Benny Lim, former
Permanent Secretary
of the Ministry of
National Development.

INTERVIEW

Benny Lim

Rebooting Nation Building in Singapore

Benny Lim began his 37-year public service career in the Singapore Police Force and rose to become Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs, National Security Coordination Secretariat, Prime Minister's Office, and Ministry of National Development. In this interview, he reflects on the limits of Singapore's social harmony, and advocates rebooting nation building efforts to address the inevitable tensions of increasing diversity.

What key principles have guided Singapore's approach to living with diversity?

Singapore enjoys a level of racial harmony that many observers describe as exceptional. Without detracting any significance from this achievement, I think it is useful to locate this observation against both historical and living contexts.

Singapore's commitment to be a nation that belongs to all Singaporeans regardless of ethnicity is a product of

political ideology, choice and circumstance in history. From the outset, the concept of a multi-ethnic nation of citizens with equal citizenship rights has been a cornerstone of the national ideology.

Indeed, one may argue that this fundamental difference between Singapore and Malaysia made separation [into two nation-states] inevitable.

Generally speaking, in the first two decades of independence, nation building was prioritised. Initiatives such as

What our history tells us is that we did not arrive at this state of ethnic harmony without conscious design, perseverance and effort. Central to that effort is the creation and development of a national identity called the Singapore citizen and the development of a governance framework that has maintained ethnic peace by cultivating public acceptance and trust.

In the last three decades, with political stability and order, our priorities on nation building seemed to have taken a back seat. Racial and religious harmony continued to be prioritised—but discretely and not as an integral aspect or part of a larger purposive nation-building enterprise.

Where has Singapore done well and which area needs more work?

If you measure communal harmony by the number of inter-ethnic conflicts, then you could say we have succeeded.

Our justice system has played a crucial role. Surveys on public confidence in government institutions typically find the police and courts at the top of the list. Confidence in the integrity, impartiality and professionalism of our law enforcement agencies and judiciary is very high.

From my own experience as a police officer, conflict between actors of different races in Singapore seldom leads to serious violence or rioting. Instead what usually happens are calls to the police by both parties or an observer and, regardless of the ethnicity of the police officer who

communal engagement, mass campaigns, National Service, and overarching symbols of unity and national values, such as the Pledge, weaved a common ideological fabric across diverse identities. English was chosen as the common language of administration and meritocracy enshrined as the organising principle in determining the advancement of citizens.

Singapore's governance framework was centred on a secular state, which offered protection through the rule of law to all citizens. Tough laws were applied robustly against those who threatened communal peace. On matters of well-being, however, the State was prepared to provide special support to the minorities like the creation of statutory bodies and special provisions in Constitution. This reflected a pragmatic appreciation of the difficulties of the minorities to otherwise compete against the dominance of the Chinese majority.

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01   Singapore introduced the compulsory conscription of male youths into national service in 1967.

02   Interactive public installations in 2012 featured lines from Singapore's national pledge.

> **"With political stability and order, our priorities on nation building seemed to have taken a back seat."**

01 Residents of a housing estate at a community durian party.

02 "*Kallang Roar*" refers to boisterous cheering by football fans of Singapore's football team.

arrives, there is trust and confidence in his or her intervention. This restraint rests on both the effectiveness of deterrence in strict laws against violence, especially race-based violence, and the trust in the authorities to dispense justice fairly.

Over time, the ideal and the value of ethnic harmony have come to be accepted and supported by most citizens. Polls consistently confirm this consensus.

However, I wonder if what undergirds this consensus is not radically different from why Singaporeans value the safe and secure low crime environment we have. Peace, safety, order and the danger of ethnic fault lines sparking tension and conflict are well appreciated by Singaporeans.

If this is so, and our ethnic harmony rests mainly at this level of consensus alone, and is not both anchored by deep personal bonds of trust, mutual understanding and by a strong national identity, then we need perhaps to think about the strength and resilience of this ethnic harmony and reflect on its limits.

In your opinion, what have been the most successful government initiatives in bringing different communities together?

In terms of urban and physical planning, I think the most important programme has been our public housing estates by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). I believe that the HDB heartland, where more than four out of five Singaporeans live, is a shared universe that is diverse in many ways and yet similar in so many concerns through the sharing of daily experiences in a common space.

For these reasons, I think we should focus our community building activities in the HDB heartland. Such activities should not dwell self-consciously on just promoting inter-ethnic bonding. We have to ask how we can get people to form real bonds of trust and friendship and cultivate reflexes for empathy and tolerance.

Crafting the right programmes that resonate with the ground is key. Grassroots leaders tell me that their durian parties are always over-subscribed by residents and certainly multi-ethnic in appeal. In the heyday of our Malaysia Cup [football] campaigns, the Kallang Roar was as spontaneous as it was multi-ethnic in voices! Such activities or programmes should engage the wider community, with multi-ethnic participation as one of its desired, but not necessarily declared outcomes.

Many perceive a backlash against immigration in the West. Do you see this happening in Singapore?

Singaporeans' concerns over foreigners arose when they perceived unfair treatment. Policy shifts in the last five years have done much to address such grievances. Jobs and job opportunities is the domain where such anxieties may still persist; crowdedness and congestion seem to have become less of a source of acute angst.

