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## **Boundaries of Socio-Political Discourse in the Singapore Media : The Out-Of-Bounds (OB) Markers**

Tan Pin Yang  
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# **Boundaries of Socio-Political Discourse in the Singapore Media: The Out-of-Bounds (OB) Markers**

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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

November 1990, with the stepping down of Singapore's inaugural Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, saw the changing of the guard in Singapore, together with the promise of a more consultative style of government and greater citizen participation. However, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had been quick to point out that the new openness did not mean that they would tolerate undue criticisms of the government.

Participants in political discussions are thus constrained by the Out-of-bounds markers (OB markers) which dictate the rules of political engagement and the topics which are deemed by the PAP as too sensitive for public debate. The OB markers are not a defined set of rules, and evolve with the prevailing socio-political climate.

The OB markers have been in existence long before it was brought into the limelight in 1994, when a Singaporean author was chastised by the PAP for two critical political commentaries published in the press. The Singaporean government has justified the need for OB markers in maintaining national security and religious and racial harmony.

Although Singaporean academics have mentioned the OB markers in their work, there has been no extensive study performed on the topic. This thesis aims to explore the conditions which have informed the need for OB markers and its implementation in the local press, using *The Straits Times* as a case study. The thesis will also discern if there has been a shift in these markers using the public discussion of the Marxist Conspiracy, the Catherine Lim incident and the Ong Presidency as test cases.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
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- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature



Date

24/08/2002

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the subject of Out-of-bounds (OB) markers which have been mentioned and alluded to in writings on politics and social control in the city state of Singapore. The OB markers (in golfing parlance, a set of coloured flags cordoning off an area where golfers are not permitted to enter) basically refer to the boundaries of political and social discussion which the Singapore government has no hesitation in voicing its displeasure when they are breached. The application of the term in a political context seems to be a uniquely Singaporean occurrence since only local politicians and writers have used this term in reference to these unwritten rules of social-political discourse.

Local writer Dr Catherine Lim became the *cause célèbre* of the OB markers debate in 1994. Lim had strayed into the realm of political commentary in her article when she speculated about an apparent contest of styles within the government of Singapore, between Lee Kuan Yew's sterner stand and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's "kinder, gentler" approach (George, 2000, p.41). The PAP took Lim's comment on "one government, two styles" to mean that Prime Minister Goh was not in charge of governance (Low, 1998, p.61).

Lim was rebuked by the Prime Minister's office, and was told to fulfil her political potential by joining a political party. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was also of the view that such "poison darts" must be stopped and that the Prime Minister should not hesitate to take on anyone who challenges him so that his authority and office will not be mocked (Low, 1998, p.62).

A critic of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), veteran opposition party member J. B. Jeyaretnam, argued that the OB markers and other such unwritten rules are undemocratic and unconstitutional (Lee, 1999). Jeyaretnam pointed out that Article 14 of the Singapore Constitution ensures the rights of all Singaporean citizens to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.

The government countered however, saying that the same article empowered them to impose restrictions if the exercise of those rights threatened national security, relations with other countries, public order, morality, or if it was in contempt of court, defamatory and incited violence (Lee, 1999).

Political activist James Gomez (2000, p.71) states that the presence of OB markers and the censorial nature of the republic severely restricts the cultivation of a politically active civil society, and inadvertently leads to self-censorship. Voices of dissent are muffled under the tide of creature comforts and the good life which the PAP has managed to provide for Singaporeans. As long as Singapore, the “nanny-state” (Gomez, 2000, p.72) provides the necessary environment for economic growth, the people are content. The materialist pragmatism of Singaporeans has left most of them politically apathetic, or unwilling to risk their livelihood in disagreeing with the government.

In the same vein, former *Straits Times* journalist Cherian George has termed Singapore the “Air-Conditioned Nation”, because the republic is “a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control, where people have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy” (George, 2000, p.15). Comfort is the means through which control is achieved by the PAP. Picking up on the air-conditioner metaphor, the OB markers are thus a thermostat to ensure that the heat of political debate does not reach an uncomfortable level.

Some observers questioned whether Dr Catherine Lim had broken these unwritten rules, and found it hard to accept that someone as eloquent as her had crossed the line between observer and participant. Legal scholar Walter Woon had, in a different context, called the catch-all definitions employed in the laws as “driftnet laws”, which is a legislative net that enables the government to trawl a whole ocean of eventualities and throw back whatever it was not interested in (George, 2000, p.43).

The message that seemed to have been sent out to the rest of the population was that they would not stand a chance if they were to comment on the PAP and its policies, since a polished communicator like Catherine Lim had misfired in her attempt.

Engaging in political debate was therefore an extremely risky undertaking best left to those who felt well equipped (or were foolhardy enough) to wade into the murky waters.

Ho Khai Leong, a senior lecturer in political science in Singapore, states that the uniqueness of Singapore's public policy can be best explained when it is viewed in the proper strategic, political, economic and social contexts of the city-state. Misunderstandings and misconceptions about Singapore often arise from ignoring these factors. A consideration of these variables is important for analysis in order to find middle ground between the ideal and reality (Ho, 2000, p.12).

This statement, it seems, reflects the general consensus among Singaporean scholars and politicians that most overseas (and some local) critics and observers tend to view Singapore's policies within an a-historical framework.

The various social and political factors that have informed Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party of the need to restrict public debate and the media will be explored in Chapter One. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has repeatedly mentioned that the Western-style democracies and press systems cannot be universally applied because each country has its own distinct history and path to development. The most explicit statement of his beliefs can be found in his two-volume autobiography, which will be drawn upon in this thesis, as well as *Lee Kuan Yew: The man and his ideas* (Han et al., 1997).

The unique circumstances surrounding Singapore's establishment as a sovereign state, such as a lack of natural resources and her mainly multiracial population, presented the PAP with a formidable task of making the nation thrive and prosper. The insensitive reporting in the 1950s which led to chaos made it clear that harmonious interracial relations had to be maintained, and hence an OB marker was planted on racially inflammatory issues.

Chapter Two briefly describes the removal of communist and foreign influence in the Singaporean press during the 1970s. The existence of several laws such as the Internal Security Act and the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act - some of which

were legacies of British press control - (Chua, 1998, p.146) played a major part in bringing the local newspapers to the heels of the government.

*The Straits Times*, Singapore's oldest newspaper, eventually chose to adhere to the OB markers and government policies for the sake of survival. Its history to 1995 has been comprehensively explored in C.M. Turnbull's *Dateline Singapore*. Now tasked with the mission to 'inform, educate and entertain', one of its columnists Chua Lee Hoong points out that the current editors "do not accept that being anti-establishment is a newspaper's only path to greatness and glory" (Chua, 1998, p.147). Chua is of the opinion that the Singaporean press is not, and should not be "a secular hound of heaven barking at the heels of the government to keep it in line" (Chua, 1998, p.147). Moreover, she points out that the American media model works on the assumption that governments are inherently corrupt, and therefore need a watchdog to prevent abuses of power. One can see the incompatibility between the Western press model and Lee Kuan Yew's Confucianist view (that all sectors of a nation are subordinate to the government, and it in turn has the moral obligation to be corruption-free) of what the press should be.

The third chapter seeks to ascertain if there has been a shift in the OB markers in the years following Lee Kuan Yew's stepping down as Prime Minister, and to see if PM Goh's promise of a 'kinder, gentler' government had been fulfilled. A qualitative analysis will be performed on articles drawn from *The Straits Times* concerning the Marxist Conspiracy, the Catherine Lim and the Ong Presidency cases. These cases have been chosen because they span a length of time which saw Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister (in 1987), and eight years into Goh Chok Tong's tenure as PM of Singapore (1999). For each case, the areas put under scrutiny include: firstly, depth of the discussion and commentary from the reporters; secondly, presence of alternative points of view or concerns raised; thirdly, editorial comments; and lastly, responses from the public to the Forum pages.

This thesis is meant to be a primer on the subject of OB markers, enabling the reader to knowledgeably follow up on further discussions. It hopes to achieve three objectives: the first is shed light what the OB markers are. The second objective is to explain where they came from, and the third objective is to discern if there has been a shift towards a widening of the OB markers. I believe that this work is an original

contribution to writings on Singaporean policy-making, since OB markers have only been alluded to in current work, and there is no dedicated text on this subject.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Road to OB Markers

#### Overview of the OB Markers Issue

The 'Out of bounds markers' or 'OB markers' in short, are defined in golfing terms as stakes or fence poles which define the boundaries of play within a golf course. When a ball is launched beyond these boundaries, it is forfeit from the game (USGA, 2002). A search over the Internet yields results either relating to the game of golf or to Singaporean politics with the term adopting another meaning when applied to the Singaporean context.

Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister and an avid golfer, used this term to refer to topics which were considered too sensitive to be discussed publicly- such as matters touching on race or religion. However, these OB markers reach further. With them the rules of political engagement have been defined. Often citing Singapore's multiracial, multireligious makeup, Lee makes no apologies for his tough stance on silencing those who would breach the OB markers and compromise the nation's stability or attack the government and its fitness to rule.

Ho (2000, p.186) states:

In political discussions, Singaporeans are constrained by what the governing elite called the 'Out of bound markers' or OB markers in short. OB markers refer to issues that are too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilizing or jeopardizing public peace and order...and racial issues are within this parameter of OB marker.

Although Lee Kuan Yew had used this term before prior to the 1990s, OB markers were frequently brought up in public debate during that decade. The 1990s saw Singapore basking in its wealth as a result of over 30 years of meticulous government planning, as well as the emergence of a more politically savvy section of the population. These young men and women had never lived through the trauma of the Japanese occupation nor experienced the tumultuous years of the fight for independence and communal rioting. Influenced by Western liberal democratic ideals, they form a major part of the new civil society that has emerged in the city-state.

Their participation in Singaporean politics had been greeted with caution and some suspicion by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which has held the reins for 37 years since the country's independence in 1965. Birch (1993, p.7) points out that they seem to be wary of Gresham's Law of culture where 'good' values will be driven out by the 'bad'. Lee has always held the view that Singapore, and any other Asian country, has evolved differently from the Western nations. Where Western institutions have had the luxury of centuries for their evolution, Asian nations were expected to put in place already mature institutions the moment their colonial masters departed. Hence, according to the PAP, the ways of the West are not the ways for Singapore, given the unique circumstances surrounding the development of either side.

It comes as no surprise then, that when Singapore's new civil society comes up with ideas deemed too radical by the PAP, the former would often be reminded by the latter that transplanting foreign ideas into Singaporean society is not only unwise, but could have dire consequences. The OB markers are thus useful for keeping arguments and debates thrown up in public within a corral, where the PAP could easily step in should the discussions offend their sensitivities, or those of any ethnic or religious group.

While the Singaporean population at large is accepting of the idea that boundaries exist in socio-political discourse, many are uncomfortable with the fact that these boundaries seem to be arbitrary and lack definition. Owing to the innate '*kiasu*' (afraid to lose) and '*kiasi*' (afraid to die) mentality of many Singaporeans, they would like to have in their hands a map with which they could chart the course of their arguments, and avoid falling foul of the PAP.

Many have called on the PAP to set a 'once-and-for-all' definition on where the OB markers lie. The PAP, on the other hand, is reluctant to do so for the fear of opening loopholes which could be exploited (George, 2000, p.43). This reluctance in turn generates a feeling of disconcertment among those who feel that the government can come down on anyone for any reason at all since the 'rules' are so arbitrary.

The issue of OB markers cannot be seen a-historically by taking it only in its current context and assessed through the eyes of a Western liberal democrat. Indeed, Ho

(2000, p.12) remarks that misconceptions about Singapore often arise from ignoring the country's strategic, political, historical, economic and social contexts. These factors relevant to OB markers will be discussed in the following sections, and are necessary in order to assess the issue in its proper place.

