

Devadas Krishnadas's introspective look at Singapore during this inflection point in its history is first and foremost, a call to Singaporeans to develop an informed political consciousness and participate in the political process by one of their countrymen. To a non-Singaporean, it is an insightful view into an intriguing and successful society. The writing is engaging, the breadth of topic is expansive, and the arguments thought-provoking and persuasive. A must read for anyone interested in the tapestry of Asia.

– Tom Sass, Captain, US Navy (Retired), Ph.D.
Managing Director, HFR Platform, HFR Asset Management, LLC

This collection of writings by Devadas Krishnadas, a rising public intellectual, touch on critical contemporary issues affecting Singapore, which is at an inflexion point in its journey. Written in a crisp and succinct style, Devadas dissects and presents these issues clearly. Essential reading for concerned Singaporeans and those who are interested in this strategic nation-state.

– Nizam Ismail
Civil activist and partner in a Singapore-based law firm

In *Sensing Singapore*, Devadas Krishnadas has written a book that is a must-read for all policymakers and citizens. As public and private sector leaders struggle with developing the best possible futures for their societies, this book urges them to give serious thought to how to build a constructive path forward. The challenge is to do so despite the daily onslaught of tactical issues that garner so much attention. *Sensing Singapore* focuses on strategic issues, and thus offers a wealth of insights that will help leaders make the best possible choices. With its clear, sensible, and accessible insights, every policy maker and citizen must take to heart the arguments outlined in *Sensing Singapore*.

– William C. Martel, Associate Professor of International Security,
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Medford, MA

Devadas Krishnadas has his finger on the pulse of Singapore. Writing incisively and persuasively, his keen insight and imaginative foresight are of immense value as our nation's story continues to unfold.

– Aaron Lee, lawyer and poet

The adage “Learn the past, live the present, lead the future” richly comes alive in Devadas Krishnadas's insightful and thought-provoking collection of essays. *Sensing Singapore* weaves together a rich tapestry of Singapore's past, present and possible futures. All who care about Singapore, whatever personal ideological leanings, should read this book.

– Dr Jeremy Lim
Principal Consultant, Insights Health Associates

Sensing Singapore is crisp, enjoyable and thought-provoking. Devadas's writings cut through the fog of rhetoric and deal head-on with the tensions, challenges and trade-offs faced by global cities like Singapore in an increasingly super-charged globalized world.

– Alvin Sheng Hui Tan
Robert and Renée Belfer International & Global Affairs Fellow (2008-2010)
Belfer Centre for Science & International Affairs
Harvard University

SENSING SINGAPORE

REFLECTIONS IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Sensing Singapore: Reflections in a Time of Change

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DEVADAS KRISHNADAS

FOR AJAY

“O, GOD, THY SEA IS SO GREAT AND
MY BOAT SO SMALL”

— *BRETON FISHERMAN'S PRAYER*

CONTENTS

Foreword by K. Shanmugam 11

Note by Nicole Seah 13

Introduction

Beginnings 17

Reasons 20

The Necessary Role of Public Intellectuals 27

Pivoting

Pivoting 33

Surviving Change 35

You, I and Us: The Politics of Birth 40

Mind and Matter 47

A Future of Our Own Making 53

Looking Outwards

Looking Outwards 61

Crying Wolf 64

Shall We Pivot? The Dance of Giants 69

Divergence 76

Wise Up 84

Asia's Prospects 89

Short Actions, Long Trends

Short Actions, Long Trends 97

Not Being Hazy About the Haze 100

Time to Think Big and Bold 103

From Boom to Blowing Bubbles 108

Raising the Sea of Mobility 116

Doing the Right Thing 122

Give Your Better Self a Try 127

Winds of Change

Winds of Change 133

Minding Our Ps and Qs 135

Seeing the Invisible Gorillas: The Politics
of the Population White Paper Debate 140

White and Blue: A Tale of Two Papers on Population 146

It's a Vision Thing 152

Indirect Approaches

Indirect Strategies 159

'Triple A(ged)' Standard 161

Making Ends Meet: Financing the
Future of Singapore 165

The Singapore Romancing of Quality Growth 172

Shift All Gears, Not Just Some 179

The Growth of a Quality Society 185

Finding the Future

Finding the Future 193

The Need for Good News 195

Lessons in Political Leadership 199

An Extraordinary Life 206

Beyond the National Day Rally: 3 Shifts in Singapore's Political Society	210
Looking Back, Moving Ahead	
Looking Back, Moving Ahead	219
Let's Not Riot Online About a Riot	221
No Longer Politics As Usual	225
One Society, Two Questions	230
New Beginnings	
New Beginnings	237
Bibliography	240
Index	244
About the Author	251

FOREWORD

We live in an age of information overload. We have seen a proliferation of news platforms and are spending more time sifting through a dizzying array of media presented in various forms across multiple platforms. As such, quality writing becomes even more important.

