



MR LEE KUAN YEW'S PARTING GIFT

BY BRIAN YIM

Singapore's founding father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, passed away on 23 March 2015 at 3.18 am at age 91.

MillionaireAsia pays tribute to a great nation builder.

The scenes that unfolded after the passing of former Singapore's Prime Minister for 31 years, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, were extraordinary.

A florist in the busy business district of Raffles Place started giving out flowers. A sign on display said, "Please help yourself to a stalk for free if you are going to pay respects to our beloved Mr Lee Kuan Yew. No photographs please. We do not want any publicity."

At the wake at Parliament House, where Mr Lee Kuan Yew's body laid in state, close to half a million Singaporeans of all races, from all walks of life, young and old, the handicapped, those in wheelchairs and on crutches, were willing to stand in orderly queues. They were prepared to wait as long as 11 hours, just to pay fleeting and yet reverent moments of their last respects to the country's first Prime Minister who built the nation.

Well over a million Singaporeans, or almost one out of every three citizens, also visited the more than a dozen memorial sites that were open 24 hours at precincts throughout the island.

The crowds just continued to swell unabated, undaunted by the discomfort of long waiting hours in the scorching sun and rain as the wake organisers scrambled to contain an unprecedented massive outpouring of grief that seemed to overflow when it dawned on Singaporeans that their founding father had passed on.

The queue to Parliament House had to be suspended intermittently when the waiting time exceeded 10 hours. But the crowds continued to surge as it seemed every Singaporean wanted to say their final goodbye to a founding father, as a gesture of their respect and gratitude.

The historic and unprecedented turnout, over the seven-day national mourning period is undoubtedly, by far the largest ever in Singapore. It was certainly a defining moment in the city-state's history. One that signifies the end of an era.

Acts Of Kindness

Just as remarkable, was the Singapore-style efficiency in crowd control and the well organised funeral arrangements, as well as the numerous spontaneous acts of kindness.

Individuals stepped up to serve as volunteers and total strangers dug deep into their pockets to buy meals and drinks for those standing in what seem like never ending lines. Shop owners and businesses also responded to offer free meals, drinks, umbrellas, fans and other refreshments for people in the snaking queue that traversed all across the city centre stretching for many kilometres long. Taxi drivers were seen offering free rides to those who had paid their respects.

It was a time which one people, united in grief and gratitude for the mastermind and architect of modern Singapore, who with single-minded determination and against all odds, built Singapore from a sleepy post-colonial outpost with no natural resources, populated by poor migrants into a clean and green metropolis and one of the most prosperous nations in the world in less than 50 years.

Measures Of Success

In 1959, when Mr Lee became Prime Minister at the young age of 35 years old, Singapore's per capita income was below US\$400. It has since shot up to US\$56,000. The Republic is now one out of only 11 countries that have a much desired AAA sovereign credit rating from all three leading rating agencies: S&P, Moody's and Fitch.

The statistics speak volumes of the distance Singapore has gone as a result of Mr Lee's far sighted policies:

| | 2014 | 1959 |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| GDP per capita | \$71,318 | \$1,240 |
| Government revenue | \$61.4 billion | \$300 million |
| External trade | \$982.7 billion | \$7.3 billion |
| Public housing | 1,062,153 homes | 22,975 homes |
| Land size | 718.3 sq km | 581.5 sq km |
| Literacy rate | 96.7% | 52% (1957) |
| Weekly flights | 6,500 flights by 100 airlines | 125 flights by 11 airlines (1960) |

(The Sunday Times, 29 March 2015)

Seldom has a leader in recent times, evoked such a response after their passing, at home and globally. Such was the reach and impact of Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

India even declared a day of mourning for a Singapore leader! Australia, New Zealand and Timor Leste, passed parliamentary motions to acclaim the man who has impacted the lives of so many. A long list of statesmen and global leaders, past and present and business tycoons like Li Ka Shing and Jack Ma visited the wake and funeral and acknowledged the legacy of Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

To his detractors, Mr Lee Kuan Yew may be an autocrat who suppressed personal freedoms and ruled for more than 30 years as Singapore's Prime Minister with an iron fist and who did not suffer fools lightly.

The "social engineering" in this unique blend of a socialist democracy, involved not just setting quotas for the racial composition for public housing estates, but also the size of families (Stop at Two Policy); creation of the Social Development Unit (SDU) to match make university graduates, and the infamous ban on chewing gum. Dissidents and political opponents who challenged Mr Lee, were dealt with harshly and taken to court, imprisoned, exiled or made to pay damages.

Vintage Mr Lee Kuan Yew

Mr Lee made no apologies when it came to curbing personal freedoms, trying to match make graduates or dealing forcefully with anyone whom he felt was a danger to the state. In his book, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, from 1965 to 2000*, he said, "If Singapore is a nanny state, then I am proud to have fostered one."





I am also grateful for the systems, institutions and First World infrastructure that Mr Lee and his team have created and built so that we have a safe, efficient, non-corrupt and harmonious, pro-business environment. One where I can create and build a business, get it registered and have it running within a day; where as an owner of a new enterprise and without the need for connections or bribes, I can write to a Minister or even Deputy Prime Minister to request to officiate at my conference or exhibition and they reply personally to graciously agree to my request.

Homeowning Population

Where else in the world, where citizens, who bought their modest 3-room public housing in the 1970s for \$15,000 can see the value of their real estate skyrocket to \$330,000 today? Or where 90% of the population have ownership of their own homes?

History has shown that there were many charismatic leaders who have blazed into the forefront of their respective countries but failed when it came to nation building. Or worse, plundered their national wealth and enriched themselves at the expense of their own people. We have too many examples of that!

Singaporeans are most fortunate that their founding leader epitomizes the virtues of integrity, a clean government, incorruptibility and a global reputation of not only getting things done, but done efficiently.

After building the foundations, Mr Lee was also not one to cling on to power but started the process of succession planning early. In 1990, he chose to step down as Prime Minister when he could have continued for at least another two decades, but he wanted to groom the second and even third generation of leaders to continue his legacy. This was invaluable foresight to facilitate a smooth transition.

“I Did My Best”

Yet for all his achievements for Singapore, Mr Lee said, “This was the job I undertook, I did my best and I could not have done more in the circumstances. What people think of it, I have to leave to them. It is of no great consequence. What is of consequence is that I did my best.”

In his eulogy at the state funeral, his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, noted that Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s passing had brought out the best of Singapore, jolting a normally reticent population to openly display many acts of kindness towards fellow Singaporeans and affection for a national hero.

PM Lee said, “The light that has guided us all these years has been extinguished. Our shared sorrow has brought us together and made us stronger and more resolute. We come together not only to mourn. We come together also to rejoice in Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s long and full life and what he has achieved with us, his people in Singapore.”

A shiny star has passed. But Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy of a strong and prosperous Singapore with a bright future is his gift to all Singaporeans that is now being widely appreciated.

Thank you, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

