

Troublemaker
© Bertha Henson, 2014

ISBN 978-981-09-1473-8

Published under the imprint Ethos Books by
Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
28 Sin Ming Lane
#06-131, Midview City
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

The publisher reserves all rights to this title.
Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Cover photograph by Diana Rahim
Cover design by Agnes Lee
Layout by Kum Suning
Designed by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

The cover design draws inspiration from the incident where graffiti was sprayed on
the rooftop of a 23-storey Housing Board block in May 2014. The photo was taken
from the home of Mr Lourdes Gabriel.

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Henson, Bertha, author.
Troublemaker / by Bertha Henson. – Singapore : Ethos Books, [2014]
pages cm
ISBN : 978-981-09-1473-8 (paperback)

1. Henson, Bertha – Political and social views. 2. Singapore –
Politics and government. 3. Singapore – Social conditions. I.
Title.

DS610.7
320.95957 -- dc23

OCN883709556

TROUBLEMAKER

BERTHA HENSON



CONTENTS

DEDICATION	9		
AUTHOR'S NOTE	11		
INTRODUCTION	13		
Partisan Politics			
Preface by Augustin Chiam	18		
2012 HOUGANG BY-ELECTIONS			
Poh Ho Ho Ho!	21		
Poh Boh Ho!	22		
Playing Png Pong in Hougang	23		
Hougang's Choice	24		
Hougang's Choice (Part 2)	27		
2013 PUNGGOL EAST BY-ELECTION			
The case of the philandering parliamentarian	29		
A possible WP response to SDP	32		
Partying in Punggol East	35		
Going for class monitor	38		
The effect of this by-election	40		
The likeable Lee Li Lian	43		
GRASSROOT POLITICS			
Town councils as political organisations	46		
He hath spoken	48		
Town councils: People versus Politicos	49		
AIM: A political education for residents	51		
Name the pot; name the kettle	53		
Which is blacker: Pot or kettle?	55		
Stop fighting and clean the ceiling	57		
Clean ceilings in Parliament	58		
Coming down from the ceiling	60		
Opining on the disclaimer of opinion	62		
IMMIGRATION			
Preface by Vinod Ashvin	68		
POLICIES AND THE PEOPLE			
People, oh people...	71		
Swinging the other way	73		
The people and the population White Paper	75		
A non-conversation	77		
Deciphering Day 1	79		
Detractors on Day 2	82		
Directions on Day 3	84		
Disturbed on Day 4	87		
Doubt on Day 5	89		
Dislocated by Relocation	91		
What number to use?	93		
Exploding myths	94		
Rethink White Paper ratios	96		
Dare we talk about abortion?	98		
Two in three as PMETs – bizarre?	101		
REPORTING HONG LIM PARK			
Hong Lim Park Event #1: The Picnic	102		
Hong Lim Park Event #2: The Protest	104		
BN Special: Levelling the playing field in the job market	107		
Banking more on foreigners	111		
A Singaporean-first job market	112		
He knoweth not what he sayeth	114		
The price of marriage to a Singaporean: \$15,000	117		
SMRT bus flips over – is driver's nationality significant?	119		
Singaporean Toh or Chinese Du – don't matter	120		
The PR case for Casey	123		
FOREIGNERS AND FIRSTS			
Foreign affairs	126		
We have had "human touch". Ouch.	128		
The flip side of the Filipino Day	130		
MALAYSIA 2013 GENERAL ELECTION			
The Protest Test	134		
The Protest Test Part 2	136		
The Protest Test Part 3	138		
Save face, slap wrist	140		
2013 LITTLE INDIA RIOT			
Who would have thought?	143		
Not the Singapore way	145		
The big Little India clean up	147		
The big Little India clean up Part 2	149		
A Sunday problem	151		
A deportation report	153		
Little India COI: A fellow bus passenger testifies	155		
Little India COI: The violence that night, according to first responders	158		
Little India COI: A brave young man	161		
Little India COI: We DO have a hero. Yay!	163		
Little India COI: A real pro	164		
Little India COI: Our Protocol Police	167		
Little India COI: Notes on a Riot	170		
Little India COI: It's an inquiry, right?	172		
Little India COI: Would you want to live in Little India?	174		
Meanwhile, in Singapore	177		
Little India COI: Wanted – more lawmen	179		
Little India COI: The final chapter	181		
Little India COI: And now that it's over	184		
IDENTITY			
Preface Kwan Jin Yao	188		
The bedrock of Singapore	190		
I am in Singapore	192		
Foreign-born versus local-born	195		
Us versus them	197		
The kindness of a foreigner	198		
How close to the core?	200		
Personal answers to national questions	202		
The "other" Singapore	206		

