

## **Tribute to Greatness, The Late Goh Keng Swee...Legacy of Paradox (Part 2)**

### **1. Moral Courage To Act Yet Willing to Learn and Adjust Appropriately**

*“When faced with a nasty problem, we met it head on. Experience shows that difficulties cannot be wished away. Postponing action in the hope that time solves everything usually makes your predicament worse.”*

This was most evident in his work at the Ministry of Education. Despite not being trained as an educator, as Minister of Education, he and his team of young defense engineers addressed issues like the morale of teachers, bilingual education, streaming and moral education.

Although there were many reservations and detractors, he pushed through many of his policies. Particularly, the streaming policy, in which he believed there was no one-size-fits-all education, gives rise to children’s ability to learn at different paces.

He took umbrage that all students, even those who consistently failed exams, were put through a 12-year regime that had been designed for the top 15 per cent of the cohort.<sup>1</sup> Only 42 per cent of a Primary 1 cohort made it to secondary school. Out of this lot, 16 per cent made it to the A levels and a mere 6 per cent went on to universities and polytechnics.

The resulting streaming yielded results. In the six years, from 1978 – 1984, the percentage of Singaporeans with secondary school education jumped from 42 per cent to 46 per cent, while those with post-secondary from 16 to 18 per cent and tertiary education from 6 to 8 per cent.<sup>2</sup> There were some fall-outs but there is no doubt that many have benefitted from this policy.

Appalled at the fallen social standing and poor quality of teachers, He raised the pay of teachers as well as opportunities for teachers to be promoted and improve themselves.<sup>3</sup> Director-General of Education, Ho Peng, attributes Dr Goh as the architect in laying strong foundations for many key and successful education policies today.

As Singapore’s economic architect, he repudiated conventional wisdom - the notion of ‘import-substituting industrialization’ and the suspicion of Multi-National Companies’ (MNC) capitalist exploitative tendency of the 1960s. He welcomed the MNCs and helped Singapore industrialize.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Long & Ho Ai Li. Shaking up the education ministry. May 16. P D8. Singapore Press Holdings Publication. Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Long & Ho Ai Li. Shaking up the education ministry. May 16. P D8. Singapore Press Holdings Publication. Singapore.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Long & Ho Ai Li. Shaking up the education ministry. May 16. P D8. Singapore Press Holdings Publication. Singapore.

“Never shy to call in the experts, Dr Goh invited Dutch economist Albert Winsemius, who recommended the formation of the Economic Development Board to attract MNC investment and to serve as a one-stop shop that would handle all investors’ queries.”<sup>ii</sup>

On a personal level, he was never shy to say that he did not know something or what they stood for. This was best illustrated by a story told by Philip Yeo, his protégé.

The Chairman of Spring Singapore and former Chairman of Economic Development Board recounted the time when Dr Goh asked him to send a computer engineer to see him. He thought Dr Goh wanted to learn how to use the computer. Instead he was told that he wanted to see what’s inside the computer.

He had this insatiable appetite to learn.

## **2. Confident and Self-Assured Yet Humble and Frugal**

*“Prudence does not mean that one must always take counsel of one’s fears...Safety can be won only by daring.”*

In setting up the Junior Flying Club as a feeder for the Singapore Air Force, Dr Goh decided that the most economical way to train young pilots was to use hand gliders. But they were found to be unsuitable for flying training in Singapore and were abandoned within a couple of years.

Through this episode, it showed that while Dr Goh sought to find novel solutions, he was willing to abandon a non-workable idea rather than go on a ego trip not to admit the mistake and to keep doing it even though it didn’t work.<sup>4</sup>

Describing their entry into politics to change the system of colonialism and communists’ stronghold, he acknowledged that ‘it was an act of reckless folly...we were like innocent virgins roaming a brothel area.’ He acknowledged that there was a higher power that had protected and saw them through the hell-fire of those times.

He concluded, “If I were a deeply religious man, I would ascribe our escape to a benevolent God.” The late Dr Goh was a Methodist.