### **Singapore's First Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew**

Lee Kuan Yew has always been sceptical of the idea of a free press and of the marketplace of ideas. He says that his early experiences in Singapore and Malaya shaped his views about the claim of the press to be the defender of truth and freedom of speech. To Lee, the freedom of the press was the freedom of its owners to advance their personal and class interests (Lee, 2000, p.186).

Far from sorting the irresponsible from the responsible and rewarding the latter, Lee states that the "American concept of the 'marketplace of ideas', instead of producing enlightenment, has time and again led to riots and bloodshed" (Han et al., 1997, p.213). He would often quote the incidences of racial rioting in Singapore's early years to rebuke this concept.

Rejecting the notion of the press as the Fourth Estate, Lee asks pointedly, "who elects the members of the press? On whose authority did they speak? Who gave them the mandate?" (Han et al., 1997, p.212). Since those in the journalistic profession have not been nominated by the people, Lee's stand is that journalists do not have the right or the role to lead the country in directions contrary to those set by the elected leaders. He says that "freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government" (Turnbull, 1995, p.293).

Western liberals have argued that a completely unfettered press will expose corruption and make for clean, honest government. However, Lee points out that the uninhibited and freewheeling press and television in India, the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan have not stopped the pervasive and deeply embedded corruption in these countries (2000, p.166).



As opposed to tearing down the credibility of the government, Lee insists that the press in Singapore should play a supportive role in nation building for the good of the general populace. He states that “the mass media can create a mood in which people become keen to acquire the knowledge, skills and discipline of advanced countries. Without these, we can never hope to raise the standard of living for our people” (Turnbull, 1995, p.293). Taking all of these factors into consideration, Lee feels that the PAP has every right to seek a mandate to curtail press freedom when it was used unfairly to criticise the government or destabilise the country.

On the OB markers, Lee states in no uncertain terms that only those who are elected can set the boundaries: “If you want to move the OB markers, then you come out (into politics) and persuade the electorate” (Ng, 1995b). When posed the question if the electorate could set the OB markers, Lee’s response was that the people could not spontaneously move without leaders who could pose alternatives and crystallise their differing opinions (Ng, 1995b). It would seem that the ultimate decisions still lie in the hands of the ruling party.

Lee Kuan Yew asserts that the American mistake was to assume the universality of its systems and values. After the Singapore government restricted the sale of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* in 1987 for failing to grant it the right of reply, the US State Department sent an *aide-memoir* to the Singaporean Foreign Affairs Ministry deploring such a move. The US argued that the press should have the right to publish what it chooses, however irresponsible or biased its actions might seem (Ministry of Communications and Information, 1987, p.6).

The logic of such an argument was that the marketplace of ideas would weed out the undesirable. Lee says that the US model was not a universal standard, and the media in different countries play different roles. These roles are born from differing political and historical experiences. Though different from the US in terms of execution and philosophy, they represent equally valid functions which the press fulfils in different environments. Lee adds that it is quite unlikely that the idea of an adversarial press, free to print as it sees fit, would find much sympathy in Singapore (Han et al., 1997, p.217).

Lee Kuan Yew views himself as a pragmatic person, not an ideologue set in his ways. He says that what guides him is reason and reality. Hence, Lee asserts that he has never been one to adhere to the "pet theories" of experts and quasi-experts, especially academics in the social and political sciences. Lee stresses; "I always tried to be correct, not politically correct" (Lee, 2000, p.688).

Despite the numerous spats between Lee Kuan Yew and the Western liberals, it would appear that what he wants is the right of reply to 'unfair' commentary made about the city-state, and for the West to adopt a 'live and let live' attitude towards the Singapore press and government.

### **The Republic of Singapore**

It is important to point out that Singapore is not a democracy, but a republic. While the term 'democracy' has become a catch-all term for a political system whereby the government is elected by the people, there are fundamental differences between a democracy and a republic.

Gary McLeod, a US republican running for Congress, indicates that a republic is representative government ruled by law, whereas a democracy is direct government ruled by the majority (McLeod, n.d.). In other words, a republican government is elected by the people who put their trust on the ruling party to decide what is best for them on their behalf, according to what is stipulated in the Constitution. On the other hand, a democratic government is elected by the people who expect the ruling party to act according to what the majority wants.

It is no wonder - given the PAP's style of government - that independent Singapore was founded as a republic. It is vital to note this fact because it helps an observer, who may be a democrat, to understand why the PAP's policies seem to fly in the face of 'democracy'. The republican form of government is also best suited to Lee's philosophy that time and resources are wasted when trying to accommodate the conflicting voices in a community.

### **The PAP and Modern Singapore**

Historian Raj Vasil (2000, p.17) is of the opinion that the PAP, which has ruled Singapore without interruption since 1959, "has determined the entire nature and course of politics and the direction of socio-economic change in the country. It views itself and is seen by many Singaporeans as the unchallenged national party".

At the helm of the PAP is the charismatic Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew - prime theoretician, spokesperson and architect of the city-state, and first Prime Minister of Singapore.

However, modern Singapore also owes much to her British colonial masters, who had ruled the country benignly for over 140 years. Without the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819, the island would never have been able to reach her full potential.

Eight years later in 1827 it was joined with Malacca and Penang to form the Straits Settlements, administered by the British East India Company until 1858. The British government assumed direct responsibility over the settlements in 1867, and was interrupted by the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 during the Second World War. When the British returned in 1945, they did not intend to stay. Instead, they worked towards sowing the seeds of self-government and democracy by transferring power to Singapore in stages. Singapore became a crown colony, separated from Malaya on 1 April 1946 (Sie, 1997, p.77).

When Malaya was granted independence in 1954, Singapore achieved internal self-government in 1955 with David Marshall, leader of the Singapore Labour Front (SLF), as the Chief Minister. The SLF was formed in July 1954, and was generally a united party. However, the People's Action Party, formed in November 1954 under the leadership of young lawyer Lee Kuan Yew, was not a united party. It was an alliance between social democrats and pro-communists. As a result, the PAP was more left-oriented than the SLF (Sie, 1997, p.78). The communist elements and their sympathisers were subsequently flushed out. In May 1959, Singapore acquired full self-governing status, with the PAP winning 43 out of 51 seats, and Lee Kuan Yew became the Prime Minister (Lee, 1998, p.305).

In September 1963, Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia. With this, Singapore achieved complete decolonisation, but not independence. Lee Kuan Yew had worked hard to get Singapore in as a member of the Federation, believing that Singapore's only way to survive was to tap the resources of the hinterland of Peninsula Malaysia. The merger was unsuccessful, mainly owing to Malaysia's fear and suspicion of Lee Kuan Yew's policies and of dominance by the numerically superior Chinese population. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1965, Singapore was cast out of the Federation and left to fend for herself, having independence "thrust upon" her (Vasil, 2000, p.3).

The PAP adopted a management-by-objective (MBO) approach in the administration of the new country. It was a do-or-die situation for the young nation. Unemployment had to be dealt with, the economy improved and hostile neighbours placated. National service was introduced and patriotism was inculcated in schools. With the single-minded determination to survive, let alone prosper, the PAP began to rule in an increasingly paternalistic manner. Critics would say the hubris of success had swollen the collective heads of the PAP politicians, and in turn lead to stricter censorship against all who would oppose them.

### **Corporate Singapore's Management by Objective (MBO)**

This success has been partly attributed to the PAP's strategy of running Singapore like a corporation. "Singapore Incorporated" is a term that has been used to describe Singapore's economic *modus operandi*. As Ho (2000, p.15) points out, "the nature of the Singapore state since independence has been variously described as ...soft-authoritarian, semi-autocratic... corporatist... and illiberal". Or as Salaff (1988, p.19) says, "of the various approaches to the formation of state social policy, the most clearly applicable to Singapore is corporatism".

Singapore could operate as a corporation only if the ruling party had the necessary functional organizational structure in place. Salaff (1988, p.21) points out that "the party-state mobilizes and co-opts interest groups in support of its development policies by reorganizing the major social and economic factions into large corporate collectives". In addition, "the key to state leadership in Singapore's development

program is the extensive network of semi-autonomous statutory boards and state corporation responsible to the Cabinet” (Salaff, 1988, p.21).

Since the PAP leadership is able to run Singapore as if they were the Board of Directors, the PAP has unswervingly used MBO as its operating tactic. And the objective is the unhindered progress towards national unity, development and economic prosperity. To achieve all these, the mass media, especially the press, has been singled out to be the instrument of state policy.

### **Developmental ‘Kiasuism’- Singapore’s Unique Ideology**

The term ‘*kiasu*’ originated from the Hokkien dialect, one of the most commonly used dialects spoken by the Singaporean Chinese. Literally meaning ‘afraid to lose’, the term is used to describe the fear of being superseded or rendered obsolete; be it in terms of education, employment, or even collecting freebies (Singaporeans are infamous for queuing up hours in advance for almost anything on promotion). Often coupled with ‘*kiasi*’ (literally meaning ‘afraid to die’), another common Singaporean trait describing the aversion attracting trouble to one and avoiding it at all costs, ‘*kiasuism*’ becomes a compelling force for self-preservation at any cost.

One thing that bears mentioning is that of the cultivation of a ‘siege mentality’ among Singaporeans. The siege mentality views outsiders as competitors, and home is the only place that is safe and secure. Its origins reach back to the republic’s expulsion from the Federation of Malaya as well as the sabre-rattling and war of words which Singapore and Malaysia are periodically engaged in. In his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew had described Singapore as a Chinese island in a Malay sea (Lee, 1998, p.667). To the north and east there is Malaysia; and to the south and west is Indonesia. Both are Malay-Muslim countries which possess radically different racial compositions and attitudes compared to Singapore.

The PAP has reiterated time and again the prudence of being prepared for any eventuality. In order for that to be possible, the maintenance of what Chomsky (Birch, 1993, p.11) calls “necessary illusions” is needed to spur the citizens to rally around the ruling party in order to combat the perceived threat. The introduction of compulsory

military national service for Singaporean males is such an example, which had raised the ire of Singapore's neighbours.

While the siege mentality offers a simple explanation as to why the trait of being '*kiasu*' is prevalent in the Singaporean mindset, '*kiasuism*' or rather 'developmental *kiasuism*', was one of the major factors in Singapore's success. By breaking down the city-state's social and political problems into objectives to be met and problems to be solved, the PAP could then tackle the seemingly insurmountable mountain of problems in a systematic way.

Singapore's single-minded MBO approach succeeded because Singapore is unique as a nation. As Vasil (2000, p.37) writes, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told him in 1968 that Singaporeans "are of immigrant stock. Having left a richer culture, and psychologically more secure past, we have only the future to make something of, and that we are determined to do".

A strong and effective government united in its objective to make the city-state is seen as another key ingredient to Singapore's success. On prosperity, it is interesting that Confucius, whose thinking has been credited with the political and especially economic success of Confucius-inspired Asian countries, had this to say:

When Confucius went to the state of Wei, he said to a disciple, 'How the population has grown!'

The disciple asked, 'Since they have a large population, what is there to add?'

Confucius said, 'Enrich them'.

The disciple asked, 'Once they are rich, what else is there to add?'

Confucius said, 'Educate them.' (Confucius, trans. 1991, p.65)

So now that Singapore is a wealthy nation - despite of the current economic downturn - the government has established the third university, the Singapore Management University; and is considering a fourth. These moves are in line with Lee Kuan Yew's idea of maximising human resources by educating the citizens.

The uniqueness of the Singapore experience could also be seen in several ways. Vasil (2000, p.35) points out that the PAP differed greatly from other political parties in

Southeast Asia., for “it did not allow a wing with its own identity, organization and personnel to develop” and “it did not permit the growth of an alternative competing leadership”. Bertha Henson of *The Straits Times* concurs with Vasil, stating that Lee Kuan Yew’s view is that strong opposition parties are not necessary for democracy and would only serve to confuse the population (Henson, 2002).

