In tribute to Lee Kuan Yew

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It is with a heavy heart as I pen this post about our founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, who left us earlier this morning.

Iâ??ve been reading all the tributes and thought this would be a good chance to consolidate what Singapore owes to this man as we look back on how far weâ??ve come.

While the nation grieves, I try to find comfort in the fact that people are taking the time to remember his legacy and recount how he brought Singapore from a Third World to a First World nation in a lifespan of a single generation. Iâ??m not sure, and I doubt, that there has been any other country quite like us.

My generation does not really know Lee Kuan Yew, for we were born after the most trying of times. We didnâ??t grow up in times of war and fighting, and all we know are the stories our parents share about being poor, not always having enough to eat, living in crowded quarters, and wearing tattered, hand-me-downs clothing.

Today, many of us have our own bedrooms (or share with our siblings, but usually no more than 2 â?? 3 in a single room); we apply for jobs with a starting pay of $2000 and above; live in peaceful times where crime rates are low and even females like me feel safe enough to go out jogging at midnight. We dine at cafes and new meals like â??teatimeâ?• and â??supperâ?• have emerged. We buy clothes as fashion trends change and complain about not having enough wardrobe space to keep all of them.

We are exceedingly blessed, but we want for more. We complain and argue incessantly for greater freedoms and privileges, but there is one thing few of us will deny â?? Singapore owes her success to Lee Kuan Yew.

A man who believed in Singapore when others didnâ??t

"He built a nation nobody believed possible."

— *Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore*

We have defied economic logic and sense to succeed, thanks to this one man who believed so strongly in Singapore and in us. At a time where people scorned Singapore for our small size and lack of natural resources, he believed that we could be so much more.

Lee Kuan Yew planted the vision of a successful Singapore and together with his Cabinet Ministers, took on the arduous task of nation-building. He *believed*, and rallied the people together towards a brighter future with the promise that they would get there.

A man who did not give up easily on his country

The late Mr. Lee was also not one to be daunted by obstacles. Can you imagine believing all your life in something, only to have your lifelong dream shattered?

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> *"Every time we look back on this moment that we signed this agreement that severed Singapore from Malaysia, it would be a moment of anguish. I mean for me, it would be a moment of anguish because all my life....you see the whole of my adult life.... I have believed in Malaysian Merger and the unity of the two territories. You know It's a people connected by geography, economics, and ties of kinship..."*

Most normal people may never recover from such a trauma, or at least, take a long while to recover and climb back up on their feet again. But Mr. Lee was different. He wasted no time in rebuilding Singapore. His lifelong plan and belief may have failed, but that only meant he had to work out a new and better solution right away.

World-class transport and infrastructure

Our parents mostly either walked or rode their bicycles. Few had the privilege of owning a car.

Today, we have Changi Airport which continues to win international awards, and a world-class public transport system of interconnected trains and buses.

But the MRT keeps breaking down!

Sure it does, but remember that no system is perfect. In our system where most of us never have to wait any longer than 10 minutes for a train, we already have much to be thankful for.

Meritocracy: Equal opportunities for all

This is one of the biggest reasons why I feel proud to be Singaporean. In our system of governance, a key principle is that of meritocracy, which ensures that everyone (regardless of background, race or money) has an equal chance to succeed.

In some other countries, if youâ??re a girl, you donâ??t get to go to school. If youâ??re white, you get promoted easier than if youâ??re black, Asian, or any other minority race.

As a female, Iâ??m thankful to have been born in Singapore where my gender and skin colour doesnâ??t limit me from getting the same opportunities as everyone else. And I am heartened by the fact that as long as I am willing to work hard, I will surely succeed.

