

RATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

KUIK  
SHIAO-YIN

The  
Power of a  
People



EPIGRAM

# The Power of a People

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THIS PARLIAMENTARY SPEECH  
WAS DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE  
ON 17 MAY 2018 IN THE DEBATE  
ON PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB'S  
FIRST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

**T**wo months ago, Tembusu College Rector Tommy Koh invited me to speak on a panel at Tembusu College discussing Singapore's hopes for the next prime minister. The College had also selected a student leader to speak on behalf of his cohort. To prepare, this student leader had spent a whole month running focus groups and surveying his peers. That night, he read out an open letter

addressed to the future prime minister that summarised the themes emerging from his research. Professor Koh (who chaired the discussion) and the rest of us panellists recognised it as the best speech of the night. You might have already seen that speech online: it went viral. Three weeks ago, those precocious students hand-delivered sixteen letters to my office, one for each of the fourth-generation leaders, hoping that I would bring them to Parliament on their behalf. I will keep that promise and pass these to the Clerk for the team.

Many have already weighed in on the letter online. Some praise it for being inspiring. Others slam it as naïve. Whatever your inclination, it is worth a read because it reflects the perspective

of a new generation of voters that will be making themselves heard, regardless, at the ballot boxes in the next few years.

I was nominated into Parliament to give insight into the youths' concerns. I will thus orient what is probably my last major speech around the three big questions in the students' letter, for these questions resonate with themes brought up by Madam President in her President's Address last week:

The students' first question for their future prime minister is, "How much do you trust us?" This echoes Madam President's concern about the future leadership's ability to listen to and trust and work with the people, particularly those with dissenting views. Their second and third questions

**“Do you see us as equal partners, leaders you want to empower, or as citizens you need to govern? What kind of role do you trust us to play?”**

for their future prime minister are, “How will you unite Singapore?” and “What is Singapore to you?” This ties in with Madam President’s call for the leadership to deal with social inequality and cast a more inclusive future vision that can “fire up[...]the spirit of young Singaporeans”. I will explore the questions and make suggestions that I hope are respectful enough of Madam President’s call for bold changes versus marginal tweaking.

First, “How much do you trust us?” In their letter, the students shared their uncertainty about whether their voices in the public square would be welcome if they did not share pro-establishment views. They wrote, “Do you see us as equal partners, leaders you want to empower, or as citizens you need to govern? What kind of role do

you trust us to play? We are prompted in school to think critically and voice our opinions, but we see some naysayers being treated negatively. We are encouraged to push boundaries[...]yet those of us who write articles online are reminded to respect existing boundaries. We are taught it is important to learn our history, but are certain narratives preferred over others?”

The youths believe that having dissenting views doesn't mean they are any less passionate for Singapore's good or less loyal to Singapore's interests. They speak out because they care and want to see their leaders model curiosity and compassion in their engagement with divergent views. And, lest we brush aside these dissenting young people as just part of a “vocal minority”

**My own sense of the ground...  
is that there are more people  
who have dissenting views  
about what's going on in our  
country than government-  
commissioned opinion  
polls reveal.**





Together with two founding partners, Kuik Shiao-Yin runs The Thought Collective, a group of purpose-driven businesses that aim to build up social and emotional capital. The Collective trains and coaches people in the social and emotional competencies needed to collaborate, sense new ways forward and create cultural change for our cities. It also helps organisations design new approaches and strategic solutions for stakeholder outreach and engagement.

In Singapore, Shiao-Yin served as a two-time nominated member of parliament and advises the boards and committees she sits on in developing youth talent (\*SCAPE), nurturing cross-cultural harmony (OnePeople.sg) and strengthening national identity (Founder's Memorial Committee).

## ABOUT THE SERIES

Rational Conversations by Epigram Books is a series of essays and speeches by prominent Singaporeans on issues close to their heart.

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“

We are not  
Lee Kuan Yews...  
and we need not  
pretend to be. Those  
times are past. Our  
time is now.

”

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