Vasil (2000, p.35) further states that the PAP “did not consider it necessary to create party institutions at the grass-roots level in a way that would allow them to act as a link between the government and the people”. The PAP relies on ‘non-party’ organizations, such as the Community Centres and the Citizens’ Consultative Committees which were introduced during the period of the communist threat. This can be seen as the PAP’s recognition that an ‘official’ body would have been too intimidating for the people to speak up, and having these ‘non-party’ organizations would put people at ease and in turn facilitate feedback.

Elaborating more on the uniqueness of Singaporean politics, Vasil (2000, p.35) says:

Until the mid-1980s, when power began to be transferred to the second generation leadership, there had been little open competition for ideas and views within the party, all initiative and decision making remained largely a preserve of Lee Kuan Yew and his close first generation associates... the party did not give any special attention to routine organizational functions, such as recruitment and servicing of members, creating and sustaining links with the people at large and creating party organization at various levels... it did not feel the need to create effective organizations of its own students, youth, women and so forth to mobilize support from those sectors of the population.

As Ho (2000, p.29) states, the PAP politicians’ drive for power is a rational self-seeking process, “based on the belief that their continuance in power would most benefit the nation because of the party’s organizational superiority, and their indispensability and personal sacrifice for the general good”.

With all these differences and uniqueness, Singapore has opted to go on its own way of MBO towards national development and economic growth, and displeasing the liberal Western democrats and the Western media is the least of worry for Lee Kuan Yew and his like-minded associates.

### Control as a Colonial Legacy

Control of the press in Singapore is not as recent a phenomenon as most have been led to believe. Turnbull (1995, p.5) writes that the island's pioneering newspaper, the *Singapore Chronicle*, was established in 1824, only a year after the British East India Company (EIC) imposed its periodic "Gagging Acts" throughout its territories. The EIC was always wary of newspapers- while its main concern was with local-language newspapers stirring racial disorder in India, it was also resentful of criticisms levelled at it from the English presses. The 1823 Act made it mandatory for all newspapers to be licensed, and have their materials submitted to authorities for vetting before they went to print. In addition to banning all criticism against the EIC, scandalous stories about individuals were also disallowed (Turnbull, 1995, p.5). A free press in Singapore was not in the minds of British officials stationed there.

As elsewhere in the British Empire, censorship was used as a means of ensuring the credibility of the island's colonial masters, even after the transfer of Singapore from British East India Company administration to direct colonial rule in 1867.

In the years following the Second World War, the British authorities in Singapore enacted regulations in June 1948 to inhibit press criticism of official policy (Chua, 1998, p.146). From 1948 to 1960, the Communists were active in Singapore and Malaya, engaged in guerrilla warfare against the British and those who were opposed to the Malayan Communist Party. By 1952, over 6,000 people, mostly civilians had been killed. *The Straits Times* indicated that this figure equalled two-thirds of the casualty figures of the Boer War, a major military campaign. However, official reports always referred to an "emergency"- not a war, and the Communist terrorists were referred to as "bandits" in order to deny claims of the existence of a People's Revolutionary Army. Turnbull (1995, p.203) adds that the adoption of euphemisms was useful for commercial and insurance interests to regard the conflict as an emergency rather than a war. The paper cooperated with the government, such as not printing "scoops" which could have thwarted security operations.

Turnbull (1995, p.223) points out that any government's first obligation is to provide security, hence Singapore and Malaya inherited the colonial legacy of media control as a result of the Emergency. As with other developing nations, Singapore and



Malaya extended their power over the press to encompass wider interests of political and social stability, racial harmony, economic efficiency and international goodwill, with the New Printing Presses (Applications and Permits) Rules of 1972 being an extension of the “Gagging Acts” of 1823. It required printing licenses to be renewed annually on the condition that the media owners did not run articles that would threaten national security, hurt Singapore-Malaysia ties, and incite communal and racial riots (Birch, 1993, p.17).

It would seem that if the PAP had its way entirely, the press would be the government’s voice of state. But whether or not the PAP has its way entirely is a matter of opinion- the PAP certainly allows some dissenting views. Salaff (1988, p.23) says, “despite control of dissent, there is still an active, if restrained, political life in Singapore”. But this state of affairs is regrettable, according to Singh (1992, p.174):

Unfortunately, the PAP continues to believe that the opposition is irrelevant and unnecessary for the political growth and maturity of the system... This would indicate that the PAP government is out of touch with the political aspiration of the governed.

However, Singh had acknowledged the need for restraint in the arena of political and religious debate. He said that the “drift towards racialism and communalism was considered unfair and dangerous and the PAP could not have been more right when Malaysia was afflicted with the 13 May 1969 racial riots” (Singh, 1992, p.156). Lee Kuan Yew would often cite the occurrence of these riots as examples as to justify the need for tough laws in order to preserve the fabric of Singaporean society.

Indeed, the sharpest lesson the Singapore presses had learnt was during the Maria Hertogh Riots of 11 December 1950, of which *The Straits Times* was partly responsible for the events leading up to the riots (Turnbull, 1995, p.173).

### **The Maria Hertogh Riots: A case study in inflammatory reporting resulting in violence**

Maria Bertha Hertogh was born to a Dutch army sergeant and a Eurasian mother and baptised as a Roman Catholic. When the Japanese invaded in 1942, Maria’s mother entrusted her to a family friend, Cik Aminah binte Mohamed. Maria’s parents were subsequently interned and lost contact with Aminah and their five-year-old daughter.

Maria's parents returned to Holland after the war, and it was only in 1949 that they discovered that Maria was living in Trengganu (on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia), where she was raised as a Muslim and renamed Nadra (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.45). At the parent's request, the Dutch consul-general applied to the Singapore court for Maria to be transferred to Singapore and put under the charge of the Director of Social Welfare.

Aminah went to court and managed to reverse the decision to return Maria to her natural parents. She took Maria back and promptly married her off to a Singapore Muslim teacher, Mansoor Adabi. The Dutch consul-general then took out a summons to have the marriage voided and custody restored to the parents. On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, a judge ruled the marriage invalid on the grounds that Maria was only 13 years old. While he also acknowledged Maria's wish to remain with her Malayan family, the judge declared that her long-term future lay with her natural parents. Maria was handed over to her mother, who moved into the Convent of the Good Shepherd with her. The judge was unwilling to accept any appeals against his decision, insisting that Maria was better off starting her new life as quickly as possible. However, an application by Aminah and Mansoor was set for hearing the following week (Turnbull, 1995, p.173).

This seemed to be the perfect human interest story for the English-language press. Although *The Straits Times* did not delve into the personal lives of the rich and famous, the paper welcomed sentimental stories about humble folk, such as pretty Asian girls eloping with British servicemen. It would run the story for days on end, culminating in "joyful" reconciliation with the tearful family- ideally a widow- in which the paper would play the role of peacemaker (Turnbull, 1995, p.174).

The press went on a feeding frenzy as the Hertogh story was a journalist's dream with all the elements of high drama- a long-lost child, distraught parents, a devoted foster mother and an ardent young husband. Turnbull (1995, p.174) points out that the added attraction for the largely European readership, was of the restoration of an innocent young girl to her own culture and religion. As a result, the convent was besieged by reporters and photographers.

The Dutch consul-general escorted a group of journalists and photographers into the convent against the mother's will, with the intention of recording how well Maria was settling in. *The Straits Times* featured a picture of Maria playing dominoes, but the other English-language papers were more provocative. For instance, the *Singapore Standard* had on its front page a photo of a smiling Maria, holding hands with the Mother superior accompanied by the headline "Bertha Knelt Before Virgin Mary Statue". The article pointed out that Maria knelt before the statue on "her own free will" (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.45) concluded that she was now "a carefree child" (Turnbull, 1995, p.174).

The Malay press were incensed the reporting in the English-language papers. The *Utusan Melayu* carried pictures of a weeping Maria with an article headed "Nadra Cries and Begg for *Utusan Melayu* Reporter's Help" (Turnbull, 1995, p.174), while other Malay papers presented a picture of a bewildered and sad girl parted from her foster mother and newly-wed husband (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.45).

The story of Nadra (as the Malay papers were insistent on calling Maria) generated great sympathy in the Muslim community, to the extent that a small group of men including radical politicians, like M.A. Abdul Karim Ghani, became Aminah's champions. Ghani, who formed the Nadra Action Committee, was the president of the Singapore Muslim League and editor-in-chief of two Muslim newspapers. Lee Geok Boi says that Ghani's news reports were designed to inflame feelings against the Europeans as anti-Muslim (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.45). By early December, feelings in the Muslim community were highly charged with strong resentment against the Europeans and the way the case was being handled.

A.E.G. Blades, Assistant Commissioner of the Special Branch, wrote to the papers pointing out that Maria's presence in the convent was stirring criticisms and strong feelings. The head of the Special Branch warned the Colonial Secretary about the anger generated by the press reporting, and suggested that Maria be moved from the convent (Turnbull, 1995, p.174). Blades thought it would be prudent to house the girl at the York Hill Home, where she was initially placed (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.45). However, the Colonial Secretary did not consider such a move necessary.

A day before Aminah's appeal was to be heard, Ghani exacerbated the already tense situation by publishing an open letter in *Dawn*, a Jawi newspaper that he owned. Not only was Ghani turning the custody battle into a racial and religious issue, he was also trying to portray himself as a martyr for the cause. In the letter he addressed "the trinity who will sit in judgment" which included the following statements:

(T)hough in legal terminology it is Aminah vs. Mrs. Hertogh, before the Tribunal of spiritual values it is a case of Muslims vs. Catholics. ...

(B)ecause we Muslims try to follow Christ and Mohamed who came after him, we try to be loyal to God and to the King. But, when my duty to God demands that to do a thing it does not matter if the King is displeased and I have to stand before a modern [sic] Pilate to be expelled from Singapore or sent to solitary confinement at the worst... I take the risk of being hauled up in the Court for contempt of Court for my standing up for a claim that the Court in trying to establish its prestige should not become guilty of contempt of the higher court of humanity and the still higher Court of the Judgment Day. Tomorrow you will be Pilates trying NATRA [Nadra] who is imprisoned in a convent which though not in law but in fact is a prison... NATRA whom all Muslims regard to-day as either own sister or daughter is having Torture of the Heart. To we Orientals, bleeding the Heart of a human being is more torturous than the crucifixion of past history.

(Lee, G. B., 1998, p.46)

On Monday, December 11, a large Muslim crowd had gathered outside the Supreme Court to hear the verdict of Aminah's appeal. Carrying banners demanding Maria be removed from the convent, the crowd went on a rampage, dragging Europeans and Eurasians out of cars, beating them up and killing them (Turnbull, 1995, p.175). During the two days of rioting, the Gurkha Contingent from the army was called as the British felt that the Malay dominated police force would be sympathetic to the Muslim rioters (Lee, G. B., 1998, p.46).

Singapore was put under a week-long curfew, which took three days to restore order. At the end of the whole episode, 18 people had been killed, 173 injured, 72 vehicles burnt out and 199 damaged. Hundreds were arrested mostly for curfew breaking, but included a hard core of rioters and the members of the Nadra Action Committee.

In the aftermath of the riots, the Progressive Party leader C.C. Tan lashed out at the press for "its irresponsible manner and utter disregard of the hatred and passions

which they were helping to inflame” (Turnbull, 1995, p.175). He added that it was no wonder the Muslims were infuriated when the pictures and articles coming out every day were an affront “even to the minds of the most puerile”. Tan further alleged that the papers were vying to outdo each other in sensationalist reporting, and these publications “have disclosed the depth of irresponsibility to which the local press would sink” (Turnbull, p.175). He warned the press would only have itself to blame if its liberties were curtailed in the future as a result of these abuses. Lee Kuan Yew agreed with Tan. In his memoirs he says that the callousness and sensationalism in the coverage of the story by both the Malay and English newspapers served to ignite an already tense situation in Singapore (Lee, 1998, p.45).

The governor appointed a commission of enquiry into the riots, which found that the first cause of the riots was putting Maria into a convent as well as the reporting in both the English and Malay press. The report expressed regret that the press was allowed into the convent, thus provoking the Muslims.

