

» DEBATING S'PORE POLITICS

Overcoming doubts and stepping forth

BY CATHERINE LIM

WHATEVER strategies of communication I may use as a political commentator – directly through exposition, or indirectly through humour, irony and satire – I would like to continue to share my views with fellow Singaporeans.

There is one special group I'm interested in – those who follow political developments keenly and are now wondering whether they should move from being passive observers to active participants in public discussion and debate.

For them I have an urgent message: If you have the following reservations, you can overcome them, as I have:

Firstly, you feel bad about criticising a government that has done so much good for the people. The People's Action Party (PAP) Government's achievements have been so spectacular, surely whatever shortcom-

ings it has can be overlooked?

But if you sincerely, strongly feel that the shortcoming is more than minor – that it is, in fact, a real defect of leadership style that could have serious repercussions for society in the long term – then you must speak up.

If giving credit where credit is due is a good thing, then giving criticism where criticism is due is better, for it entails greater effort, even courage.

There is a time and a place for praise and blame, trust and doubt, appreciation and anger. They need not exclude each other; indeed, together they make for a more balanced, integrated view.

I am probably the most seasoned critic in Singapore. But I have repeatedly expressed my profound appreciation for the safety, security, and material well-being of Singapore. Perhaps the most glowing tribute ever re-

ceived by the PAP Government came from me four years ago at the time of the Indian Ocean tsunami.

I was so impressed by the Singapore Government's rendering of help to beleaguered Indonesians – help that was noted not only for its generosity but also its quiet tact, calm resolution and warm empathy – that I wrote an enthusiastic article about it that was published in *Today*.

Secondly, you feel that since you are not interested in going into politics, since you don't have the makings of a politician, you aren't qualified to be a political critic. Wrong.

Political life is not for everybody. As long as you are a concerned Singaporean with worthwhile ideas, as long as you are motivated by conviction and good intentions, you can make a valuable contribution to the raising of political awareness and the enlarging of political debate, so sorely needed in Singapore.



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MAKE A STAND

"You will notice that my operative words are honesty, sincerity, conviction and good intentions... So my rallying cry to Singaporeans is this: Think through, speak out, stand up and try not to be too afraid."

WRITER CATHERINE LIM (left)

I have been challenged, as well as invited, many times to get into the political arena, but my answer has always been no. For I am aware of my limitations, pretty serious ones at that.

For one thing, my personality and temperament make me quite unfit for the demands of political life. Being overly individualistic and solitary, not to mention opinionated and stubborn, I would find it very hard to submit to party discipline and consensus.

I'm sure if I joined any party, I would be booted out within a month. I can claim only two abilities – being

able to speak and write. But that's okay, as I can make reasonable use of them in my role as political commentator.

Thirdly, you fear that as a political critic, you will bring upon yourself the wrath of a powerful and implacable government, perhaps even strong punitive action. Wrong again.

I believe that much of the fear we Singaporeans experience is unnecessary and self-inflicted – which, of course, suits the PAP fine, since it makes its work of control that much easier.

I also believe that even a criticism-averse government

must respect, even if grudgingly, criticism that is informed, measured, reasoned and principled, born out of conviction and a genuine concern for the well-being of the society.

At the most, the government might react to your criticism with a sharp rebuke; at the least, it might simply ignore you, as it has been ignoring me for years.

When my first political commentaries appeared in *The Straits Times* more than 10 years ago, there was initially an uproar, and the government was clearly angry. In fact, there were all kinds of rumours, some downright ridiculous, about how the

government was out to get me. But as you can see, I'm still happily around.

You will notice that my operative words are honesty, sincerity, conviction and good intentions. Ultimately, these are the most important qualities to bring to any relationship in any sphere – political, business or professional, in the public or private domain.

So my rallying cry to Singaporeans is this: Think through, speak out, stand up and try not to be too afraid.

The writer is a novelist. The above is an excerpt from a speech she delivered at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy last week.