I don't think Singaporeans want to do away with foreign workers who build their homes and train lines, support their families with housework or take care of their frail elderly. Moreover, the proportion of citizens marrying foreign nationals has been consistent and is more than one in three in 2015.

Having said that, I believe we can do more in the integration of new citizens. We ought to give more thought to our engagement programmes, or even evaluate how integrated a person has become in our society, as a consideration for citizenship. For instance, we may want to consider a term Permanent Residency (PR) system where those who choose not to be citizens when eligible can be reverted to employment pass. In this case, they can continue to live and work here but with no right of permanent stay, and can leave when they retire or stop working. This is a tweak and formalises the current round-about-regime of fixed term Re-entry Permits. It calls a spade a spade and makes PR a commitment towards citizenship[1].

What are some of the difficulties in physically accommodating an increasingly diverse population, such as NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) sentiments, and how we can address them?

As a general principle, public interest should not be held hostage to self-centred individual interests, especially when there is no encroachment of the lawful space they own. We should be prepared to take a decision, agree to disagree and proceed.

At the community level, there is a real need for some kind of conflict resolution mechanism. Complaints about noise, for instance, are one of the most common complaints by residents to the police. However, unless it clearly breaches existing laws of nuisance or health codes, there is really little that the police can do when called upon. There is a practical need to boost our capability to mediate such conflicts in a community-centric way.

[1] Currently, Permanent Residents require Re-Entry Permits, which are renewed for up to five years each time, to return to the city-state from trips abroad.

A key issue of living with diversity is fostering social cohesion and resilience in the face of threats like terrorism. How did the initiatives you were involved in address this?

I was involved with establishing the Community Engagement Programme (CEP), the predecessor of the current SG Secure movement. The CEP was an effort to create an operational structure across various key domains to coordinate and manage response so that social cohesion is maintained during crises. One of its aims is to identify and train an activist cadre in each domain—workplace, schools, constituencies—to be the first responders when an incident occurs. This was based on the observation that in most disasters, it was always the people on site who saved the most lives, because no matter how fast the firefighters or police can arrive, they would always be slower than those already there.

Another objective was that through the frequent emergency exercises, we would be able to build a network of trust and mutual confidence among the key actors, who can be relied on to maintain calm in their respective domains following an incident.

The idea for the recently opened Harmony in Diversity Gallery came from the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), a body that has worked to promote inter-faith dialogue for peace and understanding since 1949. The gallery showcases the common strands that are found in all the religions in Singapore and also succinctly explains how the framework of maintaining religious harmony works in Singapore.

Its real potential resides in the engagement programmes that will be developed in partnership with others in the community and in the public service.

> **" When class and ethnic lines coincide and reinforce each other, the challenge will be compounded. "**

Looking ahead, what are the key challenges to integration facing Singapore in the next 20 to 30 years?

The challenges to social cohesion in the future may not just come from the latent cleavages of multi-ethnicity but also from the fault lines of class. When class and ethnic lines coincide and reinforce each other, the challenge will be compounded.

Also, race today may be less salient than religion as a source of potential divisiveness. The rise of religiosity has been observed in many countries. In Singapore, it has led to an even more plural religious landscape, with differentiation occurring within religious communities.

This diverse terrain has reduced the reach of the traditional religious elite's authority. In turn, their effectiveness as mediators in inter-religious conflict may decline.

The State will have to be relied on even more to hold the ring. It needs to step up its resources and capabilities to manage this complexity. The challenge will not just be to manage competition between groups but more their demands against the State and society for concessions to their interests interpreted as their fundamental rights.

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01 Mr Lim (second from right) at a typical hawker centre exhibit in the Harmony in Diversity Gallery.

02 Block parties are organised to welcome residents to newly built public housing.

How can Singapore be better equipped to deal with these?

"Dialogic" conflict resolution requires the parties to be able to define their interests and then negotiate and come to an acceptable solution rationally. However, when interests are pursued as rights based on ideological-religious grounds, the dispute is more deep-seated and needs to be resolved either by "imperative" or "ideological" conflict resolution means.

Imperative conflict resolution requires contending parties to respect an authority to judge and to accept his verdict. The courts work this way; respected patriarchs too. Ideological conflict resolution requires a supra-ideology to which contending parties subscribe to. Civic nationalism is the most common form of this in the modern state.

01　Graphic recording of issues discussed at the National CEP Dialogue 2015.

02　To Benny Lim, founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's death triggered a reflection of what it meant to be Singaporean.

Hence, maintaining public confidence in the justice system and cultivating national identity, pride and loyalty are ways to develop resilience in the face of our growing diversity and the tensions that come with it.

While we have paid much attention to good governance, I think we can do more for nation building. If the ideal of a multi-ethnic Singapore citizenry is to remain a cornerstone of our national ideology, we need to promote it as an integral part of nation building, of a unitary national identity based on citizenship. It is a good time to reboot our nation building efforts: on the ground, SG 50 [Singapore's year-long celebration of 50 years of independence] and the passing of our founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew have already given this process of self-discovery and re-discovery for our younger and older generations respectively, a jump-start. ⚙

> "Confidence in the justice system ... national identity, pride and loyalty are ways to develop resilience in the face of our growing diversity ..."