mr Lee’s comments were in its interest.

In the same way, Mr Lee helped the West to understand China. Since Deng, the West has frequently dis-
missed China’s growth and its sus-
tainability. Mr Lee would tell the Americans and Europeans that Chi-

na’s growth was indeed real. He often cautioned the US against underesti-
mating China and trying to contain this rising power. Because of his in-

nate understanding of China, Mr Lee’s views were sought and closely listened to by world leaders.

Former US Secretary of State George Shultz once said: “He (Mr Lee) didn’t just go see leaders in Beijing. He was able to travel in the country and see people in all sorts of occupations and age levels, so he is a very penetrat-
ing observer ... I found that very valu-
able to listen to what he had to say, as we tried to formulate in the US how we would approach China.”

Today, China is an important player on the world stage and its leaders can talk directly to other world leaders everywhere. But Chinese leaders continue to appreciate Singapore’s view on the world. As then Vice-Presi-
dent Xi Jinping told Mr Lee during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: “We will need you for a long time. I have been to Singapore, I know what you have and our people want to learn. We get more from you than from America.”

Singapore is constantly finding ways to stay relevant to China. Both coun-
tries now cooperate in areas such as financial cooperation, food safety and social management. For China, it is even more important to get its relation-
ship right with a small, neighbouring country such as Singapore. This will be the best litmus test of its peaceful rise.

ZHENG YONGNIAN
Long-term vision helped cement US ties

Mr Lee was seen as a vital interpreter of events in Asia by successive American Presidents

Mr Lee Kuan Yew has been the most instrumental factor in the development of Singapore's relations with the United States. In fact, bilateral ties were initially very much centred on the friendship between Mr Lee and successive American leaders who deeply respected his strong conviction, clear big-picture vision and extraordinary strategic leadership.

The Vietnam War could be said to have strengthened Mr Lee's cachet and standing with Washington. Mr Lee saw American participation in the war as buying time for non-Communist states in Southeast Asia, and played a role in stiffening US resolve to resist Communism. Singapore's independent and non-aligned foreign policy orientation gave him great credence within the American policy establishment, as a neutral party supporting their military campaign in Vietnam.

Mr Lee remained a vital interpreter of events in Asia long after the Vietnam War ended. His standing in American policy circles has been explained by Foreign Minister K Shanmugam, who notes that Mr Lee recognised some fundamental truths about the US and the world well before other states and leaders. Mr Lee saw that strong US presence was vital to maintain peace and balance in Asia as the Asian economies developed, and supported it long before it was fashionable to do so. Singapore was often in the minority of voices, sometimes even alone, in speaking up for the US in the developing world and forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement.

BELIEF IN AMERICA'S STRENGTH

Later, again under Mr Lee's leadership, Singapore stepped up to help the US maintain its presence in the region even as the US drew down its assets elsewhere. In November 1990, in one of his last acts as Prime Minister, Mr Lee signed a Memorandum of Understanding with then US Vice President Dan Quayle, offering enhanced use of facilities in Singapore to American military aircraft and naval vessels as a contribution to sustaining US forward military position in Southeast Asia.

But as he worked with American statesmen at the strategic level and preserved the balance of power in Asia, Mr Lee saw flaws within American society. Although he praised America's strengths, its enterprising spirit and openness to talent, Mr Lee did not shy away from speaking of America's weaknesses such as the widespread availability of guns, and as he puts it, the breakdown of civil society and erosion of the moral underpinnings of American society.

As American leaders valued Mr Lee's views on geopolitics and the world order, and admired his accomplishments, they did not take to heart his criticism. In some cases, American opinion makers also agreed with Mr Lee's analyses of the problems troubling their country. They knew that even as Mr Lee believed in the American can-do way and that the US is the only country with the strength and determination to deal with the challenges faced by the global community. Even as the US was affected by the recent financial crisis and some saying it was in decline, Mr Lee repeatedly reminded others not to underestimate American creativity, resilience and innovative spirit. He was confident the US will find its feet again.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger writes: “Lee has made himself an indispensable friend of the United States, not primarily by the power he represents, but by the excellence of his thinking. His analysis is of such quality and depth that his counterparts consider meeting with him as a way to educate themselves ... Every American president who has dealt with him has benefited from the fact that, on international issues, he has identified the future of his country with the fate of democracies. Furthermore, Lee can tell us about the nature of the world that we face, especially penetrating insights into the thinking of his region. Lee's analyses shed light on the most important challenge that the United States confronts over the long term: how to build a fundamental and organic relationship with Asia, including China. There is nobody who can teach us more about the nature and the scope of this effort than Lee Kuan Yew ... Lee is not only one of the seminal leaders of our period, but also a thinker recognised for his singular strategic acumen.”

Mr Lee's long-term vision and strategic intellect singlehandedly contributed to the cementing of the close ties that Singapore now enjoys with the US. Singapore and US officials often articulate that Mr Lee has established the institutions and processes for both countries to pursue strategic interests that would normally be impossible between a small island state and the global superpower. American policymakers would always recall how Mr Lee developed the basis of bilateral defence cooperation, especially access arrangements for American forces in Singapore. They also believed that it was Mr Lee's persuasive influence that laid the ground for the US to enter into negotiations with the Singapore Government on a bilateral free trade agreement. Through Mr Lee's readiness to engage the US directly and in their own ways. This is different from the situation when Mr Lee was in government.

The quality of Singapore's strategic assessment of developments in Asia and beyond will determine the level of confidence, trust and value which American policy-makers will accord to Singapore. ONG KENG YONG

Ong Keng Yong is Executive Deputy Chairman of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University. This piece was written in his personal capacity.
A close but difficult relationship

Ties between Malaysia and Singapore have been marked by their share of ups and downs

The Republic’s oft-tumultuous relationship with its neighbour across the Causeway during Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s tenure as Prime Minister was often attributed to his personal relationship with Malaysia’s leaders.

But in Mr Lee’s view, the root cause of the problems that arose when Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 lay in “our diametrically different approaches to the problems facing our two multiracial societies”.

“A multiracial society of equal citizens was unacceptable to the UMNO leaders of Malaysia in 1965 and remained unacceptable in 1999,” he said in his 2000 memoirs From Third World to First, referring to the United Malays National Organisation, the largest party in Malaysia’s ruling coalition.

Malaysian politicians wanted independent Singapore “to be obliging and accommodating” in an abang-adik (big brother-little brother) relationship — “with little brother giving way graciously” to Malaysian interests, Mr Lee said.

Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman tried to use three levers — the military, economy and water — to force Singapore to follow Malaysia’s lead. “We countered the military leverage by building up the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces). We overcame their economic hold by leapfrogging them and the region to link up with the industrial countries,” Mr Lee said in 2000.

But Singapore had no choice but to continue to rely on Malaysia for water, which was to remain a major sticking point in bilateral relations for four decades.

Relations across the Causeway became “relatively trouble-free” for a few years after Mr Abdul Razak Hussein became Malaysia’s Prime Minister in September 1970.