BN Special: Who's poor in Singapore?	209
Kuih lapis or kuih talam?	213
In the Singapore Conversation, we trust?	217
A survey of the here-and-now in black-and-white	221
When women talk about NS...	224
RACE AND RELIGION	
Kancheong over Amy Cheong	227
Kancheong over Amy Cheong Part 2	230
Kancheong over Amy Cheong – Epilogue?	232
New twist to AMP Nizam's tangle with the G	234
Crossed lines	237
Shine more light on the race report card please	241
Race survey: waking up from a nightmare – or just sleepwalking?	245
Grassroots movement or lalang on fire?	248
Drawing the veil over hijab	251
Religiously speaking	254
EDUCATION	
Preface by Jonathan Tan	258
PRE-SCHOOL	
Paying for pre-school	260
Kindergarten in my backyard please	262
Pre-school study: Pass or fail?	263
PRIMARY SCHOOL	
Gaming the education numbers	265
Distressed by stress	269
Preparing for PSLE results	271
Preparing for PSLE results Part 2	273
Preparing for PSLE results Part 3	275
Wee Im Pee's brother gets his PSLE results	277
SECONDARY SCHOOL	
A good school conversation among parents	279
A hairy issue in school	281
Topsy-turvy tuition	283
TERTIARY	
Pre-U seminar: Thinking out of the box which is still in the same room	285
When there are so many ministers talking down a diploma or degree	288
SCHOLARSHIPS	
Here's to old school ties that do NOT bind...	290
What PSC should be "acutely conscious" of	292
TEACHERS	
Teaching teachers	294
Help the teachers who "act out"	296
Teach Singlish? Real or not?	299
LAW AND ORDER	
Preface by Salima Nadira Moss Mafoot Simon	302
THE DINESH SAGA	
Just how did Dinesh die?	304
Just how did Dinesh die? Part 2	306
You clearer now on just how Dinesh died?	308
Just how did Dinesh die? Part 3	312
Just how did Dinesh die? Part 4	314

Just how did Dinesh die? Part 5	316
Just how did Dinesh die? Part 6	319
Just how did Dinesh die? The final chapter	322

CIVIL SERVICE SHENANIGANS

Practices made public	324
CPIB: In the Dock?	326
CPIB officer charged: Another public servant bites the dust	329
A civil service report card	332
Moral policing?	335
So much sex in sin city	338
Way too much sex in sin city	340
Illegal sight-seeing in Singapore	342
The man in the golden Mercedes	344

ON THE NET

Preface by Ng Yi Shu	348
Not just noise on social media	350
Who's the little drummer boy?	352
We, the people who use social media	355
The net is closing in... on the Net	359
The G's dartboard: The blogosphere	364
The 10 Commandments for Bloggers	367
Dear Anonymous	371
Stick and stones may break my bones...	373

BROADCAST LICENSING SCHEME

The mess that MDA is in...	376
Disquiet over licensing scheme – all quiet on the MDA front	378
Calling out the MDA	381
Breakfast Network on Talking Point tonight	386
Licence scheme: Answers not very good leh	388
Talking points for that Talking Point show	391
Eyes now on the Broadcasting Act	395
Licence scheme: Parity? What Parity?	397
BN report: Hong Lim Park - Online protest goes offline	399
MDA licence scheme: Another round?	402
A short story: An Unlicensed Conversation (Part 1)	404
A short story: An Unlicensed Conversation (Part 2)	407
A short story: An Unlicensed Conversation (Part 3)	410

THE BREAKFAST NETWORK STORY

About Us	414
Who We Are	415
Contact Us	415
BN Report: Pink on the Green	427
BN Special: How the foreigners who build our homes live	429
It's becoming very hot in the BN kitchen	438
Encounters with foreigners...	442
We decided to become Breakfast in Bed	445
Kitchen closed	447
Personally speaking; no fund intended	451
Why is MDA making a meal out of Breakfast Network?	454

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

461

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

463

For my mother, Dinah, who never really knew what I was up to online;
my brother, Chris, my top cheerleader and greatest supporter;
and my great friend, Benson Ong, because of his unfailing faith in me.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I apologise first for the rather informal style of writing that will follow in this book. As I was writing for a blog, my columns were written in a style that I thought would be more appropriate for online reading, especially from Bertha Harian. I have edited some of the columns for greater readability although I have left some short forms alone. Those who follow my blog as well as the former Breakfast Network site will know that the letter G represents Government while MSM is short for mainstream media. I have also left some Singlish words and phrases alone because to fix them would detract from the flavour of the column and change my “voice”.

Some members of Breakfast Network helped in the production of this book, writing the introductions to each chapter and adding explanatory notes for further clarity given that there are several references to events that were happening at the same time.

I hope they suffice.

INTRODUCTION

“Troublemaker” was the word Professor Tommy Koh used to describe me when we were talking about the demise of the Breakfast Network site. “But you are a good troublemaker. We need more good troublemakers,” Singapore’s veteran diplomat added.

Well, that was a relief!

The phrase stuck with me, and it occurred to me that it would be a good title for this book, a collection of blog posts and columns I had written in my post-Singapore Press Holdings days. I started the day after I left my job of 26 years, on 12 May 2012, when my free SPH newspapers did not appear on my doorstep. The absence of my morning reading material drove home the point that I was no longer a journalist – or, more accurately, that I was no longer employed as one.

So I started Bertha Harian; the name was given to me by a top-level civil servant some years ago. An alternative, he suggested, would be Berita Henson. I didn’t think it had quite the same ring.

People ask me why I write, and have variously described my writings as that of a disgruntled ex-journalist, a Government Trojan Horse used to infiltrate the online community, or a closet supporter of the Opposition who could finally show her true colours once free of the Establishment fetters that my previous career had imposed on me.

I greet these attempts to pigeon-hole me with no small measure of mirth.

To some people, content cannot be assessed on its merits alone. Questions must be asked about the “motivation” and “agenda” behind the content. I have never seen the need to take an ideological stand, whether anti-this or pro-that, about what I write, although there are certain principles I cherish. I believe strongly in transparency and access to information, which will allow citizens to make informed choices. I prefer less government, not more, with governance underpinned by the rule of law, not the discretion of executives. I uphold the ethical principles of professional journalism, especially the need for accuracy and context, because it is the prism through which most information is presented, regardless of social media’s growing appeal.