Devadas Krishnadas has been a regular columnist setting out his views on a variety of issues. He is one of the rare few who tell it like it is. His columns are invariably thoughtful and honest.

Devadas has established himself as a serious thinker on social issues. His experiences from his time in the civil service coupled with a sharp mind and a sense for what is practical allow him to sensibly critique public policy and offer insightful suggestions. In fact, Devadas is himself a prime example of a thinker who is able to grasp the importance of balanced critique.

As a keen observer of public policy, Devadas usually looks at issues from multiple perspectives. He is able to understand the viewpoints of the other key stakeholders. He is not held hostage by political or economic ideologies. He is not swayed by populist sentiment. And he is intellectually honest.

We need more of such public intellectuals. They champion reasoned debate and offer feasible solutions on issues of strategic importance. They ensure that debates remain grounded on logic, reason and circumstance. Facts over emotions, as Devadas rightly puts it himself.

Devadas's book provides an objective discourse on the many key issues Singapore faces. The compilation of articles are organised by issues and topics into different chapters. That makes for easy reading as you can move quickly to topics of your own choice. Despite the complexity of some of the issues discussed here, Devadas is able to put across his views succinctly and more importantly, simply. As a result, the commentaries are easy to read.

The book provides a concise summary of the issues that confront Singapore. Whether you agree with him or not, Devadas always provides well-argued and interesting food for thought.

I congratulate Devadas on authoring an engaging and absorbing sensing of Singapore.

K. SHANMUGAM
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINISTER FOR LAW, SINGAPORE

NOTE

It can be safely said that the gradual ascent of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs allowed for the uprising of social discourse in Singapore. Particularly in the lead-up to the general elections in 2011, conversations that citizens had regarding the state of policies in Singapore were mostly hushed behind close doors and largely regarded as taboo.

As the power of the masses has proven, the ability to influence and shape public opinion on a broadbased scale online has coaxed the government away from its top-down approach. With that, the policy decisions that have been rolled out in recent times signal a more consensus-based direction, or as some might say, bordering on the inevitable rise of populism.

On both ends of the spectrum with supporters and critics alike, many have taken the task of carefully dissecting what this bodes for the future of the strength of Singapore's economy, the cohesiveness of its people, the state of its politics, and perhaps, the long-term future of the ruling People's Action Party, which has enjoyed a considerably tame route to electoral success despite Singapore's declaration as a state of democracy.

This mission is crucial for the renewal of the city-state's repeated successes as we look into the future. The old guard of the PAP overtook the country amidst challenging circumstances and, in defying the short-term social and political developments in a naturalised democracy, engineered Singapore into the economic behemoth it is today.

Singapore has been able to ride on the success of its highly-lauded reputation for being an economic success story, and it has no doubt reaped immeasurable benefits for its people. The irony then is that, it is this very success that has created the opportunities and laid the stage for many to ask, what is next?

While the rest of the global economy finds itself in turmoil, Singapore has placed itself on a relatively secure plane. But as a populace that has been constantly fed the discourse of the need to stay ahead of the curve, and never to rest on our laurels, the question on the minds of citizens and the government remain similar – what is next?

As politicians find themselves unable to communicate the entirety of their intent with regards to policy decisions, due to factors such as ideological affiliation, stakeholder concerns, electoral favour, personal scrutiny, or the general need to appeal to a broader base of the population, perhaps this is where the role of the public intellectual comes in to fill the gap.

It is my hope that this book and mission undertaken by Devadas will pave the way for several more intellectuals of my generation to step forward. That this new generation will grow in their contribution to the ongoing conversation which the country needs in order to strengthen its social foundation in the years ahead.