Turnbull (1995, p.178) states that the Hertogh Riots taught *The Straits Times*, especially its expatriate staff, a sharp lesson, brought home by the fact that Europeans and Eurasians were singled out for attack. The riots revealed that deep racial passions below a deceptively calm surface could easily be unleashed by emotional reporting and dramatic pictures. From then on, the paper’s policy was to tread warily on issues involving race and religion. The experience proved a more effective and lasting lesson than restrictive legislation.

The Hertogh Riots was not to be the last racial riot in the history of Singapore and Malaysia. In 1964, a sustained campaign in a Malay language newspaper alleged that the Chinese majority in Singapore were suppressing the rights of the Malay minority. Fighting broke out on July 21, with 36 killed and many more injured (Han et al., 1997, p.213).

The issues of race, religion and language still boil beneath a deceptively calm surface. Lee Kuan Yew used to believe that those problems would disappear with higher standards of education. However, after observing communal strife in other countries, he wonders whether such phenomena will ever disappear (Han et al., 1997, p.213).

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided the reader with a brief overview of the social and political conditions in Singapore. Instead of simply viewing the OB markers as a tool to stifle dissent, the incidents of communal rioting, the need to preserve the integrity of a multiracial population and a country driven by the pure instinct to survive in a hostile environment, are factors which have indicated the need for limits to be set in social and political discourse.

Another point that this chapter endeavours to illustrate is that Singapore's road to nationhood has been a unique experience - given the city-state's extraordinary circumstances, the implementation of 'universal' values such as press freedom may prove dangerous. The '*kiasu*' mentality of Singaporeans ensures the status quo, since failure is too great a risk.

Chapter Two will examine how the press in Singapore was brought under the PAP's wing. In particular, it will focus on the turbulent relationship between *The Straits Times* (Singapore's only major English-language daily) and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore's early years, and how the paper was supposedly brought to heel.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Creation of Consensus

The first chapter provided a brief socio-political history of Singapore, describing some of the factors contributing to the existence of OB markers. This chapter will touch on how the press was 'cleaned up' in 1971 with the removal of communist and foreign influence from the Singaporean press, and the PAP's current 'consensus politics' approach to public administration.

The implementation of the OB markers would not have been as successful if not for the fact that the press in Singapore has to adhere to guidelines set by the government, leading to criticisms of the PAP for having beaten the press in Singapore into submission and being intolerant to criticisms. The remainder of this chapter will then focus on *The Straits Times'* conflict ridden relationship with the PAP during Singapore's early years, and how the paper was brought to toe the government line.

#### Singapore's Press Laws

Lee Kuan Yew had two preoccupations when dealing with the opposition: that they were being used by communists, and if they were "black operations" that were funded by foreign intelligence agencies to cause mischief (Lee, 2000. p.126). In the same vein, Lee is just as careful with regards to the media, in that, in his view, it could be used by opposition and foreign groups to influence Singapore's politics.

Once the PAP government came to power, they passed several laws to mould the press into its current supporti role. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act mentioned in the previous chapter ensures that presses in Singapore do not print seditious materials under the clause that they would have their licenses revoked if they did do. The same act also stipulates that the ownership of media companies must be kept in the hands of Singapore citizens, so as to prevent foreign interests from exerting influence from the outside. The board of directors for any media organisation must be comprised mainly of Singaporeans, with a 3% cap for local shareholders (Ang & Yeo, 1998, p.393) and a 49% ownership cap for foreign investors in a broadcast station (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts [MITA], n.d.).

The Undesirable Publications Act empowers the authorities to restrict the circulation of materials deemed 'obscene' and 'undesirable'. Publications which would fall under these categories would include erotic magazines such as *Playboy*, and books which would promote hostility between races and religions, as well as communist literature (MITA, 1967). The Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MITA) has jurisdiction on the enforcement of these laws. All journalists also have to sign the Official Secrets Act, which prohibits them from communicating sensitive government information to foreign nationals (Birch, 1993, p.47).

Furthermore, most magazines, periodicals, journals and imported books have to be vetted by MITA before they are allowed circulation in Singapore. Locally printed books are exempt from MITA approval, since the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act already regulates the local presses. The ministry also oversees the development of films, television and the Internet in the city-state. It is also of interest to note that it plays an important role in nation building in Singapore, having commissioned artists to write songs instilling a sense of home in the hearts of Singaporeans (MITA, n.d.).

### **Removing Unwanted Influence**

The history of the press in Singapore is marked with mergers and amalgamations. In 1980 there were 12 daily newspapers printed in the different languages spoken by Singaporeans. By 1988 only six daily papers remained, two in English, three in Mandarin, and one in Tamil (Hachten, 1993, p.73). One company, Singapore Press Holdings, now runs the current 7 daily newspapers. Formed in 1984 by the merging of the Times Organisation and Singapore News and Publication Ltd., *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper*, and *The Business Times* are the English-language dailies, the *Lianhe Zaobao*, *Lianhe Wanbao* and the *Shin Min Daily* are the Mandarin dailies, the *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* are the Malay dailies and the *Tamil Murasu* is the only Tamil newspaper (Singapore Press Holdings, n.d.).

When Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, she faced a number of problems. The first was how the government was to go about building a national identity, the second was the need to formulate a strategy to ensure the survival and prosperity of the island. The third problem was how to deal with the Communist



activities quite rampant at that time, and finally, the government had to find a way to retain its support from the people.

Newspapers were a battleground of sorts between the People's Action Party government and the subversive groups who tried to undermine the government (Chua, 1998, p.147), and the way to win the war was to ensure strategic advantage on this battleground. The PAP was aided by requirements enacted by the British in 1948, as mentioned in the previous chapter, which gave provision for the revocation of print licenses should the media owner break rules on press criticisms of government policies. This provision was further strengthened with the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1972 (Chua, 1998, p.146), which was drafted to ensure that the press in Singapore remained in Singaporean hands so as to eliminate the possibility of 'black operations'-foreign cash being used to influence domestic politics.

These legislations, together with the Internal Security Act (which allowed detention without trial), enabled the government to crack down on newspapers like the *Eastern Sun*, the *Singapore Herald* and the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1971. Aw Kow, the owner of the *Eastern Sun*, was lent S\$3 million dollars after secretly negotiating with high-ranking officials of a People's Republic of China agency based in Hong Kong. The condition of the loan was that the paper would not oppose mainland China on any major issues. Known more as a playboy than a businessman, the paper suffered heavy losses due to financial mismanagement. When the PAP exposed this black operation, the paper's staff resigned, forcing the paper to close down (Lee, 2000, p.188).

Like the *Eastern Sun*, the *Singapore Herald* was also a black operation, accused of 'taking on' the government by 'eroding the will and attitudes of the people' and advocating permissiveness and promiscuity (Hachten, 1993, p.72). The newspaper was a wholly foreign-owned newspaper which employed local staff. Lee wondered why a newspaper owned by two foreigners would work up issues such as national service and freedom of speech against the PAP. The paper exhausted its S\$2.3 million working capital, and the Internal Security Department (ISD) reported that the *Singapore Herald's* largest shareholder was a Hong Kong firm registered under two dummy names.

On querying the newly appointed Singaporean editor who had put up money for the paper in the name of Heeda & Company of Hong Kong, it was revealed that the money actually came from Donald Stephens, the Malaysian High Commissioner to Canberra and former chief minister of the state of Sabah in Malaysia. Stephens' explanation was that his sole intention of investing in the *Singapore Herald* was to build a retirement fund on which he could live on in his later years. Lee Kuan Yew was unconvinced that Stephens would risk a million dollars investing in a paper which "took on" the Singapore government (Lee, 2000, p.189). The newspaper's license to print was withdrawn in 1971.

Aside from curtailing foreign influence, there was also the need to keep pressures from within in check. There was a sense of foreboding in the Chinese-language newspapers due to the growing popularity of English as a medium of instruction in schools at the expense of Chinese education. In April 1971, Lee accused the Chinese press of stirring up chauvinism in the treatment of this issue, and had three senior *Nanyang Siang Pau* executives arrested for "a deliberate campaign to stir up Chinese racial emotions" (Turnbull, 1995, p.291). The *Nanyang Siang Pau* continued to operate as an independent newspaper, until its merger with the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* to form the Singapore News and Publications Ltd (SNPL) in 1983.

The Jawi-script *Utusan Melayu* was banned from distributing in Singapore in 1971 for allegedly inciting racial passions the previous year. The paper also participated in inflammatory reporting 20 years earlier which contributed to the outbreak of the Maria Hertogh Riots of 1950.

Within the English-language newspaper market, *The Straits Times* would emerge as the undisputed victor, having dominated the market for over 130 years (as of the 1970s). Despite its thorny relationship with the PAP during the 50s and 60s, the paper did not suffer the same fate as the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald*. Its editorial policy was always one of fair and measured criticisms, which would have stood out in contrast to the invective that so riled Lee in the pages of the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald*.

July 1984 saw the merger of the SNPL, the Straits Times Press and Times Publishing to form Singapore Press Holdings. This merger effectively meant that all English, Chinese and Malay newspapers in the city-state would be produced by a monopoly company. A PAP critic may say that this merger makes it easier for the PAP to 'deal with' errant newspapers, since it could not throw its full weight on just one company instead of having to divide its efforts to pressure several companies. However, Turnbull (1995, p.349) points out that there were powerful economic reasons for the merger. Given Singapore's small population, it would be a daunting task for a newspaper company to compete with many others for readership in a small market. There were obvious advantages in cooperation due to the scarcity of resources.

### Consensus Politics

With rising education levels and greater exposure to liberal ideas from abroad, the PAP acknowledged that the days of non-participatory politics were drawing to a close. A survey run by *The Straits Times* in 1990- the year when Lee Kuan Yew stepped down from the office of Prime Minister- revealed that 42% of respondents wanted more say on national issues, and 18% voiced extreme dissatisfaction at the amount of influence they were able to exercise (Birch, 1993, p.10).

When Goh Chok Tong took office as the Prime Minister of Singapore, he promised the city-state a more participatory style of government, calling on his "fellow citizens to join me, to run the next lap together" (Birch, 1993, p.11). Hence one of the ways the government achieves consensus through the press is to portray Singapore as being involved in a race with other countries. What is at stake is the future prosperity of Singapore, and the race can only be won if the people rally around the Prime Minister.

The press can therefore work with the government to build a national consensus by being a platform from which the government can educate the public on upcoming policies. Under this approach, the press is assumed to act as a moral authority in which its agenda is shaped by a political discourse that promotes national, not individual values (Oon, 1996, cited in Birch, 1998, p.338). In an editorial, *The Straits Times* points out that "consultation carries with it a cost" (Birch, 1993, p.10). The trade-off is that policy-making would take a longer time, but the exercise is worth it "if it leads to better governance and if it makes policies and laws more acceptable to Singaporeans" (Birch,

1993, p.10). However, consensus politics is not easy to achieve, because in Lee Kuan Yew's view, "people's desires were often incoherent and contradictory" (Birch, 1993, p.9).

A more effective method of creating consensus would be the inculcation of 'shared values' among the people- if everyone held on to the same beliefs as the ruling party, then convincing the population of accepting government policies would not be much of a problem.

The concept of Shared Values was first mentioned in October 1988 by the then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Presented to Parliament in 1991, its intention is "to sculpt a Singaporean identity by incorporating the various parts of our various cultural heritages as well as the attitudes and values which have helped us survive as a nation". In addition, the Shared Values would be a "safeguard against undesirable values permeating from more developed countries which may be detrimental to our social fabric" (Quah, 1999, p.117). The Shared Values is therefore a form of "cultural inoculation" against undesirable influence, as Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew puts it (Han et al., 1997, p.436). The Shared Values are:

- Nation before Community and Society above Self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Regard and community support for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony (Quah, 1999, p.118)

#### *Consensus, not conflict and racial and religious harmony*

It is clear that the Shared Values do define what some of the OB markers are, the most obvious being that of 'consensus, not conflict' as well as 'racial and religious harmony'. As illustrated in Chapter 1, religious intolerance led to chaos in the city-state, and so discussions which could arouse racial and religious passions fall within the out-of-bounds category and excluded from public discourse.