After spending so many years practising journalism, I thought I possessed enough institutional memory, knowledge of the workings of government and media and the ability to “read between the lines”. I thought this would help me become a useful moderator, or filter, on issues that affect citizens.

Much of my content is based on mainstream media reports, which I consider the best source of information, properly researched and verified – most of the time. They provide me with a jumping-off point for further reflection. That is why I cannot abide unprofessional work, such as sloppy reporting, or a lack of reporting, which results in incomplete and half-baked reports that misinform an unwary reading public. When I spot them, I feel cheated.

My inspiration for writing is a column that used to be published in The Straits Times on Saturdays close to three decades ago. It was titled “Look Back in Wonder”, and was written by Ms Tan Sai Siong, an experienced business and political reporter/commentator for the paper. She didn’t always attempt single-issue columns to fill her allotted space. Sometimes, she just gave her take on three of four news items that had appeared over the week. When she did so, the column was extremely readable. Why spin so many words to fill up space when you only want to make one point?

This is one of the freedoms of writing online that I enjoy: The quality of the content dictates the space it is allotted. In a daily newspaper, the enormous amount of content that is dealt with each day means that sometimes, space has to be set aside in advance, and a writer has to fill it.

The second joy is freedom from editors, who sometimes draw the OB markers far closer and tighter than I think necessary. Sure, I take a risk when I make critical comments about the Government, or the G, as I call it. But I weigh every risk, and right every wrong in my posts when they are pointed out. I have never been afraid to say sorry. Should I equate this with freedom of speech? Perhaps the right phrase is freedom of responsible speech, from a citizen with no greater agenda than advancing the cause of rational thinking for the collective good.

Third is the freedom to experiment with writing styles. The mainstream media’s methods are outdated – news reports with facts framed in a reverse pyramid, or in blocks. For print and broadcast, there are column inches and airtime minutes to fill. Quite frankly, squeezing out regular columns in a regular style in a regular spot of a regular size is a draining exercise, and terribly uncreative.

Now, of course, story-telling has gone berserk, with Twitter, storify, listicles and memes. They cater to people with short attention spans. But

not everything can be compressed this way. The long form should not be consigned to the internet trash bin, because sometimes it does take a lot more words to make or argue a point, not pithy one-liners.

Did I make trouble? I gather I did. Civil servants and politicians have me on their radar but, hand on heart, none have ever gone beyond an “aiyah, why you write like that?” admonishment when commenting on specific posts which affect them. Some have even tried to engage me by giving me the heads-up on policies to be introduced, as they did in my past life.

My blogging segued into the establishment of Breakfast Network, on which I have devoted a section in this book. Suffice to say that I was glad to be back in the saddle as a news editor, columnist, reporter. Even temporarily.

The start of my online writing adventure coincided with the post-2011 GE period, which has been described as the “new normal”. It was an era which tolerated and, in fact, welcomed and fostered the discussion of big and small issues. Much of the news happenings post-2011 are unprecedented. An illegal strike? A riot? A philandering Member of Parliament? A dead prisoner?

So much content.

Why do I write?

I write to be read.

Bertha Henson

The effect of this by-election

BERTHA HARIAN
26 JANUARY 2013

This commentary was written just after the results for the Punggol East by-election were announced. WP's Lee Li Lian took the seat.

There are only two things that will get ordinary Singaporeans to cheer – when Singapore wins a significant soccer match, and when the Opposition wins an election. And so it was... just now. And I am not even talking about those at the counting centre or those who are die-hard supporters of the hammer. I gather it was quite noisy in Hougang.

Truth to tell, I thought the PAP would win. So much had been made of local issues – and if the constituents really thought that way, they would plump for the person who had the backing of the Government. This was also not Hougang, but a PAP ward for what seems forever and ex-MP Michael Palmer was said to have been pretty good at working the ground. But it seems the voters thought: a) The WP can do the job in the ward as well too, b) The PAP deserves a “slap”, c) Singapore needs a plural government, d) We remember Lee Li Lian; we don't know Koh Poh Koon, e) Those national packages will be delivered anyway however we vote.

Any one of the five or a combination?

Now I suppose much will be made of the by-election “effect”. That the people want the PAP in power, but a by-election was a good chance to put in a new voice. The WP campaigned that way although I thought that it was only at its final rally that it got its act together to push the PAP back on the defensive. I thought it should have used its First World Parliament slogan. I thought it should have taken aim at ‘AIMgate’¹ earlier in the campaign.

In fact, I thought the “hammering” that the WP got, at least online and from certain opposition quarters, for being so “conciliatory” towards the G – telling people that the policies need to mature and that it sometimes works with the G behind closed doors, would not do it good. I thought Ms Lee was a bit of a damp squib who would counteract the strong support from the WP leadership. I wondered if those jibes about the WP being “arrogant” would work.

1. See section on “The AIM Saga”.

On all fronts, I thought wrong. And I congratulate the WP.

The by-election result showed that voters considered the WP the dominant opposition party. A multi-cornered fight diluting the opposition vote? Nah. The disarray among the opposition ranks turning voters to the PAP side? No too. Now, what if the SDP contested? How would the vote go? I almost wish it did, just to hear from the voters how they rate the SDP. My heart, though, really goes out to SDA's Desmond Lim. Just half a per cent, even less than the 4 per cent the last time round.²

So what now? DPM Teo Chee Hean, anchor minister in that part of Singapore, looked so drawn and haggard after the results were announced. Both he and the PM did the courteous thing, thanking supporters and congratulating the victors. The voters have made their choice, they said. I was expecting something more, like “and they would have to live with it. ...”, but no.