The relentless questioning of each of our steadfast beliefs will force us out of our comfort zones. The step that we take out into the unknown together will serve to further strengthen the anti-fragility and resilience of this country.

That, in itself, can only be nothing short of a positive step ahead for all of us.

NICOLE SEAH

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

BEGINNINGS

This book is a paradox. It is at its core a very personal, intellectual and emotional journey over a period of a year. However, much of its content has already seen light in the public domain in the form of commentaries and speeches.

It is organised in rough but not complete chronological order covering observation, thinking and writing over the period from August 2012 to September 2013. To render coherency to the major thrusts of writing in the book, it is organised into nine thematic sections.

While it is mostly concerned with Singapore, it is my hope that the book will be of interest to a much wider community other than Singaporeans. This would be for two important reasons. First, Singapore is a strategic global city and its future should be of concern to foreign, security and economic policy circles at the international level. Second, the perspective of the future of wider Asia is important from the vantage point of such a strategic city as it is useful to both public and private actors internationally.

However, first and foremost, I hope my fellow Singaporeans and those who have come to share in the making of its future will

find meaning and purpose amidst the changes that are rushing towards this tiny, exceptional island.

Because it is has been a personal journey even if publicly so, I thought it appropriate to include in this book my motivations, which can be found in the following chapter. I have also included in the introduction section a chapter on the role of public intellectuals. This is because it is as self-cast in such a role that I undertook all of the public writing which has now been brought together in this book.

In the year-long journey of personal discovery, I had the benefit of having good friends and the joy of making new ones.

I would like to thank TODAY and Mothership.sg for permission to reproduce the writing I placed on their platforms.

Yvonne Lim, Associate Editor of TODAY, proved herself a sympathetic editor of commentaries.

Lee Kok Fatt, Tan Kiat How and Tan Tin Wee, who were distinguished colleagues from my time in the civil service, are high quality public servants who daily serve to promote the progress of the country and well-being of the people. Their friendship and encouragement often made the difference between persistence and despair.

My colleague, Tan Ling Yin, provides invaluable assistance in the operation of my firm – Future-Moves – a risk management consultancy. Having her work alongside me in the arduous task of establishing a new business has given me the mental and emotional space to continue to undertake my public writing and ultimately to complete this book.

Thomas Sass, a good friend and classmate, was a steadfast supporter when things seemed gloomy. Gerard Pennefather, who has been a stalwart supporter during the most challenging of times. Dr Jeremy Lim, a source of encouragement and inspiration as he

too, has travelled the journey of writing for the public.

And an old friend, Harry Liew Kim Siong, of whom I could always rely on, not to pull his punches but always to pour another dram to float our sorrows. Sadly, he passed away in 2013. I am sure it would have been a much better product if he had lived to give me the full measure of his wisdom.

I am grateful to Minister Shanmugam for graciously providing the foreword and to Nicole Seah for her note.

My parents, long suffering from the strange choices made by their eldest son, have my undying love and gratitude for their patience and support. Of Ailing, my wife, I can say no more than without the blessing of her company, I would be less than nothing.

Finally, because this book is ultimately about the future of an exceptional country, it is inspired and dedicated to an exceptional little boy – my son, Ajay. I hope he will grow up in a country he is proud of and which he will make better still.

Despite the benefit of the love, wisdom and support of so many, all and any responsibility for the words on the pages that follow are mine.

I trust that the reader will follow my journey of personal exploration with an open mind and understanding heart.



REASONS

I have always considered that amongst the 5 W's – why, what, whom, when and where – the “Why?” was the singular most important query to satisfy. If that question had a good answer then the rest would be a matter of tactics. So the only strategic question is about intent.

After a career of varied public service, I had increasingly begun to ask myself “Why?” about public policy as well as political reality. I had started out in the Singapore Police Force convinced that I would spend my career wearing the noble blue in the service of the people. After all, when I signed on, it was as a pensionable officer – the last of a breed.

Successful police work is largely about the possession of three qualities – first, an ability to function under conditions of uncertainty, second, the ability to sense-make with limited information, and third, the capacity to make independent decisions with only imperfect information available. Police officers are also institutional sceptics – this is because people rarely tell them the whole truth. They typically are also good observers of their environment.