'Consensus, not conflict' complements the idea of putting nation and society before self. However, it should be noted that this shared value does not invalidate the

reasons for the existence of opposition parties. As Quah (1999, p.96) points out, the PAP has to objectively assess any negative responses of its policies from the opposition.

### *Nation before Community and Society above Self*

With the reminder that the good of the nation overrides the needs of the community and the individual, it can therefore be interpreted - within the OB markers framework - that discussions of political issues which may cause division with the nation are prohibited. As the PAP is now seen as synonymous with Singapore, any attacks and unfair criticisms against the party is also seen as an attack on the viability of the state.

### *Family as the basic unit of society*

While the sanctity of the family unit is not unique to Singapore, the PAP believes that a stable family is a fundamental bedrock for the foundation of a healthy, strong society, without which Singapore cannot hope to remain as economically competitive should her population be beset with social problems. Publications deemed to threaten the idea of 'family' are banned, such as *Cosmopolitan*, which allegedly promotes sexual promiscuity. Casual sex and single parenthood aside, the Singapore government has frowned on homosexual relationships.

Gay couples are not legally recognised in the city-state; and although there is no law governing sexuality, the Singapore Penal Code criminalises same-sex intercourse as unnatural sex and gross indecency (People Like Us, 1999). While it is not clear whether discussions on homosexual issues are deemed out-of-bounds, there seems to be a marked absence of any such topics in the mainstream Singapore media. Gay groups in Singapore have then turned to the Internet to express their views and opinions.

Although the shift in leadership style of the PAP from a paternalistic (1959 to 1984) to a consultative style (after 1984, when the PAP brought in new blood into its ranks) is a relatively recent event, the groundwork for consensus politics had been laid in those 'paternalistic' years.

A decisive leader like Lee Kuan Yew was needed to bring the disparate communities together in the common fight for survival. The PAP had established a

proven track record for economic development leading to higher standards of living and employment and in doing so, it gained the confidence of the people. At the same time, the leadership knew that Singaporeans were no longer content to take the PAP's every word at face value. Knowing that their position was secure, the PAP then decided that it was time to change its style of administration.

### **Birth of *The Straits Times***

Contrary to popular belief, *The Straits Times* was not established by the People's Action Party to be a mouthpiece for the government. Turnbull (1995, p.10) points out that little is known as to how the paper was initially conceived, but the commonly accepted explanation was that it was set up by an Armenian named Catchick Moses. *The Straits Times* was launched in 1845, with Robert Carr Woods, an English journalist from Bombay, as the editor.

The commencement of a regular monthly steamship service in 1845 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1859 speeded up communications between Britain and her Southeast Asian colonies. *The Straits Times* could now offer a "new type of paper, bringing foreign news to Singapore and keeping its [European] readers in touch with 'Home'" (Turnbull, 1995, p.16).

The fledgling newspaper initially suffered from "a deficiency of interesting matter" to fill the pages as well as financial woes, but grew from strength to strength after 1849. *The Straits Times* was revitalised that year with its first political controversy revolving the high-handed actions of Sir James Brooke, the pioneer White Rajah of Sarawak.

*The Straits Times'* growth is due to good management by its (mainly expatriate) editors and board of directors. The only time when the paper had to cease production was during the 3½ year Japanese occupation of Singapore. It was revived on 7 September 1945, jubilantly declaring that "Singapore Is British Again". With the British Military Administration (BMA) in place, the newspaper quickly adopted a watchdog role, but was always mindful in "taking a positive attitude, boosting morale by reporting achievements, supporting the authorities in their efforts to restore a normal regime, but firm in criticisms of shortcomings" (Turnbull, 1995, p.136).

Throughout its later history, *The Straits Times* faced no credible threat since the other competing English-language newspapers were short-lived, owing mainly to the drying up of their funds and the inability to compete with such an entrenched institution as *The Straits Times*.

Turnbull (1995) repeatedly points out that while the paper may criticise certain government policies, it was never its intention to attack officials on a personal level or shake confidence in the administration. An editor once argued that sometimes they had a duty to criticise the government, but in doing so they also had a duty to uphold it. The paper upheld the colonial system and took great care not to offend individuals, in particular members of the establishment.

*The Straits Times* was, and still is, a paper with a clear policy of cooperation with the government; regardless of whether the current administration was British, or locally elected. Given the rise of nationalism in the 1950s and 60s, the paper was caught in a crossfire between the outgoing colonial regime and the incoming nationalists, with the PAP declaring that *The Straits Times* was nothing more than the mouthpiece of the colonial government.

### **Marching to the Beat of the PAP Drum**

Lee (2000, p.185) points out that in the 40 years after 1949, the Singapore press had evolved away from the norms set by the colonial government. Previously, vernacular papers catered mainly to their readers' interests in their respective communities, and did not possess any Singaporean identity. The press in Singapore prior to the 1970s remained fragmented in their interests and did not form any cohesive picture what being a Singaporean was. Reporters seemed to hop from one paper to another in Singapore, and local journalists in the English-language newspapers had been influenced by the British editors and reporters who used to be their superiors in the Straits Times group.

According to Lee (2000, p.185), it took many years before a younger generation of journalists in the 1980s recognised that the political culture of Singapore was, and will stay, different from the Western model. However, Singaporean journalists are exposed to, and influenced by, the reporting styles and political attitudes of the Anglo-

American media which sees its role to be antagonistic to government in fulfilling its role as the Fourth Estate. While investigative journalism is regarded as the highest form of Anglo-American journalism, the Singapore press tends to report the facts as provided by government and other newsmakers, with little or no commentary. As far as commentaries or columnists are concerned, the laying down of the OB markers ensures that local journalists do not get carried away with criticisms of the ruling party.

The Chinese and Malay press do not model themselves on the West - their culture being one of constructive support of policies they agreed with, and criticism in measured doses with those they disagreed with (Lee, 2000, p.185). They placed greater emphasis on the interests of the group, rather than those of the individual.

Unlike newspapers such as *The Straits Times*, which obtained funding from commercial and government bodies, the Chinese-language press were left to their own devices. The wealthy Chinese merchants who owned them used their papers as vehicles for their own gains, and often played up news about China, Chinese education and culture in order to attract readership. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* were the two main Chinese papers. They were owned by wealthy Chinese families, whose right-wing editors worked through young Chinese journalists, many of whom were left-wing and activists for the Communist Party.

When the main English-language newspaper *The Straits Times* was owned by the British, it openly promoted the interests of the British commercial firms and the colonial government who were the patrons of the paper. No local English-language paper could attain even a fraction of *The Straits Times'* circulation and influence.

According to Lee (2000, p.186), *The Straits Times* was "bitterly hostile" to the PAP almost from the start. Apparently, it saw the non-communist leadership of the PAP as nothing more than a Trojan Horse for the Chinese-speaking communists. This was due to the fact that the PAP was a united front with the communists (at that time) and had socialist policies. Furthermore, the Chinese-language newspapers were strong supporters of the PAP, and as mentioned, many of the Chinese journalists were pro-communist and therefore approved of PAP policies (Lee, p.186). *The Straits Times* saw



the PAP as a party divided and challenged the “plausible myth” of a rock-solid organisation, claiming that it was dominated by the left (Turnbull, 1995, p.201).

*The Straits Times* therefore expected and hoped for a Progressive Party victory in the 1955 elections. Like the rest of the business community, the paper saw the Progressives was most likely to provide stability and economic balance in the transition to self-government, and ultimately independence (Turnbull, 1995, p.199). The newspaper had plenty of anti-PAP material to print, since the three PAP assemblymen were under constant attack from opposing ministers and the government. An outspoken PAP left-winger Lim Chin Siong denounced *The Straits Times* as hostile to the people and a mouthpiece of British interests (Turnbull, p.201).

In 1956, the paper supported the British administration’s arrest of left-wing extremists and challenged the PAP’s claim to be non-communist. A column entitled “The Tragedy of Harry Lee” pointed out Lee Kuan Yew’s anomalous position in a left-wing party. Bartlett, the columnist said, “He thinks more as a British socialist than as a Chinese communist... his ambition and his impatience have put him in the wrong party” (Turnbull, 1995, p.202).

Given that *The Straits Times* was also a journal of commerce and enjoyed the support of the mercantile community in Singapore, it is not surprising that the paper would look unfavorably on the PAP, which in its opinion, posed a threat to Singapore’s reasons for existence - free trade and enterprise. According to Lee, the daily tried to prevent the PAP from winning the elections and forming the government (Lee, 2000, p.186).

The animosity generated between the PAP and *The Straits Times* during the election campaign finally came to a head, when Lee fired his “first salvo” on April 15<sup>th</sup> 1959, two weeks before polling day. Lee declared that it was no secret that the paper’s editorial staff would “scoot” to Kuala Lumpur, and warned “if people were trying to harm us, we will give them as hard as they give us” (Lee, 1998, p.298). In another warning issued a month later, Lee told the press that any newspaper which tried to sour relations between Singapore and Malaya will go in for subversion. Any member of the newspaper’s staff found doing so would be taken in under the Preservation of Public

Security Ordinance (the colonial predecessor of the current Internal Security Act): “We shall put him in and keep him in” (Turnbull, 1995, p.216).

The decision for *The Straits Times* to move from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur was made for economic and political reasons. The Malayan capital was centrally located, facilitating speedier distribution. The government in Malaya had pledged to preserve a free enterprise economy, and thus offered a stable and attractive environment. By contrast, Turnbull says, Singapore politics seemed to be heading further left. The certain victory of the PAP in the 1959 elections made it all the more urgent for the paper to “move out of harm’s way” (1995, p.214). By March 1959, the move to Kuala Lumpur was completed, barely two months before the PAP came to power.

In the eyes of Lee Kuan Yew, *The Straits Times* was a foreign-owned paper. This explains why his stance was particularly harsh. Lee (2000, p.187) says that the PAP had to tolerate criticisms from locally owned papers and accepted their bona fides because they had to stay and suffer the consequences of their policies. He stresses that it is the declared policy of the People’s Action Party that newspapers should not be owned by foreigners. As quoted in Turnbull (1995, p.217), Lee states that:

The folly of allowing newspapers to be owned by people who are not citizens or nationals of the country, is that their sense of responsibility is blunted by the knowledge that if the worst came to the worst, they could always buzz off to some other place. Hence the clear-cut distinction in our attitude to locally owned or controlled press and foreign-owned or controlled press.

Leslie Hoffman, a Eurasian editor-in-chief, argued that the paper could not be considered as “foreign-owned or controlled”, since ordinary shareholders were local people. Declaring that he was no “bird of passage”, Hoffman announced his intention to remain in Singapore despite the threats of having the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance used against him (Lee, 2000, p.187). A day before polling day, Hoffman departed for Kuala Lumpur, a move widely interpreted by the government and his colleagues as a flight from PAP threats (Turnbull, 1995, p.219).

Having achieved internal self-government in 1959, with an elected legislative assembly and control of its domestic affairs, the newly formed PAP government was preoccupied with more pressing problems than to make good its threats against *The*

*Straits Times*. A representative from the International Press Institute (IPI) concluded that Lee Kuan Yew had overreacted and the paper had in turn “over-dramatised the threat”. The representative concluded that the affair was no more than a “regrettable incident” during the electoral campaign which had been exaggerated on both sides (Turnbull, 1995, p.221).

According to Turnbull (1995, p.221), Lee’s interpretation of the whole affair was that the paper lacked political judgment from the start. Lee felt the expatriate managers and the local senior English-educated editorial people had failed to see that the constitutional changes in 1955 signalled the end of an era. The pro-independence movement sweeping through Southeast Asia meant that Singapore would no longer rely on the British for her continued prosperity in the long term.