To mark improving bilateral relations since Singapore’s independence, Mr Lee made his first official visit to Malaysia in March 1972. Mr Razak returned the visit in 1973. During the Razak years, relations between the two countries were “equable”, with few major differences, said Mr Lee.

Mr Lee had a good working relationship with Malaysia’s third Prime Minister, Hussein Onn, whom he described as “open and direct” in their dealings, “coming straight to the point, unlike Razak”.

Despite the amicable relations between Mr Lee and Mr Hussein, bilateral ties remained impeded by UMNO leaders who were suspicious of Singapore.

As Singapore grew, the Malaysian attitude towards economic cooperation was one of, in Mr Lee’s words, “envy and disdain”. Malaysia subsequently took a series of measures to reduce the import and export of goods through Singapore. For example, from 1973, all goods shipped from one part of Malaysia to another had to be consigned from their own ports, in order to qualify for import tax exemption.

Timber exports to Singapore were also banned, badly affecting the island’s plywood factories and sawmills.

Johor leaders had also convinced Mr Hussein that Singapore was out to harm the Malaysian state and prevent its economic progress, noted Mr Lee.

Malaysia continued to take a series of actions that would slow down the Singapore economy.

For example, the Johor state government banned the export of sand and turf, while the federal government ruled that from 1977, all exports from Johor to East Malaysia had to be shipped through the Pasir Gudang port, instead of Singapore.

Despite such developments on the economic front, Mr Lee still had a good start with Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister, reaching out to Dr Mahathir Mohamad while he was still Deputy Prime Minister by inviting him to visit Singapore in 1978.

Expecting Dr Mahathir to succeed Mr Hussein, Mr Lee had wanted to put their old antagonism behind them.

Back in May 1965, during a session of the Malaysian Parliament in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir had denounced Singapore’s People’s Action Party, led by Mr Lee, as “pro-Chinese, communist-oriented and positively anti-Malay”.

Dr Mahathir subsequently made several visits to Singapore, during which they had “long and frank exchanges of several hours each to clear the air surrounding our suspicions of each other”, Mr Lee said.

Mr Lee told Dr Mahathir about Singapore’s fears that Malaysia would cut off the water supply to the Republic — something that Malaysia publicly threatened to do whenever their bilateral differences cropped up — though the guarantee of water supply was part of the 1965 Separation Agreement.

Dr Mahathir said he accepted an independent Singapore and would not undermine it.

“I believed I had satisfied him that I was not interested in out-manoeuvring him, that I wanted a business-like relationship,” Mr Lee said.

Despite the differences between the two that would emerge in later years after Mr Abdul Razak Hussein came “relatively trouble-free” for a few decades.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who was then Prime Minister, hosting a reception for late Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman at Sri Temasek, the official residence of the Prime Minister of Singapore, in 1969.

PHOTO: MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND THE ARTS COLLECTION, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE

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Building rapport with Indonesia

Mr Lee had a good relationship with Suharto, but also sought to better understand Jakarta in the post-strongman era

Mr Lee and Suharto had a good personal relationship throughout their political careers, despite low points in bilateral ties. One was the execution of two Indonesian marines in Singapore for the 1985 bombing of MacDonald House in Orchard Road, despite a direct appeal by Suharto.

However, Mr Lee’s gesture to lay flowers on the marines’ graves in 1973 helped soothe the tension and showed Singapore’s commitment to improving relations with Indonesia.

The “empat mata” meetings between Suharto and Mr Lee during Association of South-East Asian Nations and other meetings further helped build rapport and confidence.

Mr Lee wrote in his book From Third World To First: “Our friendship overcame the many prejudices between Singaporeans of Chinese descent and Indonesians. Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, we met almost every year to keep in touch, exchange views and discuss matters that cropped up.”

During the 1997-98 financial crisis and as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) put pressure on Indonesia to undertake structural reforms, Mr Lee was against sudden regime change in Indonesia. He believed discontinuity would worsen its already precarious situation.

Despite Suharto’s fall from power in 1998 and against popular opinion in Indonesia, Mr Lee saw him as a “patriot.”

Writing in From Third World To First, he viewed the change with concern and some sorrow: “It was an immense personal tragedy for a leader who had turned an impoverished Indonesia of 1965 into an emerging tiger economy, educated his people and built the infrastructure for Indonesia’s continued development.”

In a display of personal diplomacy, Mr Lee made a trip to see Suharto shortly before the Indonesian leader died in 2008.

In contrast, Mr Lee’s views of Suharto’s successors were mixed. His initial reaction to the prospect that Mr B J Habibie, who served as Vice-President under Suharto, would take over from the latter was less than positive. But later, even after Mr Habibie remarked that Singapore was a “little red dot in a sea of green”, Mr Lee reassessed him to be “highly intelligent, but mercurial and volatile”, as he wrote in From Third World To First.

Mr Lee also credited Mr Habibie for Indonesia’s decentralisation efforts that empowered the districts and municipalities, which helped prevent separatist tendencies from mushrooming.

Later, in Tom Plate’s 2010 Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew, Mr Lee would say of Indonesia: “Successor Habibie made a mess of it. Then Gus Dur made a bigger mess. Megawati calmed it down. SBY (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) has improved it slightly, but there’s a long way to go.”

Beyond personalities, Mr Lee also made a number of visits to the country to meet a broad range of political actors in order to better understand post-Suharto Indonesia. This habit of reaching out to senior Indonesian leaders continues today — Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong held retreats with his Indonesian counterpart in 2010, 2012 and 2013.

Mr Lee being welcomed to his Putrajaya office by then Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 2001. Mr Lee, then Senior Minister, was making his second visit to Malaysia in 12 months to resolve a string of long-running disputes between Singapore and Malaysia.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mr Lee and former Indonesian President Suharto in Jakarta in 2006. Mr Lee, then Minister Mentor, was on a five-day visit to Indonesia. PHOTO: REUTERS
Preserving S'pore’s security via ASEAN

The regional grouping helped buttress solidarity while maintaining a balance of power

Four decades ago, Indonesia, together with Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, established the Association of South-east Asian Nations, or ASEAN, at a time when the region was in turbulence. It was August 1967: the Cold War was at its peak, dividing the region into communist and non-communist blocs, with a fault-line running right through the heart of South-east Asia. The United States’ war campaign in Vietnam was also intensifying.

Compounding the situation were the disputes between South-east Asian countries. Singapore had been forced out of Malaysia two years earlier. Indonesia had recently wound up “konfrontasi” with Malaysia and Singapore. Malaysia and the Philippines were also locked in a dispute over Sarawak, while Brunei had put down, with the help of British forces, an internal insurrection involving the heart of South-east Asia. The United States’ war campaign in Vietnam was also intensifying.