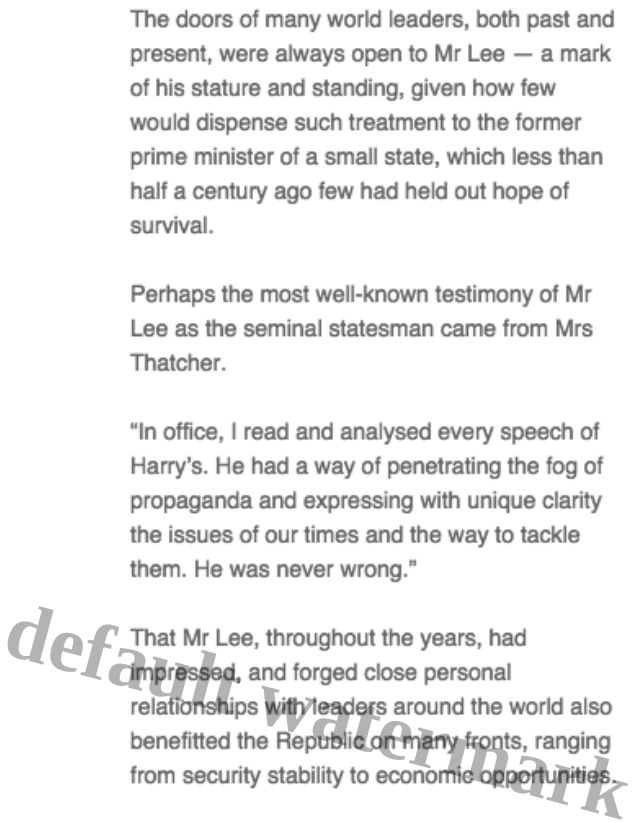
Our education system is so heavily subsidized that no matter how poor you are, the government goes to huge lengths to ensure everyone at least gets educated up to secondary school. Even a JC tertiary education is pretty cheap â?? I vaguely recall paying only $12 a month on average (that was years ago, correct me if Iâ??m wrong today).

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Even our local university degrees are much cheaper compared to overseas studies.

Strong diplomatic ties

Mr. Lee took efforts to build and maintain close friendships and relations with international leaders abroad. He earned the praise and respect of many. I love this writeup from Today newspaper:



The doors of many world leaders, both past and present, were always open to Mr Lee — a mark of his stature and standing, given how few would dispense such treatment to the former prime minister of a small state, which less than half a century ago few had held out hope of survival.

Perhaps the most well-known testimony of Mr Lee as the seminal statesman came from Mrs Thatcher.

"In office, I read and analysed every speech of Harry's. He had a way of penetrating the fog of propaganda and expressing with unique clarity the issues of our times and the way to tackle them. He was never wrong."

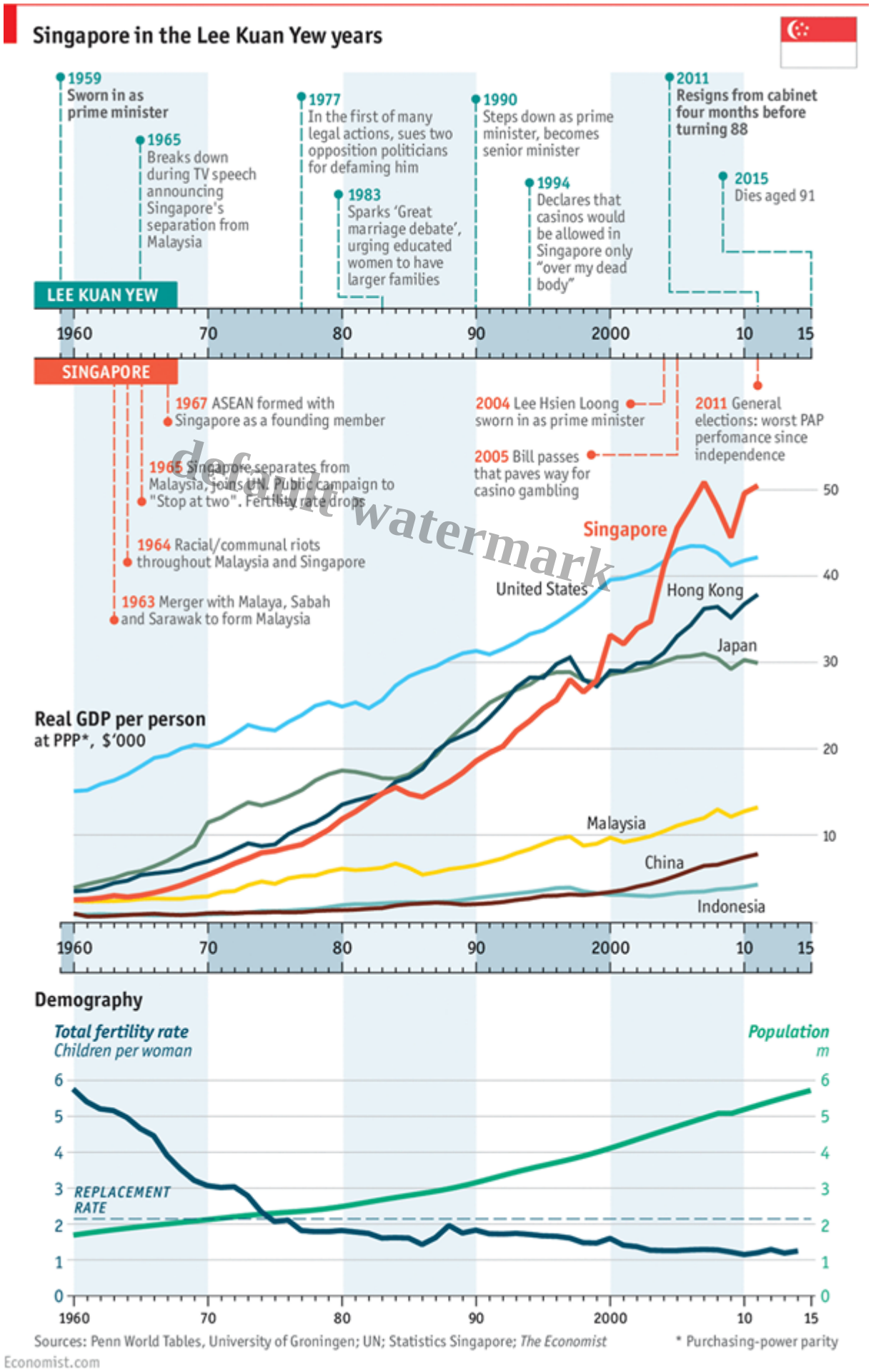
That Mr Lee, throughout the years, had impressed, and forged close personal relationships with leaders around the world also benefitted the Republic on many fronts, ranging from security stability to economic opportunities.

