

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, June 19, 2017.

Lee Kuan Yew's squabbling children are tarnishing his legacy

Tom Plate says Singapore's credibility on the global stage, which its founding leader helped to build up, is being hurt by the public washing of his family's dirty laundry.



After my first trip to Singapore, as a *Los Angeles Times* columnist, for my first interview with [Lee Kuan Yew](#), then titled senior minister, I returned home feeling I had seen something special and had met someone special. This was in 1996. Back then, the average American thought of the place as no more than a “caning and chewing gum” circus. How silly and uninformed that view was.

My fondness for Singapore was never to wane during subsequent trips and interviews, not only with Lee but also with other huge talents such as diplomat Tommy Koh, foreign minister George Yeo, global thinker Kishore Mahbubani, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong, newspaper editor Cheong Yip Seng and others. I feel gratitude for their time and mentoring even today.

Many years later, I related this to Theodore Sorensen, the iconic policy adviser and speech-writer for John F. Kennedy, months before he left us at the age of 82. Ever sharp until the end, Ted, a mentor in graduate school, tried playfully to curb my enthusiasm. The occasion was a 2010 party at Singapore's UN mission in New York for my book *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew*. Chuckling, Sorensen related that after his first visit to Singapore, Lee asked for an assessment. "Minister Mentor," Ted reportedly said (and knowing the sharpness of his needle, I'm sure he did say this), "I now feel my life is complete. I have been to Utopia."

To be sure, Lee never remotely claimed to have created utopia in the actual, but in ambitious thrust he tried, as did the many hard-working Singaporeans he carried with him to transform a third-world backwater into a first-world city state. Yet about this we would joke – relaxed, he was very witty – with my once suggesting that if Singapore were utopia, then its citizens had to be Martians, not human beings. This remark somehow got to him, but then he smilingly said: "We're not Martians!"

Judging from the sordid Lee family rift that has now just surfaced, it looks as if the Singapore elite is more Earthbound than suspected. From the prime minister – Lee's son, in office since 2004 – to his thoughtful daughter, a brilliant neurologist, this near-utopia today looks creepy-swampy with back-stabbing and name-calling. On the surface, the unseemly divisiveness focuses mainly on the late founder's last will, and his wish for the modest home of his last 70 years to be demolished, not glorified into some Chinese Mount Rushmore (Singapore itself being the monument). I won't venture to sort out all the details, which have been ably reported by this newspaper. But I believe this was in fact his last wish, and feel as does a former colleague and current resident of Hong Kong who is also a devoted Singapore watcher: "I'm shocked. I feel sorry for LKY."

Sure, this family falling-out is not of global import: but for those who sincerely care about the LKY legacy, as the "old man" himself certainly did, it is very sad to witness. It would be joked back in the Lion City that LKY's power of will was so strong, if from the grave he sensed his Singapore veering off-track, he'd reach out and knock the place back into shape. Alas, it's too bad that option is not actually available. "So very sad," emailed a friend from Singapore who knew "the old man" well. Another, from Hong Kong, emailed: "A Shakespearean tragedy for some, but a tragicomedy for others – and not only Hongkongers."

Modern Singapore's global as well as regional image reached near Olympian stature, due not only to its economic success but also to its founder's talents as the city state's public face. He was a skilled orator (though the late Nelson Mandela, in my view, retires the gold medal), and a serious thinker (though more in deft, concise formulation than pure origination). In some ways, he could be modest: regarding contemporary China, for instance, he'd say that, because of his historic relationship with Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), his insights might be overestimated. "I visit China maybe once a year," he once said. "What do I know?" Yet some scholars, who once shunned him like a civil-rights felony, regarded him almost as if he were an Old Testament prophet.

Though sometimes wrong, on the big things he had an uncanny knack for being right. Regarding the "Clash of Civilisations" thesis, he was only wary of Islamicism ("... because of that Book," he'd say, referring to overly literal adherences to tiny parts of the

Koran). And his fervour for one-citizen, one-vote democracy was no warmer than Plato's (it can produce "erratic results", he'd say, a view many Americans would accept). Though the leader of such a tiny state (but more populous than Ireland and New Zealand), Lee was viewed as a giant, not just in Asia.

His surviving children and their inner circle need to consider whether their public quarrel behoves their founding father. Having inherited a magnificent mantle, they should be ashamed for permitting the dirty family laundry of jealousy and ego to enter the otherwise commendably clean public domain of their Singapore.

Once, at the end of an exhausting day, Lee was asked whether the political system might finally "loosen up, as many have conjectured", after he had "gone to Marx", as the atheist's option is sometimes put. "It is for the present and future generations of leader to modify and adjust the system," he said. The time has come for the present generation to do just that. If they cannot handle what has been given, they should humbly hand it off to others who might preserve it with more class.

Columnist and university professor Tom Plate is author of Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew in the Giants of Asia series

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