In From Third World To First, Mr Lee wrote: “The unspoken objective of ASEAN was to gain strength through solidarity ahead of the power vacuum that would come with an impending British and later, a possible US withdrawal.” It was clear that the leaders — Mr Lee, former Indonesian President Suharto and former Malaysian Prime Ministers Hussein Onn and, later, Mahathir Mohamad — shared an innate understanding of the situation and different sensitivities of the region during ASEAN’s formative years.

Mr Lee’s views of the grouping were shaped by Konfrontasi with Indonesia and the Vietnam War. To him, ASEAN was a vehicle that would not only buttress regional solidarity, but also maintain a delicate power balance between Indonesia, the largest power in South-east Asia, and its neighbours.

Mr Lee ensured that the voices of smaller states were not lost. In a 1999 Asiascope interview, he said: “We don’t pick quarrels. As ASEAN’s smallest member, we have to stand our ground, or our rights will be rolled over.”

When Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia in 1975, for example, Mr Lee was the first to write to then Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chaman and Chair of ASEAN to urge the organisation to stand united and steadfast in supporting the Cambodian coalition and pressure Vietnam to withdraw its troops. He later wrote: “We had spent much time and resources to thwart the Vietnamese in Cambodia because it was in our interest that aggression be seen not to pay.”

Mr Lee saw ASEAN as a means to preserve the security of a small state like Singapore, especially with its predominantly ethnic Chinese population, in a sea of Malays. He helped cement the fact that Singapore is a South-east Asian country by recognising China in 1990 only after Indonesia had done so.

By using his friendship with Suharto and being sensitive to Indonesia’s feelings on thorny issues, such as China, Mr Lee was able to carve out a reasonable space for Singapore in ASEAN. Mr Lee wrote in From Third World To First: “Under Suharto, Indonesia did not act like a hegemon. This made it possible for the others to accept Indonesia as first among equals.”

**FUTURE OF ASEAN**

Later, with the collapse of communism, the reality of a multi-polar world and China’s growing heft in the region, ASEAN continued to maintain a strategic balance of power in the region. The grouping engaged the world’s major powers through multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Plus Three Meeting, which includes China, Japan and South Korea.

At the same time, ASEAN needed a new force for unity: Economics. This economic imperative started in 1992, after Mr Lee had stepped down, with the launch of the ASEAN Free Trade Area and its goal of economic integration.

ASEAN enlarged from 1997 onwards to include new members. By the 2003 ASEAN Summit, member states would call for closer economic integration and the creation of an ASEAN Community by 2020, a goal which has now been advanced to 2015.

As one of the founders of ASEAN, Mr Lee had from the start engaged with new members and encouraged their opening and entry into the regional group and international community. For example, ASEAN and Singapore had worked hard on the Cambodian question early on, with Mr Lee personally travelling the world to highlight the issue.

Yet, Mr Lee also rapidly adjusted to the realities and possibilities of the post-Cold War world. In a 1999 Asiascope interview, he said: “There’s no great ideological divide between the ASEAN countries. The communist system is gone. We are just varying degrees of democracy or authoritarianism. Every country wants economic and social progress. After the severe financial and economic setbacks, nobody’s got time for ideological or expansionist issues.”

Vietnam, in particular, came into focus for him. Mr Lee first visited it in the early 1990s and had been appointed an adviser to its government. He then made visits to the Singapore-Vietnam industrial parks that were opened as part of inter-governmental cooperation.

Vietnam’s successful integration into ASEAN’s fold is proof that economic integration is indeed the path forward. Already, the organisation has announced that it has achieved 80 per cent of its goals in the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint to be an integrated market by 2015.

As Mr Lee put it in 2011’s Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going: “The logic of joining markets is irrefutable and it will happen.”

When, and not if, economic integration occurs, it would certainly validate Mr Lee’s confidence in ASEAN’s ability to serve as a viable force for unity and prosperity. **PUSHPANATHAN SUNDRAM AND SIMON TAY**
The love of his life

‘Without her, I would be a different man, with a different life.’

S he was his closest friend, his “tower of strength”, for more than three-quarters of his life — the woman who got his attention when she bestowed him in school, who ran his household and their law firm, and without whom he would have been hard-pressed to enter politics.

Madam Kwa Geok Choo and Mr Lee Kuan Yew were often seen as inseparable. But the Singapore public found out just how much she meant to him only when he published his memoirs in 1999 — telling all for the first time about the great love of his life and revealing an unexpected side to his unsentimental, hard-nosed public face.

At Raffles College, she had beaten him to be the top student in English and economics at the end of the first term, giving Mr Lee stiff competition for the coveted Queen’s Scholarship.

When the Japanese Occupation interrupted their studies, they reconnected under different circumstances: Mr Lee and her brother-in-law ran a business making stationery glue. With their friendship blossoming by September 1944, Mr Leeknrew Mrs Lee well enough to invite her to his 21st birthday dinner, “an event not without significance” in those days.

With the end of the war, Mr Lee decided to read law in England on his family’s savings. Mrs Lee, who was two-and-a-half years older than Mr Lee, said she would wait for his return.

In the months before he left in September 1946, the couple spent a lot of time together and took photographs.

Mr Lee wrote in his memoirs: “We were young and in love, anxious to record this moment of our lives ... We both hoped she would go back to Raffles College, win the Queen’s Scholarship to read law and join me wherever I might be. She was totally committed. I sensed it. I was equally determined to keep my commitment to her.”

Indeed, Mrs Lee was awarded the Queen’s Scholarship the next year. However, the Colonial Office could not find her a university place for that academic year and said she would have to wait till 1948.

Mr Lee, who was studying at Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam College, managed to eventually arrange a meeting with the mistress of Girton College and persuaded her to take in Mrs Lee.

She arrived in Britain in October. And two months later, during the Christmas vacation, they decided to get married at Stratford-upon-Avon. But they kept their marriage a secret when she bested him in school, who ran their household and their law firm, and without whom he would have been hard-presssed to enter politics.

Back in Singapore in August 1950, the young couple got married on Sept 30 for a second time. They started their careers doing their pupillage at Laycock & Ong and, in 1955 with Mr Lee’s brother Dennis, they set up the law firm Lee & Lee.

The People’s Action Party was formed, Mrs Lee helped draft its constitution. In the 1959 general election, she even gave a speech on radio urging women to vote for the party.

One of Singapore’s best conveyancing lawyers, she also in 1965 helped Law Minister Eddie Barker draft the clauses in the Separation Agreement to guarantee the water agreements with the state of Johor. And for most of Mr Lee’s political career, she was his unofficial speechproofreader — indeed, since his first speech to the Malayan Forum in 1950.

But for the most part, she devoted herself to the role behind the scenes of being her husband’s staunchest supporter, running both the household, especially after the birth of their first son Hsien Loong in 1952, and the law firm as Mr Lee immersed himself in politics.

Not only did her income enable him to continue in office over the years, she also put his mind at ease, Mr Lee said once, for “in case anything untoward should happen to me, she would be able to bring up my three children well”.

