

**THE WORKERS' PARTY YOUTH WING
MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD ESSAY COMPETITION 2020**

3rd Prize

**TO SURVIVE THE FUTURE, RETURN POWER TO THE PEOPLE
By Maxine Chen**

Abstract:

The biggest challenge that we need to address more seriously today is our government's inability to listen to, work with and tap on the diverse experiences and skills of all Singaporeans. Low-hanging policy changes I would push for to restore trust and enable better co-creation of solutions include broadcasting parliamentary sessions, removing the stipulation under the Public Order Act that one person can constitute an unlawful public assembly, enacting freedom of information laws to let the public ask for data held by government agencies, reverting to Single-Member Constituencies and disbursing Community Improvement Projects Committee funds fairly among town councils.

Singapore in 2020: A statistical snapshot

To identify Singapore's biggest future challenge, we have to look at where we are today. We are one of the safest places in the world to live in – we score exceptionally high on the Human Development Index (HDI), a measure that looks at expectancy, quality of education and per capita income.¹ We are perceived to be one of the least corrupt nations in the world.² We top the charts in ease of doing business and digital readiness and have fairly low taxes and levels of public debt. Our policies, largely formulated by our one-party dominant government, have certainly contributed to these remarkable achievements.

Yet we are the 35th most unequal country in the world in terms of family income – among Asia Pacific countries we are beaten only by Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, China and Malaysia.³ Our median household income per household member is S\$2,925 while our mean household income per member is S\$4,115, meaning that over half of our working population earns less than 71% of the national average income.⁴ The commitments that our government has put forth to address climate change as part of the Paris Agreement have been deemed Highly Insufficient by the research group Climate Action Tracker, alongside developing countries like Indonesia and South Africa. And we rank 158th of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index. Despite many having pointed them out and proposing solutions to them, these problems persist. This is due in large part to governance and policies as well.

¹ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/SGP.pdf

² <https://ourworldindata.org/corruption>

³ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html>

⁴ <https://www.tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/publicfacing/createDataTable.action?refId=12307>

For Singapore to have a fighting chance of thriving in this increasingly volatile world, the government has to tap on the diverse experiences and skills of **all** Singaporeans. It has failed to do so.

Thus, the big challenge we need to address more seriously is this: the government needs to listen to, and work with, people on the ground.

While there are no silver bullets for this, there are low-hanging policy changes that could help to ensure that the best ideas get surfaced – and that there will not be undue repercussions for anyone who wishes to contribute their skills towards building a better Singapore.

1. Broadcast parliamentary sessions live to the public

Offering end-to-end, unedited public service broadcasting of parliamentary sessions would come at practically zero added cost to Singapore but bring about a valuable benefit: it would show citizens that the government respects their rights to see what's going on in Parliament. This would start to rebuild the mutual respect needed for effective public-people collaboration. As noted during a conference convened by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, European Broadcasting Union and the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments in 2006, "[i]f we want to be part of a modern society we need to use every means available to open up parliaments to the public...Online broadcasting will...enable more people to watch and listen, allowing them to form their own opinions without media interference."³ Livestreaming Parliament could also boost the quality of parliamentary debates. A study on New Zealand's parliamentary broadcasting initiative, Parliamentary TV (PTV), found that MPs and their staff were less rowdy, became more media-savvy and raised more parliamentary questions after the introduction of PTV, and that they considered PTV a valuable tool for their work.⁵

The government has argued that there is no need for parliamentary broadcasts because, among other reasons, footage of speeches is made available via CNA within three hours of the event.⁶ It is precisely the media's right to edit the footage and parcel them out as highlights that prevents people from getting the full picture of the parliamentary debate. A recurring theme in the said 2006 conference was that parliamentary proceedings should be streamed live, uncontrolled and "unedited gavel to gavel". Anything short of this would render any perception of transparency moot.

Since the government already has the ability to capture and publish footage, it would not be logistically taxing to livestream this footage in full. Today, at least 90 other countries offer parliamentary livestreams, and as a leader in digital transformation, we no longer have an excuse not to join them.⁷

⁵ https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Effective-or-Affectation-Televising-Parliamentary-Proceedings-and-Its-Influence-on-MPs%E2%80%99_Behaviour.pdf

⁶ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/live-parliament-sessions-dont-add-transparency-risk-turning-sittings-form-theatre-grace>

⁷ <https://www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2018/01/23/how-many-countries-broadcast-their-parliamentary-assembly-sessions-live/>