I don't know how Dr Koh feels. He must have realised it was risky, never mind the Punggol-boy-made-good tag.³ And never mind what I think was a tight campaign by the PAP, with quick counters after WP rallies and no misthought retorts and mistimed attacks. I say he is a brave man. The thing is, the PAP says he will be fielded in future elections. And people will remember if he is NOT fielded in Punggol East again but in a safe GRC.

The PM wants attention back on national issues. Yes. The by-election is out of the way. We should get back to national issues. Now with a bigger presence in Parliament, the WP will have to live up to its words and act as a check. Or show the “value of political competition”, as its Ms Sylvia Lim said. Even if the WP does not have its own transport masterplan or marriage and parenthood package, the hope is that it will critique thoroughly those policies that have been just announced. Also, that it will get to the bottom of AIMgate – which it had provoked. In my view, it should come up with its own proposal on the “fundamental nature” of town councils, which is being studied by the MND.

Anyway, the WP seems to have planned ahead, announcing the date and venue of Ms Lee's first Meet-the-People session. It is looking way ahead too, introducing four new faces (almost PAP-like I must say) at its

2. SDA's Desmond Lim received 4.45 per cent of the vote in Punggol East SMC during the 2011 GE.

3. When formally introducing himself as a candidate contesting the Punggol East by-election, Dr Koh Poh Koon referred to himself as a “Son of Punggol” and related a story of himself growing up in a farmhouse in Punggol.

last rally.⁴ It looks good to stay ahead of the rest of the opposition pack, although I am sure there will be some debate on whether olive branches should be held out to the other political parties.

The more difficult “thinking” will have to be done within the PAP though. It cannot simply console itself that this was just a by-election, and an opposition win was to be expected. I doubt that it will be complacent. I wonder now what new strategy will be formulated, whether in Parliament or in image. Its much vaunted “new normal” after the last GE doesn’t seem to have sunk in. Will it by the next GE? Or not at all? If so, the by-election effect might well sweep the GE.

You know what? There is someone I wish we could hear from. Former PM Lee Kuan Yew. What is he thinking, I wonder? That the vote of the people is a terrible thing, as he once said? ▼

4. The four new faces were: Lawyers Terence Tan and Dennis Tan, engineer Redzwan Hafidz Abdul Razak and sociology professor Daniel Goh.

The likeable Lee Li Lian

BREAKFAST NETWORK

1 MARCH 2013

I read Susan Long’s interview with WP MP Lee Li Lian in ST¹ and went away thinking that this is one remarkable woman! (Ms Lee, I mean, not Ms Long.) Her quotes are not fancy and her political views are so-so, but it’s her upbringing and background that struck me. It spoke of a life of grit and determination – very Singapore style.

A humble home, with only one breadwinner, so budgeting was done in “hushed tones” in their three-room flat. Nattering in Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien and picking up English from classmates. Sleeping on a double-decker bed; crying when she told her parents that she was posted to the N level stream; making money by being a “permanent part-time” shoe salesgirl. A woman who pulled herself up by her bootstraps to make it into a polytechnic and get a job. Who courted the same man for seven years before tying the knot. And now, trying for a baby. Go buy ST.

If there is one thing I would quarrel with, it was her assertion that a woman can juggle work, politics, and home life. That’s because she said she would quit her job as a financial trainer and become a full-time MP when baby comes. So, maybe the workload would be too much for her after all? (And an MP’s allowance is enough to get by?)

Also, this was an interview piece (without party bigwigs present, a point Ms Long made) which means that only one voice is heard throughout the article and one can’t very well be panning oneself, right? If it was a profile, then a more rounded picture of Ms Lee could be built, with comments from colleagues, party workers, ex-classmates. Both friends and enemies.

Nevertheless, the interview doesn’t detract from the fact that she is, oh so Singaporean and likeable. It was no wonder she got voted in by the Punggol East residents. Actually, the PAP candidate Koh Poh Koon is not too different in background either I gather, except that he went further through the system and made it as doctor. How many of us are doctors? He might be the exception, while Ms Lee is the rule.

I have lost track of the number of times the PAP said it would have to field more personable candidates who can connect to the ground. I think

1. Susan Long, “The N is not the end,” *The Straits Times*, Mar 1, 2013, A29.

it was first said way back when Ling How Doong (remember him?) and Cheo Chai Chen (him too?) scored wins in the 1991 GE.² After which the PAP fielded the likes of Ong Ah Heng to appease grassroots sentiment for more representatives who spoke their lingo, so to speak.³ Looks like the PAP needs to broaden its recruitment base to encompass the “non-elite” who have both ability and likeability.

Ms Lee is likeable. Now she has to show that she is able. ▼

GRASSROOT POLITICS

Background on the AIM Saga: The dealings between the town councils and the PAP-owned AIM first surfaced when the opposition-run Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) received a bad grade in a review of its corporate governance. AHTC chairman Sylvia Lim blamed it on the fact that AIM, which supplied IT software to the town council, had terminated their contract with the Town Council after the GE. Lim also questioned whether the contract between AIM and the town councils was in the public’s interest. The question sparked a debate about the nature of town councils and whether they are public or political organisations. To clear the air, PM Lee Hsien Loong instructed the MND to conduct a review of the transactions. The review concluded that there was nothing wrong with the contract with AIM even though it was a PAP-owned company. On February 2013, a new tender to develop end-to-end computer systems for the PAP-run town councils was awarded to NEC Asia Pacific; AIM decided not to participate in this new tender.