While she was often seen by Mr Lee’s side over the years at official functions and on official trips, Mr Lee said he “made a point not to discuss the formulation of policies with her, and she was scrupulous in not reading notes or faxes that were sensitive”. But he did pay attention to her uncanny gut feel for people’s characters. “She would tell me whether she would trust that man or not. And often she is right,” he said.

When he penned his memoirs, she would stay up with him until 4am going over the drafts, correcting, critiquing and getting him to write “clear and crisp”.

FACED CRISIS TOGETHER

In terms of their relationship as a couple, they did not dodge difficult personal problems, but faced them and sorted them out early on, Mr Lee said. “We gradually influenced each other’s ways and habits, we adjusted and accommodated each other. We knew that we could not stay starry-eyed lovers all our lives, that life was an ever-ongoing challenge with new problems to resolve and manage.”

When their younger son Hsien Yang married in 1981, Mr Lee wrote the newlyweds a letter with advice on marriage: “We have never allowed the other to feel abandoned and alone in any moment of crisis. Quite the contrary, we have faced all major crises in our lives together, sharing our fears and hopes, and our subsequent grief and exultation. These moments of crisis have bonded us closer together.”

Mr Lee’s brother, Mr Lee Suan Yew, described the couple as being inseparable — they had to be seated together at family dinners.

While her husband did not prefer the arts, Mrs Lee loved classical music. “And he, being very much in love with his wife, would comply and follow her to the Esplanade and listen to some concerts,” Mr Lee’s brother said.

Others, such as former minister George Yeo, who had the opportunity to observe the couple on overseas trips, spoke of their very special close relationship. Education Minister Heng Swee Keat recalled their hanting over Mr Lee’s sweet tooth and how Mrs Lee would “with good humour keep score of the week’s ‘ration’”.

While she sat quietly and unobtrusively, anyone who saw them would know “how much strength her presence gave her husband” at official events.

HER STROKE AND HIS TOUGHEST MOMENTS

In October 2003, Mrs Lee suffered a stroke while she and Mr Lee were in London. She was flown back to Singapore for an operation. As Mr Lee had already planned to have a prostate
The proud father

I've got three children I'm very proud of.

A way from the public eye, Mr Lee Kuan Yew was an “Eastern” father who, while not ostentatious about showing love and affection, made it evident to his family.

His family was his greatest personal achievement, he once said: “...I've got a good, happy family. I've got a happy marriage. I've got three children. I'm very proud of I can't ask for more.”

Elder son Hsien Yang was born in 1952, daughter Wei Ling in 1955 and son Hsien Yang two years later: Mr Lee and his wife took pains to ensure they grew up living normal lives after he became Prime Minister in 1959 when they were aged seven, five and two, respectively.

For one thing, they decided not to live at Sri Temasek, the Prime Minister’s official residence at the Istana, “because that would be a very bad thing for kids,” Mr Lee said.

He also “constantly reminded” Mr Lee of servants around and the gardeners.

“Because that would be a very bad thing for kids,” Mr Lee said.

But watching his children grow up also “constantly reminded” Mr Lee of “the need to build a safe and wholesome environment for our children to live in”.

Mrs Lee did most of the nurturing and would return from work to Oxley Road home daily to have lunch with the kids. She would use the cane when they were very naughty, but for Mr Lee, “a stern rebuke was effective enough”, he said. “Having a violent father turned me against using physical force.”

Mr Lee made a point of spending time with his children. At least once a year, sometimes twice, he would take the family to Cameron Highlands or Fraser’s Hill for two weeks. His brother Mr Lee Hsien Loong was born in 1955 and his wife took pains to ensure they grew up living normal lives after he became Prime Minister in 1959 when they were aged seven, five and two, respectively.

One of Mr Lee’s most anxious moments was when Mr Lee Hsien Loong, then Deputy Prime Minister, was diagnosed with lymphoma in October 1992. The elder Mr Lee, who was in Johannesburg with his wife, got a call from his son.

“I immediately rang back, fearing bad news. It was devastating. A biopsy of a polyp found in his colon had been diagnosed as cancer, a lymphoma.”

Former minister George Yeo said I lived in a glass house. After my father’s recent comment on my lack of culinary skills, another observed, “You live in a house without any walls.” Fortunately, I am not easily embarrassed.”

In October 2010, she wrote of how she now travelled overseas with Mr Lee. “Like my mother did when she was alive, I accompany him so that I can keep an eye on him and also keep him company. After my father became too ill to travel, he missed having a family member with whom he could speak frankly after a long, tiring day of meetings.”

Though more frail than he used to be, he insisted on travelling and doing what had to be done to benefit Singapore. “For my part, I keep him company when he is not preoccupied with work and I make sure he has enough rest,” said the single Dr Lee, who lived in the family home with her father.

She has also written about what it was like growing up as the daughter of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. “My every move, every word, is scrutinised ... One friend said I lived in a glass house. After my father’s recent comment on my lack of culinary skills, another observed, “You live in a house without any walls.” Fortunately, I am not easily embarrassed.”

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They have never made a show of being a loving couple in public. Even in private, they have rarely demonstrated their love for each other with hugs or kisses. It was only after my mother’s second stroke that I saw my father kiss my mother on her forehead to comfort her. They don’t seem to feel the need for a dramatic physical show of love.

Dr Lee Wei Ling

Mr Lee at his 80th birthday celebrations
In this 2012 interview, PM Lee Hsien Loong shares his thoughts on his father.

Prime Minister, how would you describe Mr Lee Kuan Yew as a father to you?

Prime Minister Lee: He was a very strict, good father. He left a lot of the looking after (of the family) to my mother, because he was always busy with politics and with his responsibilities. But you knew he was there, you knew what he thought, you knew what he expected; very strict and if he disapproved of something, and he didn’t have to say a lot, you would know it. When you needed him, he was there. At a crisis, he was the key person in the family. When I was ill with lymphoma, when my (first) wife died, we depended on him for support, not just what he says, but just being there and knowing that things would be ok.

In those situations — after that happens, does that change your relationship in any way?

PM: I suppose relationships grow over the years. Each episode, each bit of crisis or joy shared builds on it. I don’t know how you describe it compared with other people, each person has a different family. But for many families, father is one of the most important persons in your life, informing you and influencing you, settling a role model that you try to aspire to.

What was your fondest memory?

PM: (Laughter) Well, when I was very small, he used to take us to go and look at trains. And we used to go to Holland Road — Tanglin Halt is called Tanglin Halt because the train stops there and there used to be a railway station there. We would go there in the evening and watch the trains come, exchange tokens with the station master. And then it goes on. It’s a great thrill and outing for us, for me. I must have been 5-6 years old then. And we would do that.

When we went on holidays, we went to Cameron Highlands. We went there when I was a small child. Webreak jour- ney at Kuala Lumpur — we’d stay at the railway station, there was a station hotel in KL, in those days ... and you go and look at the trains on the platform.

I played golf. So, when I was a boy, he encouraged me to pick up the game. And so for quite a number of years, I would play with him, he would take me around the course, when we were on holidays in Penang, at Sri Temasek, on the Istana course. And that was a chance to spend time with him and chat with him. So, I mean, he didn’t do frivolous things, but he had time for the family.