Lee described the paper as only “skimming the surface of the English-educated middle class”, while the PAP had to go deeper into “colder waters and more difficult waters” to convince Chinese-educated masses to support the plans for merger with the Federation (Turnbull, 1995, 219). It could have made the prospects for the (ill-fated) merger between Singapore and Malaya more difficult, and that was a sore point for the PAP.

Mindful of how the press can play a critical part in nation-building, Lee Kuan Yew addressed the Singapore Union of Journalists in 1959 about the constructive role the English-educated would have to play in a new Singapore. However, the relationship between the PAP and the newspaper had already been soured during the 1959 election campaign, and Lee would continue his critical attitude towards the press.

Singapore’s ejection from the Federation shattered *The Straits Times*’ ambition of being the ‘national newspaper’ of one single nation. As surprised as the paper was at the news of the separation, it continued to circulate in both countries, announcing that it was time for “healing and the soothing of wounds” (Turnbull, 1995, p.260). The paper would continue to be a Malaysian registered company with a Singapore financial base for seven years, until 1972 when *The Straits Times* returned to being a Singapore listed company.

The 'cleaning up' of the Singapore press in 1971 left *The Straits Times* as the only English-language newspaper in the republic. In the aftermath, the press was subdued in its reporting, with reporters from the Chinese papers calling official contacts before writing their stories and young journalists from *The Straits Times* producing bland copy which read like government propaganda. Turnbull (1995, p.299) points out that the trauma the PAP faced over the other papers softened the government's stance with the paper, and since moving back to Singapore and being a publicly-listed company headed by Singaporeans, *The Straits Times* would most likely receive more favourable consideration (p.307).

However, the differences between the paper and the government still remained, and a dispute arose over Lee Kuan Yew's annoyance at an alleged bias shown by *The Straits Times* in favour of the opposition during a by-election in 1979. Lee upbraided the daily for treating the elections like a "cockfight" (Turnbull, 1995, p.329). Matters came to a head when in 1981, the PAP lost a seat to an opposition member for the first time in 13 years. Lee Kuan Yew was furious at the paper, blaming its election coverage and reports of an intended rise in bus fares for the loss of the seat to Worker's Party leader J. B. Jeyaretnam. It was the PAP's longstanding view that *The Straits Times* was out of tune with the times and needed reorganisation - with help from the government - if it could not put its house in order.

Fearing direct government intervention similar to the recent reorganisation of the transport system, the paper requested an interview with Lee. A compromise was reached whereby a government nominee, acceptable to the newspaper, would be appointed executive chairman of *The Straits Times*. In 1982, S. R. Nathan (currently Singapore's elected President), who was then about to retire as permanent secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was appointed to the position. Opposition member Jeyaretnam claimed that after losing the by-election, the government decided to move its censor into the paper, leading to a clampdown on news or views contrary to the government's policies (Turnbull, 1995, p.335).

Nathan's job, however, was not to act as a censor, but to build bridges between the paper and the government. His brief was very general: guide and help the editors, who were paid to produce the paper, to understand the positions from where PAP

policies were coming from and to show the paper what its mission was. Morale was so low in *The Straits Times* that Nathan decided to lead from the rear and stay off the newsroom floor. However, Nathan did intervene in the coverage of international news in the editorial columns. As a former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was accustomed to taking pre-emptive action to avoid misunderstandings (Turnbull, 1995, p.341).

In an effort to dispel the notion that he was the government appointed watchdog and censor-in-chief, Nathan organised a seminar for senior editors. Expecting a brainwashing session, the editors were instead asked to give comments after Nathan opened the proceedings by explaining how officials and senior ministers viewed the paper. As a bridge-builder, Turnbull (1995, p.339) asserts that Nathan was largely successful in establishing friendly contacts between the paper and the government.

In January 1987, Cheong Yip Seng was appointed editor-in-chief of English and Malay newspapers and Leslie Fong editor of *The Straits Times*. Both men were firm supporters of the government and had spent their working lives in the Straits Times group. Having lived through the turbulent years of the 50s and 60s, they appreciated the achievements of the PAP. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented that their appointments would mean more pro-PAP journalism (Turnbull, 1995, p.364). However, the paper carried a good deal of constructive comment in the years that followed, with Fong claiming that he had “brought back responsible, honest disagreement into the newspaper” (Turnbull, p.364).

## Conclusion

The PAP had enacted tough laws and had taken action to ensure that the Singaporean press supported nation-building instead of undermining it. The press in turn accepts that it is not the Fourth Estate. In Lee Kuan Yew’s own words, “You must accept that you are not in the position to set the OB markers” (Turnbull, 1995, p.387).

While press freedom advocates may accuse the Singaporean government for stifling dissent, it has to be noted that the editorial policy of *The Straits Times* is to toe the government line (be it colonial or PAP). The daily’s traditional style of reporting has always been “accurate but restrained and constructive” (Turnbull, 1995, p.283).

Prior to 1977, there was no written editorial policy, just a general understanding among the journalists of the paper's philosophy. But in 1977, *The Straits Times*' board of directors felt that they should define an editorial policy to promote national development (Turnbull, 1995, p.316). It was decided that the editorial policy should first inform in a serious vein and from a Singaporean perspective, stressing opinions which supported national aims, but also avoiding being a mouthpiece of the government. The supportive role the paper has ascribed to is taught to every new journalist during the in-house Basic Reporting course, where they learn that the newspaper's role is 'to inform, educate, and entertain' (Tan, 2002a).

The next chapter will explore three cases at different points of the PAP's administration of Singapore. A qualitative analysis of each of these cases would reveal the amount of commentary possible in the coverage of each case. The results of the analysis would then help to ascertain if the OB markers have widened or not.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Shifts in the OB Markers

The first two chapters focused mainly of the historical conditions which have led to the introduction of the OB markers, as well as the laws in the republic which have brought the press- *The Straits Times* in particular- under the wing of the ruling party. The daily has thus been ignominiously labelled a PAP lapdog and a party paper. However, there certainly is room in *The Straits Times* for voicing one's discontent, albeit in a measured tone.

In this chapter, qualitative analysis will be performed on articles appearing in *The Straits Times* over the past 15 years. Three incidents have been chosen, each case having been controversial, and coincided (or were close to) different periods of Singapore's administration by the PAP. They are:

1. The Marxist Conspiracy, 1987.  
- Singapore was led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, under his paternalistic style of leadership.
2. The Catherine Lim Incident, 1994.  
- Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had been in office for three years, promising a "kinder, gentler" government.
3. President Ong Teng Cheong's Press Conference, 1999.  
- Prime Minister Goh having administered for eight years, and President Ong was Singapore's first elected President.

The analysis will look for:

- depth of discussion/ commentary
- alternative views/ concerns raised
- editorial comments
- reader response in the forum pages

However, the absence of either one of the four points in the three cases will not be taken as a lack of openness. Discussions on the overriding theme of each case would also reveal the degree of openness. The findings will help to determine, through the candidness of the articles, if the OB markers have shifted, and to what extent, in the years after Lee Kuan Yew handed his office over to Goh Chok Tong.

### Marxist Conspiracy, 1987

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 1987, The Internal Security Department (ISD) detained 16 people who were connected to a clandestine communist network. The Ministry of Home Affairs released details of the Marxist conspiracy in *The Straits Times* over four days from the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, revealing an elaborate network spanning the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and a terrorist training camp in Sri Lanka (“In action, at”, 1987). Tan Wah Piow, a former student activist who had fled to Britain in order to evade national service was named as the mastermind. His plan was to establish a network of followers to prepare for his eventual return to Singapore (when Lee Kuan Yew was no longer Prime Minister), where he would establish a Marxist state (“Marxist plot uncovered”, 1987).

The intention was to subvert grassroots organisations and radicalise them to join Tan’s cause in order to establish a power base. As trade unions in Singapore were impossible to penetrate due “tight Government control” (“Vincent Cheng saw”, 1987), Tan’s right-hand man Vincent Cheng, an active social worker in the Catholic Church, was aided by the other detainees in infiltrating church groups, student organisations, and the Worker’s Party. They also set up the Third Stage- an English-language drama group used as a front to spread Marxist ideals.

What shocked the country was the fact that those arrested did not fit the image of the “poor Chinese-educated” cadres of the 1950s and 60s. A majority of the detainees were “comfortably well-off English-educated graduates and professionals” (“Marxist plot uncovered”, 1987); people who would have been the most unlikely to pose a threat to the establishment which would have given them a good life. Instead, many chose low-paying job which put them in positions where they could influence others.

#### *Depth of discussion/commentary:*

The reports were based on the statements released by the Ministry of Home affairs with little or no commentary included. Given the importance of the case, *The Straits Times* devoted several pages to the reporting of the conspiracy for each day from the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of May. The materials simply related factual information such as:

- who were the key players and those involved
- what were the plans for subversion



- where the activities were carried out
- when the infiltration was performed
- why the Marxist network was set up
- how religious and student organisations were manipulated

Pictures and extensive write-ups on the key figures such as Tan Wah Piow ("Tan Wah Piow", 1987) and Vincent Cheng ("Vincent Cheng saw", 1987) were also included in the paper. While the articles may seem one-sided since their source is a government ministry, the accusations against the Singapore government were also mentioned ("How religious organisations", 1987; "Articles questioned value", 1987). The reports used terms such as 'conspiracy', 'infiltrate', 'subvert', 'clandestine', 'manipulate', 'instigate', and 'mastermind', giving the reader an impression that the Marxist conspiracy was insidious and posed a grave threat to national security.

*Alternative views/ concerns raised:*

The Catholic Church in Singapore voiced its concerns over the treatment of the detainees, many of whom were social workers and volunteers in church bodies and hoped that they were treated "justly and humanely" ("Church 'perturbed at'", 1987). In reply, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stressed that the details of the activities was not obtained "by torture, coercion or distortion of the truth" ("Archbishop accepts evidence", 1987). In an effort to dispel the impression that the Church was under attack, Lee stated clearly that the government strongly believed in upholding freedom of religion, but would not tolerate those who used any religion as a cover for subversion ("What we will", 1987).

The statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs pointed out that the opposition Workers' Party has had a history of being infiltrated by communist elements, giving some examples of communist penetration of the party in the 50s, 60s and 80s ("Infiltration of Workers'", 1987). However, the party secretary-general J.B. Jeyaretnam denied the claims, saying that the four detainees linked to his party were not members, but sympathisers of the party who shared the same cause ("Workers' Party denies", 1987).

*Editorial comments:*

*The Straits Times* was generally supportive of the arrests of the 16 conspirators, but did not lavish praise on the government for doing so. This is reflected in the moderate tone of the editorials, the first which addressed the issue asserts that there “is no substitute for vigilance”. By giving a brief summary of the facts relating to the conspiracy, it also answered the question of whether the 16 detained “were merely do-gooders whose only crime was that they opposed some of the Government’s policies” (“Subversive designs”, 1987). Another editorial pointed out that the arrests had led to speculation that the state would not tolerate opposing views and that it was a warning to religious organisations to stay away from political issues. It explained that the government was only taking action against a small group of leftists, and that “the Church per se was not under attack” (“Church and State”, 1987).

*Readers’ response:*

The readers in general approved of the actions taken by the government to stop the Marxists before any harm could be done. Letters to the forum page denounced Tan Wah Piow and his followers, and some congratulated the Internal Security Department for a job well done (Rajenthiran, 1987; Velge, 1987). One letter took the opportunity to state that Catholicism and communism are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable ideologies, the actions and sentiments of Tan and his followers were those of the Marxists and not representative of the Catholic Church (Venning, 1987). The general sentiment was that Singaporeans should not take national security for granted (Ng, 1987).

**The Catherine Lim Incident, 1994**

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s term of office had promised a more consultative style of government. However, allowing for more discussion in politics in the public sphere did not mean that it was ‘open season’ on the People’s Action Party administration (Fernandez, 1995). Local author Dr. Catherine Lim published two articles in *The Straits Times* entitled *The PAP and the people - A Great Affective Divide* (*The Straits Times*, 1994 September 3) and *One Government, Two Styles* (*The Straits Times*, 1994 November 20).