His humility marked by his frugality extended to his personal life. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recounted how he saw Dr Goh driving an old car, “He didn’t care about fancy cars or fancy dresses. He just wanted to get the job done.”<sup>iii</sup> His wife recounted how he wore a Casio digital watch for years. If the strap broke he would replace it with a rubber band.

But he would not think twice-donating \$5,000 to a hospice which sought funds to buy an electronic wheelchair for a patient.

It was not just the form of frugality that reflected his humility. But there was also a keenness to learn. Whatever he fancied, he would pursue with child-like enthusiasm but was always driven in the best interest of Singapore and for the welfare of our people.

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<sup>4</sup> Goh Chin Lian. Corporate who built an army. The Straits Times. May 16. P D8. Singapore Press Holdings Publication. Singapore.

I believe his curiosity for learning is fueled by the recognition of his own inadequacy and a sense that he might fail, big time. He described the initial building of the SAF as a period of confusion, managing crises and running a battle of crash courses to build up the army quickly in a short period of time.

He opined realistically, "It's a minor miracle that we ever got off the ground...we kept on learning by trial and error, as much error as trial."

Ken-Yi, his grandson, wrote, "My grandfather, being innately self-effacing and preferring to avoid the limelight, always seemed to me a little at odds with his overtly public vocation and when the time came to blaze a certain trail, he would rise to the challenge, on center stage no less if had to."<sup>iv</sup>

Indeed, as President Nathan, concludes in his tribute, "Dr Goh will be remembered by all who knew him, as a humble and simple man, who in his quiet way inspired one to achieve great things."<sup>v</sup>

### **3. Intellectual Rigor Yet Pragmatic Realism**

*"The history of mankind shows that man's capacity to inflict injury upon himself seems to be boundless. Edward Gibbon in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire gave this definition of history. "History," he said, "is little more than a register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."<sup>vi</sup>*

Dr Goh has been described as 'an intellectual politician,' 'a political entrepreneur,' and "a social architect.' In every area of work, his special expertise and contribution is his ability to harness his profound understanding of the subject, and put it to work in the real world for the betterment of his people.<sup>vii</sup>

In quoting Edward Gibbon, we see the intellectual curiosity of this great man: well-read and a keen learner. He read a lot, was willing to learn, with a child-like appetite for knowledge and experiences. He demanded the same kind of rigor in learning and reasoning from the people he worked with.

He is not 'airy-fairy' in his approach and practice. He once wrote, "A practitioner is not judged by the rigor of his logic or by the elegance of his presentation. He is judged by the results."<sup>viii</sup>

### **4. True to Fundamentals Yet Adaptable to Changing Situations**

*"The ends of policy are immutable..To achieve prosperity for the Republic and her citizens and to ensure the survival of the Republic as an independent sovereign state."<sup>x</sup>*

There were fundamental values that he upheld. These never change.

President Nathan wrote insightfully, "He was a Calvinist in his thrift, scrupulous in his honesty and determined in his perseverance in whatever task he undertook. He had his principles as well as his prejudices. He had his moods and momentary indignations. But, above all, he was always prepared to listen. He had extraordinary energy and a sense of selflessness."<sup>x</sup>

The Israelis advisors were so impressed with him that they referred privately to him as *bing ish harzel*, a Hebrew term reserved for a person of great strength of character.<sup>5</sup>

The fundamentals he upheld were not reflected in the organizations he directed but also in his personal life and his interactions with family members.

His grandson, Ken-Yi shared this reflection in his eulogy about Dr Goh, his beloved 'Ah Kong'. Ken-Yi had graduated with an engineering degree but had no intention of becoming an engineer. He had done a second degree in English Literature.

As he was trying hard to explain to his grand dad how he was about to start a banking career, Dr Goh asked to see him about his career path, eyeballed him for a second and said, "Ken-Yi, all this doesn't matter. In working life, first and foremost, what you need to be is a reliable and responsible person. At first, you may be given some tasks to complete; later in your career, you will be setting these tasks yourself as you rise through anagement. Whichever the case, you ust always be a person others can count on to do a good job, whether the end result is successful or not."<sup>xi</sup>

It is a truism that who we are at home will be reflected in who we are in our organizations, not necessary the other way round.

