At the recently concluded Young Singaporeans Conference (YSC) 2010, organised by IPS on 11 November 2010 at the Amara Sanctuary Hotel, Sentosa, participants and speakers addressed issues pertinent to Singapore’s survival socially as well as economically. A key theme was the notion of the Singaporean identity.

The term “identity” refers to a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognised as a member of a group, and is a term of key importance to the nation-state. The state is both a political and geographical entity, and the nation a cultural and/or ethnic entity with a tightly knit group of people who share a common identity. The most noticeable characteristic of a nation-state is the degree to which nation-states use the state as an instrument of national unity in economic, social and cultural life.

The creation of a uniformed national identity is thus crucial, and when implied unity is absent, the nation-state often tries to create it through the use of state policy. The promotion of a uniform national language through language policy and the standardisation of educational curriculum in schools are examples of such instances.

Common identities in the things people associate themselves to, are also important. Taking the form of symbols, icons, spaces and places which are characteristic of a people’s traditions and practices, such associations allow citizens the ability to feel connected to the nation. For instance, it has been argued that France’s bid towards getting its cuisine recognised as a unique form of intangible cultural heritage and included on the UNESCO World Heritage list, is merely a display of the country’s arrogance which would only encourage the revival of old nationalist feuds. Yet, the specific methods and techniques required in the preparation of French Cuisine, and the association of certain food and wine which are specifically French, can be seen as a representation of the French way of life. The French acknowledge this association and celebrate the “gastronomic meal of the
French” as a tradition, giving themselves a common identity they as a community are able to relate to.

With the vast transformation of Singapore's physical and social landscape, concerns over the loosening of Singaporeans' sense of belonging to their country have been raised. The period preceding Singapore's celebration of its independence, National Day, sees Singaporeans most vocal about their concerns over the future of their social fabric. Local newspapers see sharp rises in the number of articles it publishes on topics such as loyalty, belonging and commonness amongst Singaporeans. Compounded with an increased inflow of immigrants and a growing number of Singaporeans going abroad for employment, study and retirement, the meaning and identity of a true Singaporean, is questioned.

During the second Session of the YSC - Sharing a Common Identity, speakers highlighted the difference between the creation and evolution of a shared identity. They questioned what it really means to a Singaporean, whether an identity could be created, and whether Singapore was willing to venture into uncharted waters and be the author of its own narrative. Having constantly looked at other nations’ success and failures and adapted its strategies to emerge victorious in both its conquests and in solving its own challenges, was Singapore willing to adopt a paradigm shift in its outlook from being purely economical, and accept that the Singapore Spirit has to be nurtured based on bonds, significance, and associations the citizenry had amongst themselves and also its government?

Singapore’s ideological history has been shaped largely by changing societal needs. In the immediate post-independence years, social policy in Singapore was determined by what the leaders of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) believed to be the best course of action for an emerging Singapore. Their vision was that of a robust and rugged society where the values of hard work and self-reliance were highly valued. The governing principle was meritocracy. Once Singapore achieved a relatively high level of economic and social development in the 1990s, concern was expressed about the harsh edge of meritocracy and competitiveness. The widening distinction between the haves and have-nots caused gaps between different segments of society to increase, resulting in the fear that there might be some who would be left behind.

The lack of a common unique culture to bind its citizens together had been pointed out, resulting in the argument that a Singaporean identity had not yet gelled, and unless

---

1 For more on the "gastronomic meal of the French" AND France's bid for a spot on UNESCO's World Heritage List, please visit: http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2032377,00.html
checked, would result in society falling victim to a changing external climate. There was therefore, a need to identify common key values in the hope that all the communities which make up multiracial Singapore, would gradually develop more distinctively Singaporean characteristics over time.

The Shared Values\(^2\), five statements by which the Government hoped would help bind its citizens together as a nation, was thus introduced. Conceived in 1988 by the then first Deputy Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong, the Shared Values incorporated key common values that all racial groups and faiths in Singapore could subscribe to and live by, attempting to preserve the various group’s Asian identities in a period of globalisation. Outside of these Shared Values, each community was still encouraged to practice its own values as long as they were not in conflict with national ones. The main theme underlying the set of Shared Values emphasised communitarian values and reflected Singapore's heritage. The nation and the community are identified in three out of its five values, with one value highlighting the role of the family and the last one centred on the individual. The five values also stressed the secularity of the state and its religious neutrality.

Yet, identity is associated to certain aspects of a culture which are taken as symbolic of an entire nation and which resonate with individuals from all walks of life. Individuals need to believe in such characteristics before they can share them, or as Benedict Anderson puts it, be part of an “imagined community”. Anderson describes nations as “imagined” because members ‘never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’\(^3\).

Habits such as shopping, eating, being “kiasu” and speaking Singlish are very much seen as uniquely Singaporean traits. However, if a person embodies such characteristics, are they automatically considered Singaporean? Are the five Shared Values enough to bind Singapore together as a nation? What exactly is Singapore’s national ideology?

---

2 The five Shared Values are:
- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

A speaker at the YSC argued that identity is emotional and not rational. It cannot be taught or forced without belief. He added that patience is also needed before a truly Singaporean identity, one all Singaporeans are comfortable with, could be developed. Additionally, another speaker pointed out that the Singapore Spirit, though seemingly diluted due to the influx of foreigners and the pervasiveness of increasingly idealistic young, should be allowed to flourish in its own unique way. Comparing the development of a Singaporean identity to the benchmarks set in the development of another country’s national ideologies, should not be held as the yardstick for Singapore to measure up to. Having an open mind is key in allowing Singapore, a unique multiracial society, find its own distinguishing national identity, he said.

Encouraging civic engagement amongst the citizenry has been suggested as one way Singapore could foster a more distinct national identity. The combined efforts of individuals targeted at making a difference in the lives of their community members, will result in an eventual amalgamation of knowledge, skills, values and motivations. Furthermore, the sense of personal responsibility individuals feel in upholding their obligations as part of any community will deepen an individual’s bond to that community. If Singapore were to let this uniquely Singaporean way of contributing to society flourish, a shared identity, one which the entire nation could identify with, could then result.

Still, a sense of belonging amidst a new emerging environment, internally and externally needs to be inculcated. The emotional sensibilities of Singaporeans need to be addressed before attachment, loyalty and belonging can be gained. Perhaps, civic engagement, an avenue for individuals to experience and develop a common shared identity is the answer. But, is Singapore as a nation, ready for this new chapter in its development? That remains to be seen.

*****

More on the proceedings of the YSC will be published in the next edition of the IPS Newsletter.