The PAP tolerated her first article which described the growing gulf between the ruling elite and the electorate (Lim, 1994a), but it took offence at what Lim had supposedly implied in her second article *One Government, Two Styles*- that Prime Minister Goh was not in full control of the government, with Senior Minister Lee intervening from the sidelines. Lim's hypothesis would mean that Prime Minister Goh's softer approach was not yielding results, and the administration was reverting back to the old-style, top-down decision process (Low, 1998, p.61; Ho, 2000, p.186).

In a rebuttal to Catherine Lim's article, Prime Minister Goh described her comments as an erosion of his authority ("PM: No erosion", 1994). He declared that those who wished to comment on or influence policies should do so in the political arena, not from political sanctuaries ("There are limits", 1994). Singaporeans took this as a warning that those who spoke against the PAP would be treated like opposition party members. Dr Lim received only stern words from the government- a rap on the knuckles compared to the lawsuits which have been slapped on opposition members such as J.B. Jeyaretnam and Dr Chee Soon Juan.

What is significant about the Catherine Lim incident is that political watchers have questioned the government's promise and intention of openness and greater participation in the political arena. Critics would say that the PAP's response to Catherine Lim had seemed to prove her point that the government was reverting to its old authoritarian style of administration.

*Depth of discussion/commentary:*

The controversy over Catherine Lim's two articles sparked a lively debate in the pages of *The Straits Times*. Unlike the coverage of the Marxist Conspiracy - which reads like a monologue- the government, the public and *The Straits Times* journalists seem to be actively engaged in a dialogue, with views and opinions more freely expressed.

While the paper has not strayed from its formula of factual reporting, there is a marked openness in what can be reported, more commentary from the journalists, as well as a change in the tone of the government, as compared to the previous case. In an

effort to address concerns raised by the public and state its point of view, the PAP is seen as engaging in a debate within the pages of the paper.

One of Lim's allegations was that ministers were enriching themselves with the new pay proposal that tagged their salaries to what they would have been paid if they had been in the private sector and not in politics (Lim, 1994b). Having explained that the government and multinational companies were essentially dipping into the same talent pool, the new pay scale was a means of attracting the best and brightest into public service and to reduce the chances of corruption, Prime Minister Goh's rebuttal was, "What are your alternatives? What would you pay the minister? What kind of people do you want?" ("PM: No erosion", 1994).

To dispel the notion that it did not welcome criticisms, the government stated clearly that it welcomes debate on its policies but will "rebut robustly arguments which are malicious, wrong or against the interests of the country" ("PM: Debate welcomed", 1995).

*Alternative views/ concerns raised:*

In the article *Politics for Politicians only* written by Warren Fernandez, the News Editor for *The Straits Times* posed two questions which had arisen from the debate. He wondered if Dr Catherine Lim had been right about Prime Minister Goh's change of style, and more importantly, if the political arena was for politicians only - a sort of "sign-up-or-shut-up" policy (Fernandez, 1995). If that were the case, did it reflect a hardening of the government line on what is deemed as legitimate public debate, and what constituted political comment, he asked (Fernandez, 1994).

Less than two months later, Fernandez wrote a follow-up article, *PM's assurance should calm nervous commentators*, which addressed some of these questions. In response to the concerns expressed by the public and members of parliament, Prime Minister Goh assured the Parliament that the government welcomed debate on its policies, and that those who wished to air their views did not need to join a political party. However, the government made it clear that it reserved the right to respond, "robustly, if need be" to views which could undermine the country's interests. The underlying theme of the prime minister's statements, according to Fernandez (1995),

was that the PAP would not tolerate sarcastic, snide comments or mockery of the government. However, one question he asked, which remains unresolved, was who should be the judge what the right tone for comment is, and when does “well-meaning” commentary cross the line into obsequiousness.

*Readers' response:*

What was most interesting to observe was the sort of feedback sent from the readers to the Forum pages of *The Straits Times*. While there were moderate voices calling for more encouragement given to civic groups to engage in public debate, there were also those who did not agree with the PAP's rebuttals of Lim's articles.

One reader, Wong Nai Seng, pointed out that a counter-argument given by Koo Tsai Kee, an MP, was flawed. Koo had written to the Forum page saying that the PAP's popularity could not be doubted as it had garnered over 60 percent of votes, and added that while the PAP was popular, it was not a populist party (Koo, 1994). Wong countered by saying that the votes were not an indication of unconditional support, and although the PAP may win overwhelmingly at every election, there can be much “discontent simmering underneath” (Wong, 1994). According to Wong, the citing of electoral data to support the PAP's popularity “smacks of self-delusion, and provides further evidence of the ‘great affective divide’”. In parting, he says that the legitimacy of any government stems from its ability to win popular support, but cautioned that the people will not be led where they do not wish to go.

The moderate voices were also of the opinion that the PAP had been harsh on Lim and her comments. One reader expressed his disappointment that the “PAP should deride her [Catherine Lim] viewpoint and suggest that her analysis is badly flawed”, when Lim was respected for her literary achievements and “has no political axe to grind” (Yap, 1994). Furthermore, another letter argued that Catherine Lim's articles were an indication that artists and writers have taken the Prime Minister's promise of a kinder, gentler Singapore seriously (Heng, 1994), and that the PAP should take criticism as a form of feedback and heed Lim's points (Chang, 1994).

*Editorial comments:*

It would seem that the contentiousness of the issue prompted the editor of *The Straits Times*, Leslie Fong, to write an editorial himself. He is of the opinion that the level of public debate will go up a few notches if the participants were more adept at giving and receiving criticisms. Unfortunately, Fong says, many are prone to putting their ego on the line and letting their emotions get in the way of reason, and are blinded by fixations about people or ideas. These are indirect references to the PAP, which has been seen by many Singaporeans as being inflexible, dogmatic and hyper-sensitive to criticisms. With reference to the PAP, Fong (1995) says:

...those in positions of authority, whether in government or other spheres of public life, who agree that more openness is a plus for Singapore provided it does not degenerate into licence or anarchy, should set examples for others.

Being adept in handling criticisms, says Fong, calls for a willingness to hear out the other side, to accept facts, however unpleasant, and to let reason prevail over emotions. Although Fong did not pass judgment on Catherine Lim's articles or the reactions from the PAP, he cautions: "where criticism is informed and instructive, one would be a fool not to learn from it". What matters ultimately, he says, is that one's motive is pure. "There must be a place in Singapore for fair and honest criticism" (Fong, 1995).

Despite the fears that the appointment of Fong would mean a more pro-PAP stance (Turnbull, 1995, p.361), his editorial write-up is fair and objective. It also has to be remembered that it was most likely Fong's decision to publish Catherine Lim's articles in the first place. After all, Fong is the one who claims to have "brought back responsible, honest disagreement into the newspaper" (Turnbull, 1995, p.364). Unlike the editorials commenting on the Marxist Conspiracy which basically toes the government line, this one has expressed the opinion that all parties, including the PAP, would do well to be more tolerant of alternative views and let reason be the guide.

**President Ong Teng Cheong's Press Conference, 1999**

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the ruling People's Action Party has been seen as a rock-solid, united organisation. However, on July 16<sup>th</sup> 1999, little cracks appeared and the body politic was shaken by a move that was without precedent. At a

press conference held at the Istana (the offices of both the Head of State and Head of Government), Singapore's first Elected President (EP) Ong Teng Cheong announced that he would not be running for a second term.

Stating that he had encountered a "long list" of problems, President Ong spoke tellingly of the difficulties he had encountered as the first Elected President. He cited his "disappointment" at not being able to use his 'second key' to the reserves, the differing opinions of how the Net Income Expenditure should be treated, the alleged reluctance of government departments to yield financial information to him ("Dr Hu clarifies" 1999), and added that some ministers and public offices had initially viewed his office as a "nuisance" as his role was being worked out (Ibrahim, 1999a, p.1).

The Elected President is essentially a custodial, not an executive appointment. The Elected President holds a 'second key' to the republic's reserves, can veto attempts to draw from it as well as ensure that key public sector positions are not given to incompetent people. When Lee Kuan Yew first mooted the idea of an elected President with enhanced powers, many assumed that the office was meant for himself (George, 2000, p.63).

According to George (2000, p.58), the most remarkable thing about the press conference was Ong's initiative in summoning the media and disclosing his dissatisfaction. It attests to President Ong's belief that a public debate could be carried out in the media. His appeal to public opinion was a first for a serving head of state. Given the PAP's style of presenting a strong, united front in the administration of the republic, it is not surprising that the government was averse to having internal disagreements aired in public, especially one so fundamental as the role of the Elected President - the brainchild of Senior Minister Lee.

It can be interpreted that President Ong's utilisation of the press in voicing his disagreements with the government shows that the PAP has been relaxing its grip on the newspapers. The fact that *The Straits Times* ran such extensive coverage of the incident and gave President Ong's opinions so much column space is a small but significant indication that the paper was no lapdog of the PAP, and would run stories that are pertinent to the interests of Singaporeans.

Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was quoted as saying that it was “perhaps as well” that the President chose to “vent his frustration”, leaving the government with the “unpleasant task of having to rebut him in public”. The positive aspect was that the exchanges had helped to clarify and educate the people on the role of the Elected President (“President’s significant role”, 1999). George (2000, p.60) asserts that it was probably the direct nature of the Elected President’s relationship to the people that made President Ong feel that it was proper and justified for him to account for this term of office directly to the people. And since the Elected President had to be non-partisan (President Ong had to resign from the PAP before nomination), it implies that the Cabinet could not subject the Elected President to internal party discipline or OB markers. It showed that Ong Teng Cheong was his own man when he held office, and did not always agree with the government despite being a former Deputy Prime Minister.

*Depth of discussion/commentary:*

President Ong’s candid revelation of his ‘long list of problems’ was addressed by a point-by-point rebuttal from the PAP. While comments from the public and editors were not as forthcoming as the Catherine Lim incident, it was most interesting how the disagreement between President Ong and the PAP had unfolded in the reporting by *The Straits Times*.

There are subtle hints which reveal more details if one reads between the lines. For example, one could sense President Ong’s displeasure on the implication that his decision to run for a second term of office was affected by how the PAP viewed him. Ibrahim (1999a) writes:

Probed on whether he had received signals or hints from the Government on how it viewed his re-election, he [President Ong] replied in clipped tones: “I don’t need any support from anybody. It’s my personal decision.”

The daily already had an extensive write-up on some of the main ‘problems’ on the day after the press conference was called. Obviously, *The Straits Times* was under no restraining order to prevent the publicising of the dispute. President Ong had taken the opportunity to have his say through the press, and the PAP then used this same forum to present their point of view about a month later on August 18.



Finance Minister Dr Richard Hu issued a point-by-point clarification on the problems described by President Ong. Dr Hu's ministerial statement said that the problems were "neither fundamental nor intractable" ("Dr Hu clarifies", 1999), and that the difficulties arose from "honest differences in views" which were inevitable in a two-way learning process (George, 1999).

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated that the government had not shown President Ong any disrespect nor had they withheld any information or cooperation. He added that there was "absolutely no reason to obstruct" the Elected President, an institution created by the government which the PAP wants to see succeed ("Government 'gave its'", 1999).

*Alternative views/ concerns raised:*

While President Ong's appeal to the press did raise the hackles of the PAP, Prime Minister Goh made it clear that the government's reluctance to support Ong Teng Cheong for a second term in office did not stem from his disagreements with the government. An MP, Dr Michael Lim, asked pointedly for the prime minister to clarify his stand, since there was no compelling reason for the cabinet not to support President Ong for a second term unless Ong Teng Cheong's lymphoma had taken a turn for the worst ("Why Govt could", 1999).