You spoke about how he made his presence known, made his views clear. How would you describe your relationship with him: Was it formal or informal? Were there occasions when you hugged?

PM: He is not very demonstrative and our family generally is not very touchy-feely. But (there was) a very deep respect and regard. He took us seriously and we held him in high regard. I think if you compare with parents today and the children, they were closer to him as much more formal relationship. I think today people are much looser in the way you treat your parents, what they say, what they think, how you would argue with them. With us, well, we were a different generation.

We know him to have these high standards of discipline — how did he enforce them, what was the ‘game’?

PM: Well he just expects you to behave in a certain way. School wise, it was not an issue — we were more or less self-proprielled; our parents didn’t have to enforce us, that and when we had to do something, it was very much as a much more formal relationship. I think today people are much looser in the way you treat your parents, what they say, they think, how you would argue with them. With us, well, we were a different generation.

PM: (Laughs) Well, when I was very young, my mother bought a recorder for me. From there to play in a band, to play a clarinet and tuba, he encouraged us but they didn’t make us ... jump through hoops. So, I think in that way it was a relaxed family, but they expected you, us to behave well, speak properly. Not sloppily, use correct language and no bad language. I think those were things they were stricter (about) than many parents today.

Did you ever get into trouble, were you disciplined?

PM: I suppose from time to time, yes. My mother was responsible for keeping us in line. But if he disapproved of music in one day, must have been 1967, ’66 — I must have been 14 years old, my mother bought a recorder for me. I picked up music from there — he encouraged us. I graduated from there to play in a band, to play a clarinet and tuba. He encouraged us but they didn’t make us ... jump through hoops. So, I think in that way it was a relaxed family, but they expected you, us to behave well, speak properly. Not sloppily, use correct language and no bad language. I think those were things they were stricter (about) than many parents today.

Have you tried to display some of those traits yourself as a father?

PM: I think I differ from him. My children are growing up in a different generation. With their peers, with the Internet, have to bring them up in a different way. It is still early days to say yet, but I think they are managing.

What would you consider the most valuable piece of advice your father gave you while you were growing up?

PM: I don’t know about a single thing. But perhaps just watching him, the way he fought, worked, and how he struggled with all the issues and challenges, I think that’s a great inspiration. Policies you can understand, work out what actually needs to be done. But to see him sweating with his languages, particularly Mandarin, every day list-tening to the tape, having a teacher, then exercising, exercising while lis-tening to the tape playing, keeping the phrases, refreshing the phrases, bringing the tutor home, weekends, in the study. Learning Mandarin and Hokkien, especially during the 60s, is a tremendous slog for him. Even until old age, he’s still taking lessons daily, still keeping the language alive — because he has spent so much effort. He doesn’t want to lose that. I think that is an amazing personal example.

What do you admire most about Mr Lee Kuan Yew?

PM: Well, that he has given so much to the country and so singularly focused on his obsession, to build up Singapore, to make it safe, to make it better and to create something for Singaporeans which actually we are not entitled to expect, but which we had done, not him alone but with his colleagues, and with the population. I think that’s quite exceptional. People want to achieve things, but in many countries, you see leaders, they have taken the country one great step forward, but the next step, either something goes wrong or somebody else has to take the next step. But in his case, from independence struggle, to Malaysia, to early independence, to nation building, to managing prosperity, to transitioning and having succession, and managing each of those steps while adapting as times change. I think that’s very unusual. I watched him in Cabinet — as the oldest member, sometimes he’s the most radical. When it came to the ca-sino, he was dead against it for years and years but eventually we concluded that things were changing. And George Yeo made the argument in the Ministry for Trade and Industry then. He took it and he pushed for it. The world has changed and we have to change with this ability to keep current and to keep young intellectually, mentally, I think that is very remarkable, it’s not easy.

Are there other examples that you can cite when he is the most radical despite being the oldest?

PM: (Laughs) Some of them are too radical to mention. But we’ve had to change our policies over the years. He has built up the basic, self-reliance, home ownership, education system. And then with the second-generation leadership, with the third generation, we had to make a lot of changes to what was already settled. But whether it was altering the education system, whether it was introducing new schemes for HDB, whether you are talking about even social morals, censorship, mov-ies, just let it be. So, I said no, no, we are not quite that advanced yet. We have to enforce our rules, but of course, as times changed expectations will shift. So his attitude was very practical, was current and he moved with the times, often ahead of the times. I think in other areas, he had views many Singaporeans would think very radical.

What advice did he give you when you became PM? And if you are in a quandary, would you consult him?

PM: When I was Prime Minister, I often talked about it. But we really talked about it in Cabinet. It is not like I maintain a private line and he would give me secret advice. But in the Cabinet, he would share his views. When I was Prime Minister, I remember anything specific he said, but I think it gave him a lot of satisfaction that the system of transition, of renewal was working. That not only had he managed to hand over to his success, but his successor had worked out in the job, succeeded. And another succession had taken place, to the Third Generation, not just me but also my peers, George, Wong Kang Seng, Teo Chee Hean, Lim Hng Kiang and company. I think that was one of the amazing things, that
he could stay in Cabinet with his suc-
cessors, and it was a valuable experi-
ce, for the successors, as well as for him. I’ve talked to some other Prime
Ministers who have had former Prime
Ministers to live with and they tell me
they cannot imagine how it can be that
your predecessors are in Cabinet and
you are still managing. Well, I said we
are different from you and your prede-
cessors were different from your pre-
decessors.

What made it work?

PM: He knew how to advise, how to
guide, with not asserting his will in
a hard way, and he knew when to let
things go and to take a new direction.
I told you how when we changed poli-
cies and he would very often go along
with them. And not only go along but
pushed us to go further.

But there were other areas he felt
very strongly about and let his views
be known. For example, on greening
Singapore. He was very, very definite (view). But his determination that this place should
be clean, green and beautiful is main-
tained till today. He planted at the first
tree planting 50 years ago and he had
that延续 till the other one.

A couple of years ago, the Istana staff
put up a proposal, somewhere along
the boundary, the fence; they wanted to
trim a few trees, to improve visibility
and security. I was going to agree and
he sent me a note to say: are you sure
you need to do this? This place is green,
and we make it a point to make this
place green, and we have got birds and
wildlife. You want to keep it like that.

So in the end, I didn’t cut the trees
down but he felt strongly about (the
issue).

Thankfully he found out before
they were cut.

PM: Well, we kept him posted.

PM, how much of an influence do
you think he had on you? What role
did he play in your decision to join
politics? Do you think you would
have been in politics if it weren’t for
him?

PM: Well, I think he had a very big in-
fluence on me. It’s hard to say. But he
probably made me who I am, not like
him, but I learnt a lot from him. When
I went into politics, Mr Goh Chok Tong
suggested it and he relayed it to me.

