

# Preface

*Hong Kong, 8 September 2017*

This is my fifth book. The last three were academic publications that I wouldn't expect even my nearest and dearest to have the patience to plough through. So I wasn't hurt by my mother's underwhelmed expression when I told her last year that my latest scholarly book, *Hate Spin*, would be out in a few months. Somewhat apologetically, she said she wished I would write a book she could read, like my 2000 volume, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*.

It wasn't too much to ask, since I'd already resolved to treat myself to doing a new book of journalistic essays on Singapore when I had the time. I had a bank of blogs to draw from, and various unwritten essays swirling around in my head. But my pressing writing commitments were academic in nature, and not about Singapore. My mother's request was a timely reminder that I shouldn't get so totally sucked into my academic research that I forget my roots as a Singaporean journalist.

This volume is the result. Its title is self-explanatory. I am one of those Singaporeans who feel there's something missing in our national development. Ours is a middle-aged country with a mature economy but a political system that treats us like children: for too many decisions that should be ours to make, we are told what's good for us and we are ticked off if we answer back. In the following

collection of essays, I suggest that we are ready to grow up. More respect for different ways of thinking and more freedom to challenge authority will make us a stronger society.

Before you invest any more time in this book, though, I should be clear about what it's not. First, this book is not trying to be balanced. This is because I'm quite sure it won't be your only source of information and ideas about Singapore. I haven't written it for marauding aliens from another planet who will read just one guidebook per country before deciding which ones should be destroyed and which spared. In that life-and-death sci-fi scenario, I'd want to craft a Wikipedia entry that convinces our bad-tempered visitors that we are a uniquely lovable island with an exceptionally wise government. Thus, my prose would save my homeland from obliteration. But, back in the real world, I have no such illusions that this book will be the final word on Singapore. Instead, it's just one small intervention in a much larger conversation. That conversation is dominated by the viewpoints and values of the People's Action Party. It would be a waste of my time and yours to repeat those views. I focus instead on ideas that are less familiar in our national discourse, despite the risk that the entire project will therefore be dismissed as an anti-government rant.

Second, the book does not analyse specific government policies. You'll find little if any mention of the acronyms that dominate debates in Singapore: HDB, CPF, COE, MRT. I'm more interested in how we conduct those debates than in their content. I often find myself in broad agreement with policies. I also respect some of the PAP's core governance principles, like living within our means and not imposing too great a burden on future generations. My disagreements with the ruling party tend to be on a more meta level—especially its intolerance of diverse perspectives, which is not an attitude that's in sync with Singapore's needs as a complex, cosmopolitan city. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said that economic policies can always be worked out, but it's more important to "get the politics right". I agree, and believe we've gotten the politics wrong.

Third, this book is not a manifesto. Don't bother to skip to the concluding chapter in search of a list of recommendations. There is none. I'm aware that most Singaporeans are practical people, bottom-line minded. If you are that sort, you will be frustrated by this book's lack of a clear programme for change. These essays are meant to contribute to on-going discussions about our political future. I hope they will make you look at our society in new ways. But I'll leave it to readers to decide whether and how to translate any new insights into practical suggestions to make our incomplete nation more whole.



Many of us in the business of serious nonfiction writing fantasise about a world where everyone responds with open minds to words on the page. It shouldn't even matter who wrote them, because ideas should be assessed solely on their merit. That's the dream, and some journalists swear by it. My opinion-writing coach at Columbia Journalism School forbade us from using the first-person pronoun as a crutch, saying our arguments must stand on their own two feet. The self-indulgent "I" shouldn't have to come into the picture. I still sometimes hear the ghost of Judith Crist tut-tutting when I adopt the first-person voice.

But I've learnt from experience that readers do want to know the person behind the words—and, when it comes to political writing, not in a warm and welcoming way. They want to assess if the writer is sincere and trustworthy, or has some personal or partisan agenda. This is partly a psychological defence against the sheer volume of data that bombards us constantly. We need cognitive shortcuts to make snap judgements about whether to trust each message, and the easiest way is to suss out the messenger. Then there's the cynicism that surrounds politics. People (including politicians and officials themselves) don't believe there's much idealism in public affairs. They think most people who get involved

are probably in it for personal gain. Therefore, hidden motives are as relevant as surface meanings.

So let me address such questions head on. The most common question I get from people struck by how interested I am in politics is whether I have political ambitions. This is the easiest one to answer. No. I will never join a party because the freedom to learn is too important to me. That includes my right to change my mind and reach new conclusions that distance me from the views my team holds now, and from those I held yesterday. If I became a politician, I wouldn't last a month. Within that time, I'd be contradicting my own earlier statements based on what I'd just discovered; I'd be voicing agreement with opponents when I felt they were right; and I'd be the first to declare publicly that my party boss had said something silly. I am so obviously ill-suited to party politics that, to paraphrase Marx (Groucho, not Karl) I would refuse to join any party clueless enough to accept me as a member.