This same bundle of qualities turned out to be equally applicable to futures thinking. When I left the police force after my second

command tour, I moved into the futures and strategic planning fields. While at the Ministry of Home Affairs, I had acquired deep expertise in security and rehabilitation polices. I then moved to the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) where I met a very special type of civil servant. MCYS officers are caring, understanding and emotive – they are also deeply passionate about the welfare of others.

It was an experience of personal growth for me to work with such humane and warm colleagues who strove to see the best in even the worst of characters. In contrast, the natural cynicism that comes from years of policing experience typically meant that one effortlessly and always saw the worst in even the best characters. My experience at MCYS was essentially a rebalancing in my perspective of human nature. Such a rebalancing was critical to put my thinking of the future on an even keel of judgement.

After establishing a new unit at MCYS called the Strategy Group, I was transferred to the Ministry of Finance (MOF) to pioneer a new whole-of-government (WoG) strategic planning function which would be toggled with a capability for futures thinking. At MOF, it was once again a new and refreshing experience. The best-educated and most motivated young officers in the civil service were concentrated on one floor to work on the entire spectrum of public policies. It was at MOF that I encountered my most enlightening experiences in policy making.

The enlightenment came from being exposed to a wide range of policies and becoming adept at working in the complex machinery of the government. As we worked on coordinating fiscal planning, budget formulation and the complex interplay between land, population and the economy, one could not help but grow in knowledge and ability. Also, the opportunity to interact with the best minds in the public service and with arguably the most able and

most driven political and public service leaders in our system was a boon which I never took for granted.

There were, however, three risks about policy making in the Civil Service that have proved sobering.

My experience at MOF was about learning to use data and also finding out how data reliance could be risky. Making data-based policy is an important and virtuous quality for a government to possess. However, data becomes dangerous when it is perceived through a framework of theory. When we see the world through theory – in the case of MOF, this meant economic theory – we impute meaning and value judgements into all evidence. When this happens, we have a tendency to fit facts to theory rather than theory to facts. This revealed the human tendency, especially amongst the highly intelligent, to assume that their world view was a given and hence, incontestable by alternatives.

The second risk is the tendency to over-simplify reality. The same youthful vitality which the hard-driving young officers exhibited on a daily basis proved both useful and problematic. Having a Ferrari engine of intellect wedded together with limited real world experience could make public policy seem like a video game. There was an inherent tendency to look for direct cause and effect relationships. This required making the assumption that reality could be highly simplified and was fundamentally knowable.

Once a desired effect had been identified, the right lever would be manipulated till the effect was achieved. Conversely, when an undesirable effect was noted, effort was made to detect the cause and remedial action taken. Naturally, reality is rarely so simple or discernible. This exposed a second danger not uncommon to policy making systems which was to over-simplify problems. A particular expression of this in MOF was the proclivity for micro-adjustments to policy and the so-called “targeted” policy approach where

policy “interventions” would be expected to ‘target’ a population or economic segment – precisely like how so many precision guided weapons are lasered in on a target – using charts and calculations.

The third risk is an excessive emphasis on planning. Singapore has a well-deserved reputation for being a superbly planned city. Over time, our fixation with planning has led us into more and more detailed coordination extending further and further into the future. This is motivated by a well-intended objective of achieving predictability, efficiency and coordination of State action. In the 2000s, as has been admitted publicly by political leaders, the civil service fell behind the planning curve as the population grew aggressively through immigration. Its planning assumptions had also been shaken repeatedly by a series of unforeseen economic shocks – the 1997 Asian Dollar Crisis, the 2001 Dot Com bust, the 2003 SARS crisis and the 2008-9 Global Financial Crisis.

It is ironic that the experience of these unforeseen shocks and the planning lag in recent years has led only to a renewed emphasis on central planning. This in itself is not a bad thing – it has indeed several benefits. What is less commendable is to see the future exclusively through the lens of a planning impulse as it means leaving less cognitive room for uncertainty and the unforeseen. It also undervalues the unknown and the new which are critical characteristics for economic vitality through entrepreneurship – a quality Singapore sorely lacks. Too much forward planning also involves making *a priori* assumptions about the future and the application of a theoretical framework for forecasting. The Population White Paper is the ultimate expression of both the forward planning impulse and implicit theoretical framework through which the public service interprets the future.