He encouraged me to consider it se-
riously, so I said I would give it a try
and see how it went. With this quality of
life, services, government, society, system, I think that is not so. It can easily be very different,
and persuading people that it is so, and
that we have to, it is important for us,
and worth our while, to keep this, and
show what we can do, I think that is the
responsibility of this generation.

What is the most important lesson
about politics that you have learned
from your father?

PM: You must know what you want to
do; it is not just following what other
people want and what the crowd says. I
think that’s the first one. You must have
some idea what you want to achieve.
Secondly, you have got to persuade
people and bring them along, so you are
not leading on your own; follow me, I’m leading in front of my people
with me. Thirdly, it is not just a mat-
ter of logic and argument but also of
emotional persuasion and also of peo-
lene sense. To be able to read people,
to manoeuvre, to get through what you
need to get through so things will
be done. There are a lot of many clever
people and the world, but not all clever
people make good political leaders. In
my father, I think we had a very excep-
tional combination.

What are some of the political
qualities that he has that you wish
you have more of?

PM: I think he has a very instinctive
political sense, a political intuition —
what are the forces, where are the re-
sistance is going to come from, which
argument is likely to click, will it in with
what the other person wants, or if you
are going to negotiate against the other
person, what is the keystone — you may
hold on to and the rest we can discuss.

Whether you are discussing national
service policy, terms for water or for
railway, railway land, to know how to
put the argument across and make the
deal, which is in line with your overrid-
ing interests. I think he had that in-
nvincingly. Partly the way he was born,
partly the life he lived through, having to
rather than not; the ability to
having to negotiate with the British,
having to fight with communists. If he
didn’t have those or had not developed
those, he would not have survived then.

How about lessons in managing
racial politics?

PM: That was a very important part
of it. He made me learn Malay, start-
ing from a very young age — probably
aged seven. Six? — and kept it up. He
himself spoke Malay and fluently, es-
specially during the Malaysia period, when
it was a vital asset. After we became
independent, the point that he always
reiterated was never do to the minori-
ties in Singapore what happened to us
when we were a minority in Malaysia.
Always make sure that the Malays, the
Indians have their space, can live their
way of life, and have full and equal op-
portunities and are not discriminated
against. At the same time, help them to
upgrade, improve and move forward.

And I remember this, it was very
easy to advise that you were firstyear or so when I was in politics and in
Cabinet, we had just set up Mendaki
not long, or were going to set up Menda-
ki soon after that. And he said, the cul-
ture part is easy to push because people
would be happy to pursue the culture
part, the cultural activities, the sing-
ing and dancing, performances, that is
not the hard part. The hard part is to
focus on education, maths, upgrading,
how do you do it to get that com-
unity forward as well. I think he was
right. The advice to focus on education,
and on English, maths and science, has
made a big difference to the commu-
nity to move forward and, at the same
time, they may able to keep their culture, their language and their identity. He knew what was
a hard thing and where we needed to
take the maximum efforts.

Your parents’ relationship was an
inspiration to many. What did you
take out of that relationship? Did they
have a relationship you looked up to?

PM: They did, from time to time. But
the main lesson is that’s how you want
to live as husband and wife, as a cou-
pa for life. And I have tried to do that.

Mr Lee said a few times that he noticed
that you have the same mannerism as him, in terms
of the colour of your shirt, tucking
out your shirt. Would you say you
are more your mother’s son or your
father’s? What did your parents
think of you?

PM: I think I am temperamentally not
like him. He is a lot harder, more willing
to come upfront in a very direct way. I
have my preferences, how I would like
to be treated, but I don’t spoil for a
draft; he often does.

How much influence did the late
Mrs Lee have on him, as a father, as
a person, as a leader?

PM: I think a very big influence because
they were so close. He took her advice,
her views very seriously, on policy mat-
ters and government matters, he decid-
ed with the ministers. But she had her
views of the people, she had her views
on how he presented himself, how it
came across and they made sense and
he took in them. When you are married
a long time, and a good marriage, you
become one another.

In their case, I think their personalities
were very contrasting. I don’t think
in old age they were like each other but
they were very, very compatible.

Did your mother ever have to
smooth your relationship with your
father and your father? Did you have any
period in your life, growing up,
when you had to turn to your mum?

PM: No, I didn’t have such complicated
problems. Some people do, I know —
but I was lucky I suppose.

But in Cabinet, when discussing
policies or when deciding which
to go, have you had occasions
when you disagreed with your
father? Were they fierce and
serious disagreements or were they
manageable? Did you ever lose
your temper at your father?

PM: In Cabinet, we very seldom have
fights. We have arguments, discus-
sions, we have quite different views.
There were one or two occasions,when
we went around Cabinet in order to
decide which way the consensus was. But
very seldom, mostly we discuss, if we
cannot agree, sometimes we just put
it off and we come back another time,
and sometimes, when we are not urgent,
then we, you reach a compromise ... and then
we take another step forward.

I remember when we did the eco-
omic committee, the first one, back
in the mid-80s, when there was a se-
vere downturn. We came to Cabinet
with our report. And one of our major
recommendations was to bring the
tax rate down — at that time the tax
rate was 40% — and we were pushing
it down, our recommendation was to
push it down to 25%. There was a big
discussion in Cabinet, and my father
was Prime Minister. He was not in fa-
vour of going that far. So, in the end,
I can’t remember how we phrased it,
He will never say: Do this, do that

Dr Lee Suan Yew shares some insights on his more serious, studious eldest brother.

What was it like growing up with Mr Lee?

Dr Lee Suan Yew: I could only remember the time during the war, when I was about nine, he was about 19. World War II. That was a time when the family was very close together, during the war years. He had just started at Raffles College and he was very upset that the war interrupted his studies there. For me, I was just going to Primary Two. So my studies were interrupted. My parents didn’t want me to attend any school, the Japanese-type school, because my parents were afraid that they were training us to become young soldiers. So I had no real education after that.

So while we were at home, he took time to play chess with me. He had plenty of time so he taught me the moves and all that, and I enjoyed playing chess with him. There were times when we would go out for meals together, but he was a quieter person.

The rest of us siblings, we were more active, shall we say. He was more of a bookworm, the studious person, the scholar, and we would leave him alone if he was studying and all that or reading. We would continue with our own studies but we had lots of games and activities. He would have less of that.

What kind of a big brother was he? There was a big, 10-year gap between the two of you.

Dr Lee: He was really a wonderful brother because as an older brother, he was a really responsible person, very wise and always willing to give advice to us. At any time we say we would like to meet him, he will say, sure come over and we’ll chat with him and he will give his advice. He will never say: Do this, do that — very seldom. He’ll just give you the idea and you decide. That’s his advice, and he says, well, think about it.

What was the most significant advice or counsel he gave you?

Dr Lee: The most significant advice he gave me was about my studies. He said, ‘You know, this is my last date to be a Prime Minister. I was serving Mr Goh, as Deputy PM, very happily. And when Mr Goh felt ready, he said, take over; fortunately I felt ready enough to take over.