But I am certainly hardwired with an interest in political affairs. There are some people who are blessed with the capability of seeing dollar values everywhere. They look at their environment as if through an augmented reality app, but instead of Pokémon, they see floating assets and liabilities, profits and losses, depreciation rates, who's making money and who's losing it. I have a much less useful sixth sense. I can't help but notice power everywhere. I see the world in terms of how power is distributed, who has it, who doesn't, and why; I'm intrigued by the structures and ideologies that maintain that pattern, and the cracks and contradictions that may alter it. And especially when it comes to my country, I feel an urge to share my views. I'm like the many football fans who express strong opinions about their team's coaches and players, formations and tactics, but have no illusions about entering the field.

Another common question is more specific to my current situation. Many people know I'm in Hong Kong because political pressure cost me my previous job at a public university in Singapore. It's natural to wonder if my views are coloured by this experience. The perception problem cuts two ways: if I seem very

critical of the PAP, it must be because I'm bitter; if I sound charitable, maybe I'm trying to curry favour with the powers that be so I can return to Singapore. Either conclusion exaggerates the depth of my current predicament. Let's be clear: I'm not an exile. If I had wanted to remain in Singapore after I lost my job, I could have joined the private sector or gone freelance. I have friends in similar situations who have done just that, choosing to remain in Singapore with their aged parents, for example. As my older sister was able to look after my mother, I was free to emigrate with my wife and stay on my chosen career path as an academic. The main victims of our departure were our elderly mothers, who would have liked to have us around. On the flip side, we were both able to pursue our chosen vocations in a stimulating and meritocratic environment.

I am not one of those establishment types who spend most of their lives believing the system is rational and just—until it suddenly turns against them. Those former insiders get truly traumatised and embittered, because they don't know what hit them. In contrast, because of my vocation, intellectual interests and social circles, I've never been blind to the government's dark side. One of my early assignments as a rookie journalist was interviewing political prisoner Chia Thye Poh, exiled (literally, not just as a figure of speech) on Sentosa. I covered the opposition as a political reporter, studied alternative media as a scholar, got involved with civil society, and befriended a host of outsiders—detainees of Operation Cold Store and Operation Spectrum vintage, blacklisted academics, human rights activists, and censored artists. So I've always known that our system has claimed innocent victims, including patriots whose only crime was to care too much. My own victimhood did not break new ground; fixing careers is well within the system's traditional repertoire of responses to perceived challengers. Knowing all this, I do not feel morally entitled to think more lowly of the system than I did before just because it was my turn to get hurt by it.

If, on the other hand, you think I'm too generous to the government, no, it's not to suck up. I'm in academia mainly for

the freedom it offers to learn and explore. Therefore, it would be irrational to shackle my mind as the price of being a scholar of Singapore, which is the bargain that the system currently demands. It would make more sense to find some other way to make a living. Besides, transactional tactics probably wouldn't work: at this point, being nicer to the government wouldn't guarantee it would be nicer to me. My removal from my last job showed me that one's actual words and actions are no match for the vague suppositions of all-powerful groups of men with the power to act on their whims.



Indeed, I entertain no hope of persuading the current core leadership of anything. As I argue in this book, the climate for discussion is particularly hostile right now. Government leaders are convinced that they've already gotten the politics right, and that the challenge is to sustain, not transform, their model. After the 2011 election disappointment, they felt under siege. After the 2015 triumph, they feel no need to compromise. The PAP used to characterise itself as a Broad Church. Today, it is a fortress, quick to banish even members of its own establishment.

In the long term, though, an internally reformed PAP is still one of the best-case scenarios for Singapore. If this sounds like a pipe dream, well, it's no more so than an opposition party coming to power. Therefore, one key group of readers I hope this book connects with is younger and future members of the PAP and the administrative elite. I trust they will include Singaporeans of exceptional ability and open minds, with the determination to do right by their country. I hope they will come to their own independent convictions about how Singapore can respond to the challenges ahead, before they are straitjacketed by prevailing dogma. I don't expect such positive changes to materialise soon enough for me to benefit from them. But it would be nice to see Singapore begin to move in the right direction.

One person who won't be reading this book is my mother. She died on 8 September 2016, at the age of 86. Just as she had feared when I left for Hong Kong in 2014, I wasn't in Singapore the day she took her last breath. My mother had been the principal of a mission school and a model of propriety. She worried aloud that my political views would get me in trouble, but always out of care and concern, not conservatism. Going through her things after she died, I found a file full of selected articles by me and my wife. Among them were newspaper clippings reporting my run-in with the university authorities in Singapore, the support I received from petitioners, and my subsequent move to Hong Kong. She had kept them as proudly as bylined pieces she liked from my days at *The Straits Times*, and every issue of the handwritten family newspaper I launched when I was nine.

In the effusive tributes offered by her former staff and students, I was reminded of how she had, in her own quiet way, stood up for what she believed. Once, she refused to back down when her school board objected to the drama club's plan to stage a Sanskrit play, claiming it conflicted with the school's Christian identity. Caught between pleasing her employers and defending her teachers and students (as well as her own understanding of Christian values and Singapore's multiculturalism), she chose the latter. Maybe it's just a way to make myself feel better for not being by her side at the last, but when I reflect on my life choices, I comfort myself that I made them partly because I'm my mother's son.