2. *Ling How Doong and Cheo Chai Chen were both members of the SDP in the 1991 GE (Cheo has since joined the NSP in 2006). Both Ling and Cheo won seats during the GE in the Bukit Gombak SMC and Nee Soon Central SMC respectively. The SDP won what was then an unprecedented three seats in that election. By its own analysis, the PAP seemed to be losing ground in the working-class areas and promised to field more people who could connect with the people on the ground. Former PM Lee Kuan Yew even advised then-PM Goh Chok Tong to speak more Mandarin, presumably to connect better with his constituents.*

3. *Ong Ah Heng contested the 1997 GE, replacing Ng Pock Too, against incumbent Cheo Chai Chee and won the seat in Nee Soon Central SMC.*

REPORTING HONG LIM PARK

Hong Lim Park Event #1: The Picnic

BREAKFAST NETWORK
1 MAY 2013

Cupcakes and taco chips were being given out – gratis. Men and boys from a ukulele group were strumming away. Children were wading through pools of balls. All in, it was a very Disney morning at Hong Lim Park today, complete with a magic castle.

It was a “young people” event, mostly the English-speaking and the educated. A fair number were in red or white tee-shirts bearing the words Stand Up for Singapore, the group behind the event, which concluded at about one in the afternoon.

It was billed as a picnic to show the positive side of being part of a community, an appreciation ceremony so to speak.

The organisers said so unabashedly in the flyers that came with a game card and a red picnic mat: “Today we would like to focus on the possibilities that we can achieve together and hopefully inspire each other by demonstrating that there are many Singaporeans who care deeply for our nation and will go out of their way to bring happiness and abundance to everyone that we can connect with. And hopefully just to encourage you to love each other just that little bit more.”

The group of 14 had sunk money into this project, its third. It wasn't a sit down and enjoy the nice weather event. The key idea was for total strangers to interact. Hence, games were built around starting conversations with each other and ending with each participant writing down three qualities that they feel would make Singapore a country to be proud of.

Now, does that sound too cuddly to you? Or is that the cynic in me talking?

Standing round the edges of Hong Lim Park, I wondered at the energy and enthusiasm of the young people who were busy making balloon animals and pushing cupcakes on people. So sweet, I thought. Just wait till they are out of school and in the working world, that idealism would surely wear off.

Yet, the organisers themselves are a bunch of 30-somethings in various professions. I recalled what one of them had said to me: “We are not cynical people.” The turn-out, at most 400, was not as large as expected, given that it achieved a higher profile after a minor fracas had erupted over the group's decision to stage the event at Hong Lim Park, on the same day a May Day protest event was being held. Mr Tong Yee pronounced that he was happy enough.

As the morning wore on, white tents were being set up at the other side of the park. Sound systems were being tested. The picnickers stuck to their corner.

More on that flyer: “And with this day, we hope to start a legacy for future Singaporeans. That we be known as a community of loving and gracious people, who continue to look out for each other and rest with the knowledge that we can trust our community to see us through. ... It is possible for us to play, to love, to genuinely connect with each other and still be the great little nation that we are.”

A young man came to my side as I was watching a group break out in song. He introduced himself as Edward. Aged 20, he saw the group's work on its Facebook page and decided to volunteer to help at the event. Nice-looking with a buff bod, he said: “Isn't this nice?” He hadn't come across an event like this, he said, a citizen-initiated event with no other agenda than to do good. I looked at this young man and his honest, open face. May he remain like that, I thought. Always looking out for something positive.

A somewhat older woman passed by and handed me a tissue. “You look like you need one,” she said before walking away. A young woman called Eunice pressed a box of cupcakes to me. I declined. I am not a “sweets” person. Then she wanted to take a picture with me, this total stranger.

A photojournalist who was with me said he felt uncomfortable. All those smiling, happy faces and red balloons. Everyone was like a child, even the old uncle on the ukulele. Some balloons had words scribbled on them: the qualities that those who took part in the games want for Singapore. The usual virtues were listed: kindness, patience, understanding et cetera. One balloon had this: “Less cynicism”.

I caught myself smiling. ▀

We have bad “human touch”. Ouch.

BREAKFAST NETWORK
2 APRIL 2012

The Chinese bus drivers who organised Singapore’s first strike since whenever are back home. And the International Herald Tribune reported one of them saying he had no qualms about staging the strike. After all, things changed for the better, he noted. He had served seven weeks in jail.

Asked about his treatment in jail, he said it was “strict” but “safe”. One wonders why he was even asked this question. Did the journalist expect maltreatment according to the Western-hued view of Singapore?

Never mind that.

What he said next, pinched.

Here are some quotes:

“I don’t think Singapore is a bad place. They do many things well. But compared to China, their human touch is very poor.”

“We wanted to talk to the management but they didn’t listen. No one paid any attention to us.”

“In China, if I have a problem, I can at least go to the government and petition them. I can tell everyone about it and go to a government department and complain. But in Singapore, our complaints didn’t reach the government.”

So, he thinks we are a cold country. We probably know how “unemotional” we are.¹ But his second point about complaints not reaching the G is something to think about.