I think, in Singapore, if you are in politics to further your ambitions, you are doing the wrong thing. If you are in politics you want to do good; in the process, you have responsibilities and authority. Well, that’s part of the package. But if you are in it because you want power, I think that is not quite the right motivation.

PM, if we could ask a few more personal questions from the early years. Mr Lee Hsien Yang said when he was about to get married, he received a letter of advice from his father. Do you have the same letter too?

PM: Yes, I have the letter. I still have it.

What did it say, if you could share it with us?

PM: Basically his advice was on how to prepare for a happy marriage. Speaking from his own personal experience. He spent a lot of trouble keeping in touch with us and when we were away, he would write to us and my mother would write to us every week and I would write back. And my mother’s letter would be hand-writing. His letters would be dictated, typed, and is typed double or triple space, and he would go through and correct the typed version, and then add stuff and maybe have another paragraph or two in writing at the end, and then he would send it to me in that form. And to think of the effort, substantial pieces, 5-6 pages or more. I still have them all stored away somewhere. I hope the white ants haven’t eaten them.

But that was that generation; he put the effort into staying in touch. I replied also, quite long letters every week. And nowadays, you have email and Skype and I don’t think you do it quite so substantially.

Did he have a say in how you choose your spouse, for instance?

PM: Well, I found my own. I suppose they got along.

What do you think was the most misunderstood thing about Lee Kuan Yew that as a son you wish he knew the world knew?

And what would you miss most about him?

PM: Well, I think he doesn’t mind what the world knows about him. People think about him as an austere, logical, cerebral sort of person. I think he has strong feelings about quite a number of things, and also in his personal relationships with my mother, with the kids, he may not show it, but he feels it.

What will we miss about him? I think — so many things, but I think the key thing is, that with him, you will not lose. You will be all right and you will come through, and that sense of confidence and trust in a person, because of the experience, because of what he has gone through, because of what he has done, because of what he has contributed and demonstrated, is not something which you can replicate with any other person.

He was unique. He played a unique role in Singapore and I think we have been very lucky to have him.

How would you want him to be remembered?

PM: He never troubled himself with that question either. But I don’t know what to say. He is a father, he is a leader of the nation, and he made this place.

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very curious with him and we all heard about it. There was no end to that story. From that day on, all of us knew that we must not touch his things unless we got permission to use it. But he’s not selfish. You can use his things, but he feels that you must ask his permission and then return it as you found it.

We’ve heard how exacting and tough he is in terms of his work, but would you say he had a soft side?
Dr Lee: Yes, definitely yes. We noticed that any member of the family or friends, if they are ill, he will pay a visit and make sure they have enough time. Even during his very busy period, he’ll make the effort. One thing about him, he wants to make sure the person who is ill is given courage to get better. He’ll even talk to the doctors and make sure that the person recovers well. When I was ill, he visited me in hospital, when I was in Tan Tock Seng, he popped in. He was so busy, yet he dropped in, he talked to the doctors to make sure that everything was all right and I recovered. He was so happy.

How about the relationship he had with his immediate family? Would you say that’s one area that was extremely important to him?
Dr Lee: He always feels he did not have enough time with the family when he became a politician. So he made a special effort to make sure there was always a dinner together and that would be New Year’s Eve dinner. We’ll always make sure we get together for birthdays, if he’s got time he will make sure we get together for birthday dinners. He has a very soft spot for my sister. We only have one sister and somehow he’ll always be very protective of her and make sure she’s well cared for and he’ll give his two cents and all.

Do you think there was any particular incident in his childhood that shaped the kind of policy decisions he made as a politician?
Dr Lee: Yes. I think when he was in England, when he was reading law. He noticed that politics was very important, that it shapes the country’s future education, economy and so on. So I think he was influenced by the Labour Party. He might have been influenced by the socialist Labour party but he’s not an extremist.

He was, I would say, very moderate, but he was not thinking of Singapore, that one day he would come back and help solve our economy and the poor people and that part showed up later on — we noticed that he got interested in helping the poor people. And education as well, because all along he said education would be the one thing to uplift the poor people and level up their status.

What do you think was his biggest regret?
Dr Lee: I think that’s quite obvious. His regret was that Singapore was separated from Malaysia. I think that’s his biggest regret. His dream was to see the bigger picture of Singapore like New York of the United States and KL, the Washington DC. And he was very sad that we had to part company. He really wanted to have a real Malaysian Malay-And that, I have a hunch, of course, is the one he had a lot of regrets about.

What about arts and culture? You are very interested in it yourself, but how was he with the arts?
Dr Lee: He prefers more concrete things rather than the arts. But his wife, Geok Choo, loved classical music. And he, being very much in love with his wife, would comply and follow her to the Esplanade and listen to some concerts. But one thing good is that because of this, his children, such as Hsien Loong, love classical music. So that has a nice spin-off there. I think he was quite careful with the state putting money into the arts until other ministers came in and said to him, that it was very important. I think a fine example is (former Minister for Information and the Arts) George Yeo. He influenced how we should put our money into Esplanade and look at the Esplanade today: It’s a world-class theatre and we’re bringing in world-class artists.

How would you describe Mr Lee’s relationship with his wife and children?
Dr Lee: It’s quite extraordinary. His love for her was truly until death did them part. It’s obvious, even with us, within our family, that we have them for dinner together, we must seat them together. We cannot separate them and she will somehow keep an eye on his food. He’s quite careful with his diet but she is even more careful with his diet to make sure that he is eating the right kind of food and so on.

His love for Hsien Loong, I think we all know, is very deep and he, the story went, when she was semi-comatose, at 10 o’clock when even we had dinner together, he’d say, ‘I’m sorry, I have to leave you now, but I’ve got to back home and read her favourite story books; because she was brain locked, she could hear but she couldn’t utter. So she could listen to his voice, she would recognise his voice and it’s quite amazing. A man who’s so busy will make sure that at 10 o’clock he’ll go back and read her her favourite books, and we’re all very touched by that.

His children — he’s not a physical person, he’s not a man who’ll hug you and so on, but his love for the children was also tremendous. He loves them, but he wants to make sure they’re well educated. That’s why each of them became a President’s Scholar. So genetically, they were well-endowed, and at the same time they studied very hard and the parents would oversee their education.

But the love for the children is very, how shall we say, not ostentatious. It’s very Eastern, not Western, in style. When Hsien Loong was ill, the tremendous anxiety ... in the parents was very obvious, but thank goodness he overcame his illness and that is another example.
He travelled extensively. What was his aim? What was he looking for? Mr Heng: He had such profound insights, many global leaders in politics, business and other fields always sought out his views. But he was not flattered ... by this attention to him. He would often wonder why particular articles ... were not random reading. He was one of the most profound readers and I think that is why he is able to connect disparate pieces of information. He is able to connect the dots and make it very coherent and he's able to then articulate it in a way that people can understand. That is how he has been keeping himself up to date, looking out for changes and evidence that his views may no longer be valid. He had a very young and lively mind at that age — he was 75 at that time. He was always revising his opinion, looking out for changes and anticipating what might be next.

