

Notes from Asia Pacific, early February 2013

Contemplating the future

Both in Malaysia and in its small, rich neighbour across the causeway, Singapore, it is time to think about the future. Both countries have been governed by the same political party since they were established in their current form in the 60s and 70s under their very different charismatic leaders; Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore.

In Malaysia, the ruling Barisan Nasional party lost its absolute majority in 2008 and now five out of the 12 state governments have opposition-led administrations. The next general election must be held by April this year, and the outcome is too close to call. In Singapore, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) still has the vast majority of seats but it suffered some setbacks in the 2011 general election - and recently lost a by-election which had resulted from the enforced resignation of the (PAP) Speaker of Parliament after a scandal about an extra-marital affair. This would be written off in the West as the usual mid-term by-election kick in the teeth for the government, but such things are not "usual" in Singapore.

The Government of Singapore has been carrying out a "conversation" with its citizens about what the state should be like in 20 or 30 years' time, and what kind of society people want. A theme which emerged early was education – particularly discussion in the hard and soft media about how to reduce the stress of the high-stakes Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Indeed, some had the temerity to suggest that the PSLE should be scrapped altogether and Ministers quickly stepped in to confirm that the exam would continue as an essential component of Singapore's commitment to the principle of meritocracy - although there was talk of somehow making it less stressful.

The discussions eventually converged around three headlines – immigration, quality of life and values. Singaporeans are concerned that large numbers of immigrant workers, brought in to support the country's economic push, keep wages low, overcrowd the city and take resources away from social measures benefitting native Singaporeans. There is also resentment at high house prices and growing gaps between rich and poor. Inspired by Mrs Thatcher's policy of council house sales in the UK, Lee Kwan Yew encouraged private ownership of apartments in state ("HDB") blocks in Singapore but some of these apartments are now being sold on at what Singaporeans think are astronomical prices. In taxi rides it is common for the story to come up of the HDB penthouse apartment sold for a million dollars. On values, there seems to be a consensus across races and age groups that Singapore needs to be a more "gracious" society and that the up and coming generation, who have largely been spared the hardships suffered by their parents and grandparents, are in danger of becoming too materialistic and selfish. All of this has implications for education.

As a next step "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore" was published last week. It attempted to take a middle route between two conflicting sets of demands. On the one hand, industry wants more immigrant workers to support the economy (with a diminishing Singaporean workforce because of low fertility rates), while on the other many Singaporeans want less immigration and are worried about overcrowding. The chosen strategy envisages the population (citizens and permanent residents) rising by 2030 from the current 5.3 million to a range from 6.5 - 6.9 million.

Public attention immediately focused on the upper end of the range, and many conversations now begin with "When there are 6.9 million of us...". There have been outcries from both sides - from industry about immigration limits being too strict and from the public and trade unions about how the little city state can possibly accommodate the extra people. The trains and buses are overcrowded now and there are long waiting lists for houses. How

much more of this can we take? The publication of the White Paper was quickly followed by announcements of ambitious plans to reclaim land, establish new business areas (to reduce congestion among commuters to the centre) and improve public amenities and transport. The abundant greenery of Singapore provides is a valued resource for the public, as well as protecting the air quality, and the Prime Minister assured us all that Singapore would remain “a city in a garden”.

Amid all the clamour, one important forecast in the Population Paper has been largely overlooked. By 2030, we are told, two-thirds of working Singaporeans will be in professional, managerial, executive and technical (PMET) jobs, compared with half today. The education system will be expected to produce almost half a million more young people with skills for PMET jobs than it does now. They will come from the group who have been lower academic achievers in the past. Developing the talent of middle-achievers for PMET jobs will become even more strategically important for Singapore.

Turning to Malaysia, an Education Blueprint was published last autumn for consultation and has now been endorsed by the Government in the final weeks before the Election. The Blueprint is a 300-page long analysis of the educational needs of Malaysian society and the economy, including the importance of inculcating “higher order thinking skills” to prepare young people for the jobs of the future. The analysis is insightful and persuasive, although it leaves some questions open, including the thorny one of the best language(s) of instruction for a country which wants to promote the national language and culture but also wants Malaysia to be globally engaged and competitive.

In addition, many have commented that the problems for Malaysia in most Government-led reforms are about sustaining implementation and maintenance. This is as true of curriculum and assessment as of new roads. The big challenges will be to translate the Blueprint into practice and keep the momentum going.

This week I joined a group of Singapore-based business representatives from Europe in a visit to Iskandar, the large development area in the south of Malaysia just across from Singapore. Iskandar is huge – exactly three times the surface area of Singapore. It has attracted some iconic investments including a new campus for the English public school Marlborough College (we were told more than once that it has five rugby pitches and two cricket pitches) and a new medical school run jointly with Newcastle University. Pinewood Studios is due to open its capacious new facilities there in May this year. Initially, there were grandiose ambitions for Iskandar to out-Singapore Singapore, with gleaming multi-story office blocks and F1 racetracks. That has changed and the development is now being steered by pragmatic private-public partnerships who are promoting it as a series of demand-led business parks. The down-to-earth Scottish CEO of one of the development companies who spoke to our group encouraged us to see Iskandar as an overflow for Singapore. “Keep your head offices in Singapore,” he said. “With the 6.9 million of you competing for scarce space there, you can use us for your manufacturing and studio base”. Some parts of Iskandar are already full, and have spawned their own overflow arrangements. “Eduhub”, with its universities and medical school, has put up the “house full” notice, and a new “EduPark” is being planned.

Most of us on the tour thought that the new pragmatic approach was more credible than some of the earlier hyperbole. We all felt that the development had progressed too far to be reversed now, and the questions were about the longer term. Can Malaysia and Singapore reduce barriers for companies wanting to be based in both? The bus carrying our group was held up for an hour at immigration on the bridge from Singapore to Iskandar. When the care and maintenance role for the infrastructure of Iskandar passes to the state authorities in Malaysia, will they be able to continue to renew and improve it in the way that Singapore does so well? We saw a new “Trust” school built by the State of Johor for the expanding

local population in one part of Iskandar, and more are planned. There is talk of making these new schools pilots for some of the advances advocated in the Education Blueprint. Will this happen in practice?

The economists predict continued GDP growth in both Singapore and Malaysia, though Malaysia, richer in resources and less dependent on the USA and Europe, will grow by more. Both will be dwarfed by the growth projected for their common giant neighbour, Indonesia. All three countries have expanding middle classes of young adults who expect a good quality of life and are plugged in (literally as well as metaphorically) to developments and ideas beyond national frontiers. They want their own children to go to good schools and get the right skills (whatever these are) for good jobs in the future, whether they work for national or international companies. Their priorities may be different from those of their illustrious founding figures. But they have gained a lot from the progress that has been made so far and do not want to throw it away, so there are also voices urging caution. So the direction of the changes ahead is not clear. But one conclusion is inescapable – education in South East Asia cannot afford to stand still.