2. Remove the stipulation under the Public Order Act that one person can constitute a public assembly or procession

Our Public Order Act (Cap 257A, 2012 Rev. Ed.) stipulates that a demonstration by a single person can constitute an unlawful public assembly or public procession. This March, 18-year-old Wong J-Min took photos of herself holding up signs that said, "PLANET OVER PROFIT", "SCHOOL STRIKE 4 CLIMATE" and "ExxonMobil KILLS KITTENS & PUPPIES". Separately, 20-year-old Nguyen Nhat Minh – also acting alone – took a selfie featuring a placard that read, "SG IS BETTER THAN OIL @fridays4futuresg". Both individuals were investigated by the police under the Public Order Act.⁸ As of 2018, people investigated under the Public Order Act have included a couple who wore anti-death penalty t-shirts at a Yellow Ribbon run⁹ and an artist who walked alone from Hong Lim Park to the Parliament House as part of a performance art piece.¹⁰ Using the Public Order Act to quell individuals employing non-violent means to express rational concerns about social and environmental issues goes against the grain of common sense. Reforming our public order laws would be a first step towards restoring public trust, encouraging people to express themselves without fear and lend their experiences and talents towards co-creating solutions with the government.

3. Allow the public to ask for data held by government agencies

As many journalists and academics have pointed out, there is significant information asymmetry between the Singaporean government and the public.¹¹ Enacting some form of a freedom of information law could better equip the public to make important decisions about their jobs, lives and future. As an example, government websites state that the mean gross monthly income from work among full-time employed Singaporeans is S\$4,563.¹² With a Freedom of Information Act in place, anyone could fill in a form and ask the government about the national mean gross monthly income in relation to:

- Part-time employed residents,
- Unemployed residents,
- Singaporeans, Permanent Residents and migrant workers as an aggregate, and so on.

The relevant government agency would then be required to respond to these queries. It would **not** be obliged create any new information that did not already exist – it would simply be required to respond to requests for information within a stipulated time. Having better access to government-collected data – data stemming from the public in the first place – would help NGOs, academics, journalists, students and many other stakeholders make better decisions and amplify the social good that they have been doing.

Today, 129 countries have enacted freedom of information laws, and we could leverage on extensive research on the costs and benefits of these existing laws to design a cost-effective framework for Singapore.¹³

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/climate-change-activists-test-strict-singapore-protest-laws-200409082537461.html>

⁹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/yellow-ribbon-run-anti-death-penalty-t-shirts-police-investigate-11914002>

¹⁰ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/illegal-procession-activist-refuses-to-pay-fine-gets-jail>

¹¹ <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/let-us-have-data-for-breakfast-together/?fbclid=IwAR0EfoqjhWy3Flvh0MGhJy0a6mX3FhqV5B9opoEJAXAGy0AMW6lfhKsfTFU>

¹² <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Income-Summary-Table.aspx>

¹³ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/cost-of-foi.pdf>

Restore the electorate's right to vote for leaders who represent them

With Singapore's electoral innovations, citizens are hindered from voting for leaders they support. Reversing these peculiarities would lead to greater mutual respect and better collaboration.

First, revert to Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs). When Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) were introduced in 1988, the key stated reason was to ensure minority representation in Parliament. We could do this by mandating that a certain number of SMC seats be occupied by a candidate of a minority race. With an SMC system, people would have a clear choice of who to vote for. They would not be made to elect leaders who didn't represent their views just because the GRC system forces them to do so.

Next, disburse Community Improvement Projects Committee (CIPC) funding fairly among town councils. Between 2015 and 2018, the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council received S\$363,000 in CIPC funds, or 0.25% of the S\$146,300,000 received in total by town councils during this time.¹⁴ This means that the town councils headed by People's Action Party (PAP) MPs received 99.75% of public funding meant to improve "basic infrastructural facilities, recreational facilities and communal amenities."¹¹

Seeing non-PAP wards receive negligible funding for an initiative purported to benefit all residents creates a perception in voters that they will lose out if they vote for opposition parties – irrespective of the parties' merit. Again, this distorts the citizen's ability to vote for a leader that represents their voices.

Should I have a seat at the table as a minister or an MP, I would set and share personal goals regarding the parliamentary questions I ask and policy changes I propose as a direct result of public consultations. I would make sure to use social media and livestreams to share learnings and data. And I would form alliances with likeminded MPs to push for the changes mentioned above.

I hope that these reforms would start to transform Singapore into a place where the anyone can contribute towards creating a better community regardless of race, class or wealth. One where seasoned leaders of colour drive our solutions to overcome racial discrimination, and where we will put in place systemic actions to stop global warming, informed by the younger generation, who will face its consequences. These solutions exist. Let's dismantle the policies standing in the way of us embracing them.

¹⁴ <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/municipal-projects-which-town-council-got-how-much-in-cipc-funds-090005428.html>