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Mr Lee Hsien Yang on growing up with Mr Lee Kuan Yew and how he sometimes got his way.

I n what areas of your life was your father most involved in?
Mr Lee Hsien Yang: Well, I guess he was always busy with his work. And most of the sort of day-to-day caring was taken care of by my mother. And they would consult and I suppose at key points when one was looking at what schools to go to and what course to take, they would give advice and I think he was concerned that we were well educated and they saw that as the key to being — the key to life. You know that they wanted us to achieve what we could.

What was his involvement in your daily life?
Mr Lee: When I was little, he would be in the office and we would sometimes go to the Istana in the evenings and play, and he would be playing golf. We would often have dinner together. But usually at lunch only my mother would be at home.

And your fondest memory?
Mr Lee: I guess (that would be when) we had holidays, when we went away. Not very far, but to Fraser’s Hills and later on to Cameron Highlands. We used to wander around the golf course and play in the streams and we would sit around the fire place in the evenings.

What was it like at home — how would you see him as your father?
Mr Lee: You know, people think of him as being very stern and very strict. I don’t think we ever felt that at home. I think he himself felt that he had a very strict father who would often be quick to discipline the children, and so he did not do that with us.

I think that would be a surprise to most people. And the characteristic of your father that you liked best and you most admire?
Mr Lee: Well, he has a sense of integrity that is not just a question of what’s right or wrong but also doing in what he always does very prepared. Not necessarily what is obvious or not necessarily what is popular. And he’s prepared to say it, (whereas) many people, especially politicians, are politically correct.

What was it like for you when he said those things?
Mr Lee: Well, I suppose after a while you sort of get used to it. It’s not like if I knew how it was like not to be the PM’s son.

What was it like to be the PM’s son?
Mr Lee: I don’t know. I mean, you have to ask yourself the opposite question and I never knew that. So to me this was the normal and after a while I sort of got used to it.

He is a great believer of discipline, as we all know. What is like growing up with these high standards?
Mr Lee: Well, I don’t remember feeling that there was, you know, that we lived a regimented life. I think we all did a lot of things when we were young and had a full schedule. But ... I didn’t feel regimented or restricted.

Did you hear stories about him as a young boy? What did you hear about him as a young boy?
Mr Lee: No, I was the last child and I was born quite late in life. I think by the time I was born, I’m not sure how old he would have been but certainly in his late 30s and, you know, we didn’t talk about it.

What was Mr Lee like as a grandfather?
Mr Lee: Well, he would engage with the grandchildren sometimes. He listens to them. I think sometimes he takes on board what they have said. They don’t necessarily agree with him on things and you know are quite prepared to engage him.

How often do they get to see him?
Mr Lee: Well, when they are around we try and do Sunday lunch as a routine and we gather. And sometimes we just have lunch and sometimes we have a discussion.

Were there issues when you were growing up that remain in your mind as when you really had differing points of view between your father and yourself?
Mr Lee: I’m sure there were but I’m not sure I want to share them (laughs)!

If there were stories that you would like to share what would that be?

Mr Lee: Well I guess (one story would be that when) I wanted to go to postgraduate study, my parents were both quite keen that I should go to the East Coast of the United States and I thought, you know, it would be quite fun to go the West Coast. I guess I did what I wanted to do.

So in the end even though you may have had a different point of view you would sometimes get your way or mostly get your way?
Mr Lee: I think parents who are good manage to guide their children along without making them feel constrained.

Much has been said about the great relationship that your mum and dad had. If there was something that you would take from that relationship and bring to your own life what would that be?
Mr Lee: I supposed they had a partnership. It was not a relationship (that had) superiors and inferiors but in many senses he took counsel from my mother and respected her views. And I think they had a very open relationship. It’s sometimes difficult to do. ... Relationships take a lot of work to nurture and I think they did it very well.

As a son, how would you like Mr Lee Kuan Yew to be remembered?
Mr Lee: I guess you know people think of him as a very strict person but I think he would often take on board views that he didn’t necessarily agree on. Sometimes he would change his views on things. And you know I think that flexibility and ability to take into account new circumstances is perhaps something which is not fully recognised. And it’s a very difficult thing to achieve when you have been in a position of authority for a long time.

but when it came to being friendly to others and remembering friends of the past (with whom he had gone through difficult struggles ... he was quite prepared to spend his personal time helping this young man.

As his PPS, we had a slightly different relationship. He’s very nurturing and I inherited a great deal from discussing, in the meetings, discussing matters and issues ... at meetings. Often, after important meetings, he would ask to see me and ask what I learnt from the meetings. He would then explain to me why he said certain things in a certain way, his analysis of the meeting, what was at stake, what did we learn, what was useful for Singapore and how we might follow up on those meetings. So it was a learning process which I valued deeply.

Was it his way of testing your knowledge of these issues?
Mr Heng: Clearly he was testing if I appreciated what the meeting was about. At the same time, he’s also very open about hearing the views ... contrary to popular perception, he is very decisive, but very open-minded.

Once he had a meeting with officials on a very special project which the Prime Minister had asked him to oversee. Certain decisions were taken. Later on, I found out some new facts and those new facts changed our analysis of the situation and changed what we should be doing.

I was a very young officer then and had just worked with him for a few weeks ... I decided to write him a note to explain what the new facts meant and why we wanted to reconsider the decision to do something else and, to my surprise, he said: “Yes, that’s a good analysis and let us do this new course of action.”

I have observed him in many meetings where he’s extremely open-minded and he consults very widely and ... with people who he felt had a deep understanding of issues and has a feel for the ground. In all key issues, he would draw up a list of people who could provide insights into these issues and would have the creativity to propose new solutions.

Those meetings were always fascinating because you will see the to-ing and fro-ing of views. The people always came out a greater person ... with very good analysis, and you see how Mr Lee changed his mind after evaluating all the information. So I will say he is very open-minded.

He’s both very persuasive and persuasive, but you have to do so with very thorough analysis. It’s not an idea that is just at the seat of the pants. It has to be properly thought through and the implications have to be thought through and that’s why (there’s) the series of questions such as “So? What does this all mean?”

Is he a different man with his family?
Mr Heng: I find his love for Mrs Lee very moving. They have been married for many years and, on all the overseas trips, Mrs Lee will be at his side and they were a very loving couple. Mrs Lee was always very supportive in ways big and small. We enjoyed a number of private dinners where some of the staff would join the couple and it’s really wonderful to see them seated at the dinner table and they would sometimes tease each other over the choice of food or over funny things that happened during the day. So there’s a certain warmth and love that were very moving.

What about with his children?
Mr Heng: I don’t get to interact with them as much, but in terms of work he and I might follow up on those meetings. So it was a matter to be discussed and it was under Mr Lee’s purview, it went through officials like myself. It was a very proper relationship.
A Nation Mourns

LEE KUAN YEW
1923 – 2015