My time in public service enveloped the commencement of the new century, all the aforementioned economic shocks, the

epoch initiating 9/11 attacks and the dramatic transformational effects of the population augmentation strategy. It also spanned the early stages of the internet and mobile phone age to its current pervasiveness and convergence of platforms. Singapore politics was affected by all these developments. Three general elections, one contested presidential election and two by-elections served as occasions for barometric measures of public sentiment about their political reality. However, all of the writing in this book was done whilst I was working to establish a beachhead in the private sector through my firm, Future-Moves. Being outside of the 'system' was invaluable in giving me not only freedom to express my thoughts publicly but also the perspective of distance.

Over the past decade, there has been an erosion of public confidence in the incumbent government. There is a pervasive, even if only intuitive, sense that layers of the community are becoming estranged from one other, that the government has become enamoured with wealth and the wealthy, and all the while the large scale rapidity of change in both the physical and human environment has left Singaporeans strangers in their own land. Under these conditions, it is not difficult to descend into a negative spiral of perception about the future of the country and to attribute evil intentions to decision makers.

My writing was prompted by the desire to find a way to avoid falling into this negative spiral but to investigate a more constructive path forward. The articles follow Singapore's political and economic journey over an eventful year, from August 2012 to September 2013. In one sense, they form a running commentary of unfolding events. The common threads that string the articles together as a coherent narrative form an intensely personal intellectual framework of thinking.

This framework of thinking can be reduced to six basic convictions.

First, that the concept of the nation and that of any particular political party are not synonymous. Hence, a discussion about the future of the nation is not only possible, but necessary, to be distinct from a discussion about the future of any particular political party or the government of the day.

Second, the responsibility of the government to the care and security of its citizens is greater than the converse but the responsibility of the citizens to the nation is supreme.

Third, that economic imperative is a means and not an end to national survival. National continuity is a higher order aspiration to which purely economic considerations must be subordinate. Only then will we get our bearings right about what matters most and work our way downwards to lower-order challenges.

Fourth, enlightened governance is premised on an enlightened and engaged citizenry. If we wish to see a better standard of politics and better class of policies, the citizenry has the responsibility of both educating itself on the complexities of governance and engaging maturely in debate. It also means that more Singaporeans with the passion for their nation should step forward to serve in any way they can – in politics, the civil service and in community service.

Fifth, that the future is malleable. This has two meanings. The first is that no matter how comprehensive our planning, the future is not linear. The second is that we have it in ourselves to chart our course forward, if not in the details, at least directionally.

Sixth and finally, it is our duty as citizens to put these convictions into thought and action for the betterment of our country and fellow citizens.

The writing in this book was informed by these basic beliefs and they continue to inspire and inform my thinking on my duty to my country.



The Necessary Role of Public Intellectuals

Public intellectuals have a long and often tortured tradition. They play important roles in the intellectual life of their societies.

Without the public intellectual, there would not be any active intellectual space between the governed and the governors. The public intellectual uses the sharp tools of the mind to cut through disinformation and confused thinking to reveal animating insight and stimulating perspectives.

Yet, those same tools can be perceived as weapons by those cast in an unfavourable light by those insights and perspectives.

It takes not just intellect and conviction, but courage, to be a public intellectual. The role of the public intellectual bears a closer look at to get a better appreciation of their contributions and to understand why so few choose to play this role.

I think that there are three moulds of public intellectuals.

Thought Leader

The first and the most recognisable of the three moulds is that of the thought leader. Socrates and Plato were such public intellectuals. The thought leader is an individual of a gifted mind with the power of

Supply chains 79, 89, 92

Systemic 42, 45, 46, 50, 57, 85, 89, 90, 92, 107, 113, 164

Technology 61, 62, 77, 79, 91, 162, 164, 183

Time frame 66

Trust 56, 101, 128, 150, 151, 227

Uncertainty 20, 23, 68, 73, 76, 148

Urban 35, 56, 62, 84, 86, 87, 98, 104, 136, 161, 223, 230, 231

Volatility 36

White paper 23, 111, 116, 133, 134, 140, 146, 147, 148, 225, 230

Whole-of-government 21

Wicked problems 164

Workfare 173

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Devadas Krishnadas founded Future-Moves (<http://future-moves.com/>). He is a graduate of the Tufts and Sydney Universities and has completed senior-level executive education programmes at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. While he travels extensively for work, Singapore remains home and is where his family has been for three generations.