PM Lee writes, "In every organization he headed, Dr Goh nurtured a culture of continuous adaptation and improvement to stay ahead of the changing world."<sup>xii</sup>

Towards the end, he bemoaned how putting education in the service of the economy had cultivated conformity rather than creativity. He was also openly critical of the examination-oriented education system, "The idea of education as a search for truth, the excitement for intellectual inquiry and speculation – all this are given lip service and little else. And so we have in Singapore intellectual conformity in place of intellectual inquisitiveness. And it all adds up to a depressing climate of intellectual sterility."

It is my opinion that his reprimand has set the foundation for the many education initiatives seen today: The rebranding of Polytechnics, Institutes of Technical education (ITEs), the introduction of Sports Schools, School of the Arts, the influx of overseas universities, INSEAD, Chicago Business School, Singapore Management University and the countless initiatives by the Ministry of Education to make education more alive bear the insipient imprints of one man – Dr Goh Keng Swee.

In his final speech to new politicians, he recognized that they 'cannot follow the style of work of the old guard. They will have to find their own way.,, A new generation is emerging...The style of government must change, and probably, to a significant degree, the substance of policy as well."

## 5. Leaving Leaders and Organizations Greater Than Himself

*“Whatever he created has endured, and become the foundation for succeeding generations to build and improve upon.”<sup>xiii</sup>*

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his condolence letter to Dr Goh’s family.

To me, the final mark of a great leader is one who pursues succession planning relentlessly and leaves the team and the organization far greater than him.

Dr Goh did not hog the limelight. He knew when to step down and step out, and not get in the way of the younger generation of leaders. He only consulted when asked, never imposed.

To PM Lee, “Dr Goh strongly supported leadership renewal, a continuing imperative for Singapore. He actively pushed for the transition from the founding generation to a new, younger team who would lead Singapore to greater heights of achievement.”<sup>6</sup>

As Singapore’s first finance minister in 1959, he had to tackle a number of challenges: the high unemployment at 14%, low literacy rates, acute and appalling housing conditions and reserves at a paltry \$200 million.<sup>xiv</sup>

By the time he quit public life in 1992, within 15 years, Singapore was described as an ‘economic miracle’ and within 30 years, a ‘developed country.’<sup>xv</sup> He had laid the foundations for Singapore’s GDP to increase by more than 11 times, manufacturing output had risen 20-fold and reserves were up more than 300-fold.<sup>xvi</sup>

Finally, Dr Goh ended his life journey well. Should I say, Very Well. It is truly a tribute to his greatness because I have often contended that we will never know a leader’s greatness until the end. Dr Goh has stayed true to his cause and pursued his vision doggedly till the end.

Dr Goh is certainly not only a great leader! He built a legacy of greatness, embracing the paradoxes of leadership, what Jim Collins calls “The Genius of The ‘And’”

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<sup>i</sup> Goh Chin Lian, MOE chalks up professionalism to Dr Goh. The Sunday Times. May 18, 2010. P 6. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.

<sup>ii</sup> Lee Su Shyan, His fingerprint on every important policy. The Straits Times. May 15, 2010. P D5. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.

<sup>iii</sup> Goh Chin Lian, PM: We’re building on what Dr Goh has done. The Sunday Times. May 18, 2010. P 1. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.

<sup>iv</sup> Goh Ken-Yi. A caring, selfless grandfather. The Straits Times. May 24, 2010. P 10. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.

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- <sup>v</sup> S R Nathan. A gem of a man in all respects. The Business Times. May 15-16, 2010. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.
- <sup>vi</sup> Goh Keng Swee, A Holy Order To Scale New Heights. The Straits Times. May 18, 2010. P A21. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.
- <sup>vii</sup> Vikram Khanna, The Practical Visionary. The Business Times. May 15-16, 2010. P 1. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.
- <sup>viii</sup> Vikram Khanna, The Practical Visionary. The Business Times. May 15-16, 2010. P 1. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.
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- <sup>xv</sup> Lee Su Shyan, His fingerprint on every important policy. The Straits Times. May 15, 2010. P D5. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Vikram Khanna, The Practical Visionary. The Business Times. May 15-16, 2010. P 1. Singapore Press Holdings Publication, Singapore.