Remember the Chinese crane protestors?² At least one of them tried to get through to the Manpower Ministry, even turning up at the building but he was given the runaround. He had to go back for the relevant

1. A Gallup poll published in November 2012 declared Singapore to be the “least emotional country” in the world. Only 36 per cent of Singaporeans surveyed reported feeling either positive or negative emotions on a daily basis, leaving the country lagging behind Georgia, Lithuania and Russia.

2. In December 2012 – 10 days after the SMRT bus drivers went on strike – two Chinese migrant workers perched themselves on top of separate cranes at a construction site along Jurong Port Road demanding back-payment of wages. They were later arrested for intentionally causing alarm and unlawfully remaining in the area. In March 2013, both were sentenced to four weeks jail on charges of criminal trespass.

documents and what not. This is probably Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), but no one should expect that foreign workers should know what is needed to make a case.

A case of “bad” human touch?

In the end, he resorted to perching on top of a crane.

Now in both instances – bus drivers and crane protestors – one big complaint was about living conditions. You don’t hear about foreigners of other nationalities protesting about living conditions. They have lower standards? Or they maintain their living quarters better than the Chinese do? Or maybe they are more quiescent than the Chinese, who are used to taking high-profile actions to force change.

The Guardian quoted Geoff Crothall of the Hong Kong-based China Labor Bulletin, a labour rights group, as saying: “It’s exactly what they would do in China if they had a contract dispute, if their employers refused to listen to them, if they were being paid less than other people,” he said.

Living conditions aside, the question of late payment or non-payment of salaries by employers need to be addressed.

In the crane protestors’ case, there was the issue of non-payment by their employers. Money was owed them, which looks like a legitimate grievance. No fuss here about whether a place is dirty or clean enough. ... People will wait to see if this complaint is valid and whether the book will be thrown at employers. If it is valid, then probably a lot more foreign workers than just the crane protestors have been hard done by – and the Chinese would have done everyone a favour.

Of course, this is an “if”. ▀

THE DINESH SAGA

Breakfast Network followed the ups and downs of the Dinesh Raman case, from the day his death in prison was made public in court, through Parliament, the legal process and right up to the day the family decided to settle the matter quietly with the Government.

Just how did Dinesh die?

*BREAKFAST NETWORK
20 JULY 2013*

You don't get to hear much about what goes on inside our prison walls, unless there's a death. And so it is with the death of inmate Dinesh Raman, 21, from "positional asphyxiation".

Now we know that there were 61 cases of assault in prison last year, 21 of which involved attacks on officers.

The G agencies bent over backwards to assure people that everything was done by the book. After the court told a prison deputy superintendent to pay a \$10,000 fine for what had happened, there were statements from Home Affairs ministry and the Singapore Prison Service.

Seems the whole machinery was geared up to respond quickly to any concern that Lim Kwo Jin, the deputy superintendent, had got off too lightly for not adequately supervising the process by which Dinesh was restrained in September 2010 and which led to his death.

The media too stressed that Dinesh seemed to be in a frenzy and had to be subdued after he made an unprovoked attack on a prison officer. The Prisons statement helpfully told of how a person will be restrained – a team of four or five officers deploying wrist and arm locks with someone supervising. No batons. No handcuffs either, according to ST, although Zaobao said it was "understood" that handcuffs were used.

In Dinesh's case, he struggled so hard that tired officers trying to subdue him had to be replaced. In total, eight officers, including Lim, were involved. Pepper spray was also used. ST headlined this as "Fierce struggle lasted about 30 minutes".

The Prisons statement said the techniques introduced in 1991 and adapted from the United Kingdom have been used "hundreds of times and there had been no death or injury of any significance caused".

Combing through the media reports on the case, what happened was this: He was put in an isolation cell, chest/belly down and his face turned to one side.

From there, however, the reports do not quite tally.

According to TODAY: "Lim taps Dinesh Raman's face and his eyes are still open. Lim then turns on a tap in the cell to fill a pail with water to decontaminate the prisoner, who had had pepper spray applied to his face during the restraint operation. Officers leave Dinesh Raman, unresponsive and in a prone position, in the cell."

According to ST: "In the cell, officers placed Dinesh in a prone position and washed away the pepper spray that one of them had used to help subdue the inmate. They then left, closing the cell's steel door behind them."

Everything gets more muddled when compared with what Zaobao reported. While the English-language papers said Lim returned to check on the inmate after a "minute or two", "minutes" or "shortly after" Dinesh was put in the cell, Zaobao said he took 30 minutes.

It also reported Lim's lawyer as saying that the officer was unable to pay attention to Dinesh's condition because "according to protocol, he went to get water to clean Dinesh". Makes you wonder if all the reporters were in the same courtroom!

Muddled reporting aside, the picture emerges that Dinesh was already unresponsive (does this mean unconscious?) with eyes opened (!) even after he had pepper spray washed away from his face/eyes. How come? Was he knocked out so hard somehow that he didn't even roll over when he found he couldn't breathe?

Or did he already "positionally asphyxiate" when the officers were struggling to restrain him by, for example, pushing him to the ground and weighing on him?

A committee of inquiry was convened and a report sent up to the Home Affairs ministry. Doubtless, the committee and the court have gotten to the root of the matter. What's needed is a clear report on how exactly Dinesh died, leaving no room for pesky questions like the ones above.

This matters a lot more than exhortations that everything was done by the book by dedicated officers performing their jobs in a dangerous place. ▀

Why is MDA making a meal out of Breakfast Network?