The Prime Minister felt that it was irrelevant and inappropriate to reveal President Ong's medical condition since he was not seeking re-election. But the calls to clarify the government's position left the prime minister no alternative but to release Ong's medical reports to the Cabinet ("Why Govt could", 1999), which then unanimously agreed that President Ong's health would prevent him from discharging his duties (Ibrahim, 1999b). Ong Teng Cheong, who passed away on 8 February 2002, would have been in the middle of his second term as President had he run for election and had been voted in.

Questions were also raised on the nature of the 'independence' of the Elected President after President Ong's press conference. Prime Minister Goh says in his statement that there is no confusion over the role of the Elected President, which is stated in the Constitution to hold only custodial powers whereas executive powers lie in

the hands of the government (“PM: I’m pained”, 1999). In agreement, Senior Minister Lee states that the Elected President “has no executive powers to initiate anything nor to stop the government from doing anything other than spending reserves and making bad appointments” (“EP’s role largely”, 1999). SM Lee says that the commentators who expected the President to stand up against the government in the ordinary run of policies were thus mistaken on the role of the Elected President.

Opposition Members of Parliament rose in unison to criticise the PAP’s handling of the Elected Presidency issue. Worker’s Party MP Low Thia Khiang asserted that the President’s veto powers had been diminished since the government could unblock the President’s veto with a two-thirds majority in the House. “The government gave the President the second key”, says Low, “but changed the locks” (“Govt not sincere”, 1999).

Chua Lee Hoong, a *Straits Times* journalist covering a parliamentary session which saw a debate in the House over the Elected Presidency, says that the differences in opinion were a positive sign which “augers well for Singapore’s political health”, and that variety gives dynamism and sparks creativity (Chua, 1999a). She also notes that a more active debate over the Elected Presidency would have been good, since there were still issues to be resolved, much to the ire of the opposition MPs. Their dissatisfaction can be seen, as Chua quotes veteran opposition member J.B. Jeyaretnam as saying that the government should resign “to recover its credibility” because (according to Jeyaretnam) “the government had instituted something when it had no intention of it [the Elected Presidency] working” (Chua, 1999b). Chua (1999c) cautions readers from drawing the wrong conclusions from the Elected Presidency issue, one of which being that “the Elected President is doomed to non-respect and non-cooperation from the government”.

#### *Readers’ response:*

The public seemed to be less involved in the debate over the EP as compared to the Catherine Lim incident. Whether they were more contented in quietly reading the unfolding debate in the papers or deemed arguing the role of the Elected President as dangerous ground to tread, one can only speculate why this is so.

In the few letters which could be found, one suggested three possible candidates for the next presidential election (Abisheganaden, 1999). Another reader appealed to the government to fine-tune the EP selection process to ensure that there would always be eligible candidates to choose from (Ong, 1999). The Parliamentary Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office replied that no fine-tuning was necessary since pre-qualifying the candidates would ensure that any candidate standing for election will make a suitable President regardless if there was a contest or not (Chan, 1999).

*Editorial comments:*

The editorial following Prime Minister Goh's statements on President Ong's press conference seems to be in agreement with the sentiments of the PAP. What matters, according to the editorial, is that the elected Head of State is fulfilling his custodial role "conscientiously and effectively but quietly, working with the government to resolve any difference that may arise". It goes on to say that Singaporeans who demand "public assertiveness" as proof of the EP's effectiveness should not be disappointed because how well the President does his job is more important than "how loudly he manages to convince citizens that he is doing it" ("Getting the job", 1999).

The editorial could be seen as disapproving of President Ong's press conference. However, it quotes newly elected President S. R. Nathan's comments as a reminder that the debate over the role of the EP arose because people were unaware that the EP's role was already defined in the Constitution. President Nathan says:

Please bear in mind that the function that I am about to embark on is already defined under the Constitution... There are certain parameters within which I have to work. ("Getting the job", 1999)

The editorial does also acknowledge that the Elected Presidency was neither a wooden nor constricted role. It interpreted President Nathan's remarks that every presidency is a continual "moulding of the office", as the suggestion that the institution was one which was growing.

**Conclusion: A widening of the boundaries**

Using the Marxist Conspiracy as the yardstick, the coverage of the Catherine Lim case saw a marked increase in the range of opinions expressed by the newspaper's

journalists. In addition, letters to the Forum page did not mince their words when it came to delivering criticisms of the PAP. While the ruling party was under fire for an about turn in its promise of a more consultative style of administration, it is important to note that the government had taken an open-dialogue approach and had engaged the public in a debate. Lim's alleged contravention of the OB markers of showing disrespect to the Prime Minister and casting doubts on the government's ability to rule did not mean that a discussion on where the OB markers lay was disallowed. It is unlikely that Lee Kuan Yew would have entertained such a debate, taking into consideration his aversion to noisy, protracted debates and his philosophy of "bulldozing" those out to block him (Ng, 1995a).

Although the President is not subject to the OB markers as George (2000) points out, the media in Singapore is. However, *The Straits Times* was in no way prevented from reporting on President Ong's press conference and his disagreements with the government. As mentioned above, the press in the republic does possess a certain amount of independence. It is not likely that the PAP were caught off-guard. If they so wished, they could have declared the topic out-of-bounds for public consumption before the story went to print the next day. The PAP has always portrayed itself as a party united in its cause. While President Ong's comments may have implied the existence of fault lines within the government and "cast doubts on the government" ("PM: I'm pained", 1999), the ensuing debate served to educate the public on the role of the EP.

However, this widening of the OB markers seems to have gone unnoticed by most critics of the PAP. While it is true that such moves towards openness are not great strides by the western standards, the PAP has stated that the widening of social and political space for Singaporeans is "best achieved through evolutionary, not radical change" ("Govt: Process of", 1994). The Singapore government may be sceptical about the universality of human rights and the concept of press freedom enshrined within, but it does concur that greater freedom of expression in the media is beneficial to the country.

Far from being rigid, the government has exhibited flexibility and the willingness to heed the calls for greater public participation in national issues. On the

other hand, the conditions attached to moves towards openness are that the PAP will only do so in their own time, and on their own terms.

## CONCLUSION

The OB markers in the Singapore media, which set the limits on how far public discussions can go, has been criticised as a device to curb freedom of speech and a muzzle on civil society. While there is no denying that their arbitrary nature leaves many commentators uneasy about unwittingly treading into areas deemed out-of-bounds, the PAP has stated that it welcomes debate and criticisms provided that it did not mock the government.

Lee Kuan Yew had justified the need for setting boundaries in political discussions, citing the unique circumstances of Singapore's social, political and economic development and the frailty of inter-ethnic relations. The republic's inauspicious birth as a result of her ejection from the Federation of Malaysia placed her in a 'do-or-die' situation which propelled the country down a single-minded pursuit for survival. The hard lessons learnt from the press' insensitive reporting of the Maria Hertogh custody battle drove home the point that racial relations were fragile, and that good relations had to be maintained at all costs.

The OB markers were implemented with the aim of ensuring that discussions on race, religion and government did not pose a threat on the social and political cohesiveness of the city-state. While critics assert that the OB markers are an infringement on freedom of speech, the PAP sees it as one of the means of safeguarding the country's interests. In promoting the idea of the press being subordinate to the interests of nation-building, Lee's rejections of the Western journalistic norms have drawn much criticism from liberals.

However, it is necessary to point out that while the Singaporean system is not as open and liberal as her critics would like it to be, there are little pockets of freedom where dissenting voices can be heard. For example, the research materials for this thesis were mainly drawn from a public library in Marine Parade - a large public housing estate in the eastern part of Singapore which is also Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's ward. Books delivering both bouquets and brickbats to the PAP can be found among the shelves. In his book *To Be Free*, Singapore Democratic Party leader Dr Chee Soon Juan

has painted a bleak picture of democracy in Singapore and the alleged physical and psychological abuse that political detainees suffer under the Internal Security Department (Chee, 1998, p.260). Christopher Tremewan, author of *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, asserts in the preface that the publication is banned in Singapore (1996, p.xi), which is untrue since it could also be found in the library.

If the PAP was indeed that censorial a regime and intolerant of opposing viewpoints as others imagine it to be, books such as these would not be publicly available in the libraries or in bookshops.

It is impossible to list exhaustively what the OB markers are- they shift according to the prevailing social and political circumstances in Singapore. Where there may be an opening up on discussions for a particular issue, there could be a contraction somewhere else. Many saw the introduction of the recent legislation which makes registration of political websites compulsory, as a means of suppressing dissent voiced over the Internet ("Singapore tightens grip", 2001).

However, other areas, which traditionally had been placed under tighter controls, are being liberalised. Singapore's strict censorship guidelines are put through a thorough review for the first time in 10 years in order to allow for more diversity and choice in the arts, an area that the government has identified as a growth industry ("Govt to ease", 2002).

Comedian Jack Neo has produced what may be Singapore's first political satirical film: *I Not Stupid*. The grammatically incorrect title of the movie alone is a snub at the government's Speak Good English campaign. The movie delivers both direct and indirect criticisms on government policies such as the foreign talent policy as well as the city-state's rigid school system. The references to the PAP are obvious, with a bossy mother dressed in white (as PAP politicians are during public events and Parliamentary sessions) and always reminding her children how lucky they are to have such good and responsible parents. Neo said that he was not worried about his film being censored, because he knew it was a constructive way of criticising and had no political motivations (Yeo, 2002).

Although Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew had stated clearly that only those elected could set the OB markers (Ng, 1995b), Prof Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Director of the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore, believes that citizens should not be afraid to test the frontiers. As quoted in Tan (n.d.), Prof Koh says:

Well, the politicians are unwilling to indicate clearly and in advance where the OB markers are so one would have to continue to test the frontiers. I guess in a situation like ours, which is evolving, to use a legal jargon, we can't use a civil law approach where the rules are clearly laid out but must use a common law approach where rules are evolved on a case to case basis. That means that some of us get beaten up from time to time when we transgress the OB markers. I guess intellectual [sic] should not be afraid to take risks, otherwise, how can you advance the cause if you are afraid of getting beaten up.

The move towards greater openness has been accelerated by the fact that the current economic downturn in Asia, as well as increased competition with neighbouring countries has left Singapore in a vulnerable position. Coupled with the discovery of terrorist plots to undermine the republic and the wariness felt against the Singaporean Muslim community after comments given by outspoken Muslim radicals, it has led many to embark on a path of soul-searching, and to question the very fundamentals on which Singapore as a sovereign political entity rests.

Much has changed since September 11, the event having dashed economic recovery in Asia after the 1997 economic crisis. While Singapore's economy struggles to get back on track, the discovery of enemies from within has somewhat shaken confidence in the strength of the country's social fabric. The PAP knows that now, more than ever, it needs to listen to the people in order to reinvent itself to better prepare Singapore for an uncertain future. However, the government's track record of having dealt harshly with opposition members has made Singaporeans fearful of speaking out.

The PAP has realised that the republic needs to reinvent itself in order to survive, and announced the formation of the Remaking Singapore Committee. The committee's job is to advise the government on how it is to go about changing Singapore socially, politically and culturally, so that Singapore would be in a better position to overcome the challenges in a changed world (Ministry of Community Development and Sports, 2002).



Mr Vivian Balakrishnan, chairman of the Remaking Singapore Committee and Minister of State (National Development), says that it is important for people to say what is on their wish list for changes to be implemented in Singapore, because “this is a time when people [the government] are more willing to listen than they have ever been before” (Tan, 2002b).

The OB markers are in a continuous state of flux, just as social, political and economic relations change in the world. It does not have a definite shape or a distinct boundary. One can only tell where the OB markers lie when one probes and tests the limits. It may seem as an irony to some, that the government’s push for openness and participation from Singaporeans comes at a time when the country faces its most serious challenge since independence.

The Singaporean government has signalled that the OB markers have widened, and thus the ball is also in the Singaporeans’ court. Their apprehension at speaking up is not unfounded, but if they are unable to overcome their ‘*kiasi*’ mentality and their scepticism at the PAP’s calls for feedback, the game will lapse and everyone will be worse off.

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