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From being a small and isolated city state, Mr. Lee made sure we were surrounded by allies. I like to think that one reason why weâ??ve not been subject to all the cross-border conflicts unlike other countries is due partly to the friendships Mr. Lee built.

After all, you would think twice before attacking a friend.

Singaporeâ??s timeline:


Singapore in the Lee Kuan Yew years
1959 Sworn in as prime minister
1965 Breaks down during TV speech announcing Singapore's separation from Malaysia
1977 In the first of many legal actions, sues two opposition politicians for defaming him
1983 Sparks 'Great marriage debate', urging educated women to have larger families
1990 Steps down as prime minister, becomes senior minister
1994 Declares that casinos would be allowed in Singapore only "over my dead body"
2011 Resigns from cabinet four months before turning 88
2015 Dies aged 91
LEE KUAN YEW
1960 70 80 90 2000 10 15
SINGAPORE
1967 ASEAN formed with Singapore as a founding member
1965 Singapore separates from Malaysia, joins UN. Public campaign to "Stop at two". Fertility rate drops
1964 Racial/communal riots throughout Malaysia and Singapore
1963 Merger with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia
2004 Lee Hsien Loong sworn in as prime minister
2005 Bill passes that paves way for casino gambling
2011 General elections: worst PAP perfomance since independence
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Real GDP per person at PPP*, $'000
Singapore
United States
Hong Kong
Japan
Malaysia
China
Indonesia
50
40
30
20
10
1960 70 80 90 2000 10 15
Demography
Total fertility rate
Children per woman
Population
m
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
REPLACEMENT RATE
1960 70 80 90 2000 10 15
Sources: Penn World Tables, University of Groningen; UN; Statistics Singapore; The Economist
* Purchasing-power parity
Economist.com

Just imagine, we were so close to being that yellow line. Instead, weâ??ve become an economic wonder and one of the worldâ??s richest countries.

Much has changed since then. While our parents hoped for a peaceful country and a stable rice bowl, our generation today wants more.

And that is the crux of our discontent.

Times have changed. We aspire to be rich and successful. We want to chart our own paths. We donâ??t like being controlled. Now that most of us generally have a good life (in the eyes of many, especially those who have experienced poverty), we want much more.

And thatâ??s not a crime. In fact, it is always good to strive for higher goals, which can only lead to greater progress.

But as we continue to debate over rising living costs and income inequality in hopes for the better tomorrow that we want, let us not forget how incredibly blessed we are to have already come this far.

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I quote Stefanie Sun: [Let us] be secure in the knowledge that hard work, good ethics will get [us] somewhere.

Thank you for the privilege, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

We owe you. And Singapore owes its success to you. We will strive to become an even better and prosperous Singapore â?? the Singapore you dreamed of and worked so hard to build.

Rest in peace.

Category

1. Family