BERTHA HARIAN
17 DECEMBER 2013

I am going to KPKB here. I will make sure that I do not defame anyone, including the MDA (even though you can't defame a G agency). I will not touch on the judiciary. And I will not advocate disobedience – civil or otherwise.

In other words, I will do my best to be nice.

What the (insert your choice swear word here) is MDA up to? Why me? Why BN? Isn't it enough that we write responsible stuff? With bylines and all? We even correct mistakes openly!!! What makes you think we want to take foreign funding?!!! We're Singaporeans, for crying out loud! We just don't want to sign your papers! Cannot ah?

Sorry. I simply had to get that out of the way....

I am floored, flummoxed and flabbergasted at the MDA's twists and turns. So its replies have NOT been "curiously vague" but crystal clear? Gimme a break. Anyway, I leave it to readers to cut through the bureaucratise:

—— Forwarded message ——

From: **Bertha H** <bestgirl2727@gmail.com>

Date: Tue, Dec 3, 2013 at 8:07 AM

Subject: Re: form c etc

To: "Gabriel CHONG (MDA)" <Gabriel_CHONG@mda.gov.sg>

Hello Gabriel,

I have the following queries which I hope the MDA can answer regarding the forms before we fix to meet:

- a. What is the difference between the "forms are final" and "reporting requirements" as you said above? Are we talking about filling in the blanks in the tables?
- b. Do "forms are final" mean there will be no change in, Form C (C) Declaration No.4 to give MDA written notice of changes to any information in 7 days? Or is this a "reporting requirement"?
- c. In form C1 under registration, is it possible for me to list only myself as Editor? I ask because everybody in my editorial team do work pro bono. Plus only my company Newsmakers and I are shareholders.
- d. Likewise, I note that Form C1 has the same "seven days written notice" requirement?
- e. The difference between Tables A/B and C/D/ Do Tables A/B include donations from well-wishers? Are these for investors only? Should it also include sponsors who have entered into contracts with the site, or data collection agencies or non-monetary sponsorship, such as vouchers and prizes?
- f. Table D refers to revenue BEFORE registration correct?
- g. Can you explain Clause 2g – on the continuing obligation. Does this mean annual reporting/declaration and new forms to fill? Assuming the forms remain the same, what will Table D refer to after registration – or is this redundant?
- h. How am I expected to demonstrate that commercial transactions are bona fide if queried?
- i. What are the penalties for non-registration? Will registration still apply if Breakfast Network decides NOT to be a commercial entity but a blogging site?

Would be grateful if you can answer the queries as soon as possible as I will be meeting the Network crew on Wednesday evening to discuss whether we should proceed to register. We have to convince ourselves that the terms are not so onerous as to crimp our operations in the future - or take the step of shutting down the website before committing more resources.

I would also like to ask in advance for an extension of the Dec 10 deadline. I have to take advice from lawyers as well as continue discussions with the Network crew who hold down full-time jobs. Please understand that we will be making a critical decision on continuing or stopping operations – and this should not be made in a rush. I will be out of town from Dec 19 to 30 as well. May I ask for a month's extension of the deadline?

bertha

6 December 2013

BY POST AND EMAIL

Ms Bertha Henson
Breakfast Network Pte Ltd
33 Ubi Avenue 3
#06-59 Vertex
Singapore 408868

DID: 9728 9875
FAX: 6577 3888
Email: Yuvarani_thangavelu@mda.gov.sg

Dear Mdm,

REGISTRATION OF BREAKFAST NETWORK OPERATED BY BREAKFAST NETWORK PTE LTD

We refer to the website www.breakfastnetwork.sg (the "Website") operated by Breakfast Network Pte Ltd and your email on 3 December 2013 ("your email").

2 In respect of the queries in your email:

- i. With regard to your queries (a), (b) and (d), as MDA had shared at the meeting with you on 26 November 2013, the forms (including its instructions) are final. MDA will therefore require that the class licensee inform MDA of any changes to the information provided in the Registration Documents (i.e. Form C, Form C1 and its Annexes) within 7 days. However, MDA is prepared to consider suggestions as to how the class licensee's provision of the required updates can be facilitated.
- ii. With regard to your query (c), the class licensee is required to list in Form C1 the persons responsible for and/or involved in the provision, management and/or operation of the website. Pro bono editorial team members should be listed in Form C1 if they are responsible for and/or involved in the provision, management and/or operation of the website.
- iii. With regard to your query (e), Tables A and B pertain to any source of funding for the provision, management and/or operation of the website or for any other related activity of the website, excluding advertisement and subscription revenue. Advertisement and subscription revenue should be set out in Tables C and D.

- iv. With regard to your query (f), the information to be provided in Table D should include any advertisement and subscription revenue received up to one year prior to the declaration, or if the time period is shorter, from the date of commencement of the website to the date of declaration.
- v. With regard to your query (g), MDA requires Annexes B and C to Form C1 to be submitted on an annual basis; in addition, as and when there are updates to the information contained therein (including the information in Table D), the class licensee is required to notify MDA within 7 days. However, MDA is prepared to consider suggestions as to how the class licensee's provision of the required updates can be facilitated.
- vi. With regard to your query (h), Footnote 4 at Page 13 of the Registration Documents defines what "bona fide commercial purposes" means. If need be, MDA may require the class licensee to submit any information, records, documents, data or other materials to demonstrate that it had received funds for bona fide commercial purposes.
- vii. With regard to your query (i), if the class licensee refuses to so register, this will constitute a breach of the conditions of the Class Licence which would enable MDA to take appropriate enforcement action under section 12 of the Broadcasting Act, including suspending or cancelling the Class Licence in respect of the website. Registration using the revised Form C currently applies only to an Internet Content Provider incorporated as a local company that is engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues relating to Singapore.

3 We have considered your request for a month's extension for registration of the website. We do not think that a month is necessary as the forms are straightforward and we have clarified the issues which you have raised. However, we are agreeable to granting you a final extension of one week within which to submit the duly completed Registration Documents i.e. up to **17 December 2013**.

Yours sincerely,


Yuvarani Thangavelu
Deputy Director (Licensing Services)
Licensing Division
For Chief Executive Officer
Media Development Authority of Singapore

I think almost everyone, including the MDA, thought BN would register. I was given a two-week deadline (please remember that The Independent was notified in July) to think things through and get my people to agree that we should be registered.

All I have gotten so far is grief from MDA.

I asked for one month, it gave me one week, because it reckoned the forms were straightforward. You've seen those forms on BNFB.

You would think that with a two-week notice, it would be able to give you quick replies to calls for clarification. It would know what to do/say. I can only guess that it didn't cater for a "rejection". Instead, it was a step-by-step dance. If it had said BNPL should close, then we would have closed it. Instead we closed the site, and left social media to function. Then comes this silly tango about mode of operation, corporate entity etc etc.

So I closed the company, and now it says I should have told them who owns and runs BN's social media platforms? Well, it's not BNPL. It's not me. I've quit. As for who the people are, I am tempted to say, what business is it of MDA? If the problem is whether the volunteers are getting foreign funding to run social media, then may I respectfully point out that there are plenty of social media groups which have political and religious content?

So what in heaven's name is this? Persecution?

Is MDA making up rules as it goes along?

Frankly, everything is getting stranger and stranger or curiously and curiously. So if it's not a company behind it, but an association, a society or an individual – foreign funding issues will not arise? It knows that this would be crazy, and maybe that's why it wants to know who owns and runs BNFB and Twitter as well.

If so, then it really has to net every site, social media platform that has political and religious content – never mind that there is no corporate entity behind them.

Is this why it hasn't answered the critical question of whether the main BN site can be resurrected? Or that BNFB and Twitter can be continued by volunteers using the BN name? Is it still figuring out the answer?

I don't know whether to laugh or to cry at this state of affairs.

It was a terrible few weeks for us, especially for me. After finally getting the company registered, I was rushing to get it de-registered. The MDA sent not just emails, but hand-delivered letters to Breakfast Network Private Limited's registered address during the whole sorry episode. My accountant and her staff had heart palpitations receiving their notes.

Nevertheless, we carried on business as usual. We took down the site and carried on posting our articles on Facebook. We actually had two video programmes in the pipeline when we took down BN, which we wanted to upload on Facebook. And when we were asked about who "owned" the Facebook Page, I told MDA it was free to reach the volunteers on social media. I was going back to blogging.

Strangely, we received more publicity during our "run-in" with MDA than ever before. Our Facebook numbers went up exponentially. MSM could not ignore us anymore. We became a subject of discussion in civil society circles, in newspaper columns, blogs, television programmes and even cartoons. We were referred to in journalism schools abroad, commentaries in the foreign media and even in a US State Department Human Rights Record.

People still ask me about resurrecting the site. And about why we decided to shut it down. Perhaps, they don't believe everything that we have recorded about what happened. Some actually thought that we were getting foreign funding, an incredibly silly notion more or less fostered by MDA's awful silence on the issue.

I will only say this: The kitchen crew did think about resurrecting the site in February. We wanted to go back to being a pro bono site. We changed our minds.

And that is a story for another day. ▼

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to all who helped in the production of this book, especially “oldies” Yen Feng, Daniel Yap and Alfred Siew and the “undies” from Tembusu and Cinnamon colleges in the National University of Singapore. My thanks also to all involved in the formation of Breakfast Network, including Professor Gregory Clancey, Master of Tembusu College in NUS, writer/poet Alvin Pang as well as photo-journalists Ernest Goh, Chia Aik Beng, Lim Wei Xiang and Shawn Byron Danker. I also add to this list the fans of Breakfast Network, including the IT experts, lawyers and business consultants who tried to advise me on the way forward. We had a blast!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bertha Henson worked in the Singapore Press Holdings stable of newspapers for 26 years, on graduation from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor's degree in the arts and social sciences in 1986. She started as a reporter in The Straits Times, Singapore's national broadsheet, and worked her way up to Associate Editor, her last job designation. In between, she has done "time" in various sections of the newspaper, including its Political, News and Life! sections, as well as in The New Paper. She launched – and closed

– Project Eyeball, an SPH print-and-online experiment in year 2000. She also launched the ST Schools programme with IN and Little Red Dot, news magazines which cater to the student population, as well as Mind Your Body, a health magazine distributed with ST. For several years, she also headed the training unit of the group's English and Malay language newspapers division, anchoring a reporting course for middle-level and senior journalists.

She left the organisation in 2012 to start her own media consultancy, Newsmakers, and conducts training programmes under Artemis Communications. She is Journalist-in-residence at Tembusu College, in the National University of Singapore. She started blogging at Bertha Harian the day after she left SPH employment and launched Breakfast Network, a semi-professional news and views website with friends and undergraduates in early 2013. The website closed its operations at the end of the year because she and fellow editors declined to meet registration requirements imposed by the Media Development Authority. She still blogs at Bertha Harian.