

Turning disability into capability

Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam was interviewed by Bruce Nussbaum of BusinessWeek at the ICSID World Design Congress on Nov 23. We carry today an edited excerpt of the interview, which took place at the Suntec City Ballroom.

We have to be ourselves. And that means not abandoning our strengths. I think our cardinal strength is our ability to integrate people of very different cultures, people who in fact started off with very different aspirations although we're now converging. That doesn't happen by chance. It happens through careful planning, and sometimes intrusive regulation.



How did Singapore create itself over the past 50 years, and come to be as it is today?

Our advantage is the fact that we are just a small piece of rock, nothing under the ground, no minerals. Only a collection of people, who were not meant to come together as a country. That has been our advantage, because our only basis for survival is to invest consistently in every talent and skill, and be willing to do something differently - different from other cities in Asia, and different from the rest of the world.

I was at the Marina Barrage recently with a group of residents from my constituency. The Barrage converts rainwater and sea water into a freshwater reservoir using advanced membrane technologies, developed over the years. It also uses the best foreign technologies - a Dutch company supplied seven massive pumps. People were flying kites on top of the structure, itself really beautiful. So it is now also a lifestyle venue.

It's an example of how we turn disability - the fact that we have no natural resources - into capability, using science and technology and by borrowing the best from the rest of the world. So I think that's at the heart of it: the vulnerability, the constant state of anxiety. That is the way we know we've got to be a little more ingenious than others.

What seems to be a very important issue here is generating local talent, bringing in external talent and integrating it. How does that work?

About one-third of our population is foreign-born, as it is in London. In New York, about 45 per cent of the adult population is foreign. But the big difference is that London is part of Britain, and only 10 per cent or less of the British population is foreign-born. New York is part of the United States, and the Americans know it is their country. We are both city and country, and that's our challenge.

We can survive only if we are a global city. We've got to be as open as other global cities, a place where people can spend part of their lives regardless of where they come from. But we've also got to be a country for our own citizens. That means managing this place not just as an economy or a conglomeration of businesses, but also as a society - an inclusive society that nurtures every citizen to reach his or her highest potential in life.

Singapore's success has come in large part from the technology and engineering-centred, top-down economic and social model. It is a model of efficiency. In 2003, the Economic Review Committee recommended remaking Singapore into a centre of creativity, originality and innovation. Now these capacities are associated with a different model - a human-centred, social science, bottom-up model. My question is how successful is Singapore today in making this transition to this current model?

We are doing more and need to do more to create an environment that depends on ideas coming up from individuals, and not just system efficiencies. We need the effervescence of ideas coming up naturally through the schools, through the polytechnics, our technical colleges or ITEs (Institutes of Technical Education) and our universities. The whole thrust of educational policy in the last decade has been to give these ideas and new types of talents the maximum chance of emerging.

It is a difficult exercise, because meritocracy is fundamental to Singapore, and standardisation comes very naturally to meritocracies. Standardisation is a disadvantage in education if we are trying to breed different types of talent. So how we break out of this is by creating different pathways from the mainstream, each of them meritocratic, where you have to show that you've got something different from the rest.

To get into the School of the Arts is highly competitive. But you are measured not just on your exam scores, but also on whether you can show through your track record and at the audition that you have something different. We are also doing it in the sciences, in design and applied technology, and in many public schools that are offering their own niches of excellence. Our schools and teachers are being given autonomy. We've learnt from the best private schools in the US and elsewhere, and brought the lessons into a publicly funded, meritocratic system. So it is this mix of planning, top-down support and ground-up initiative that's driving education.

We shouldn't try to be like someone else. Zurich doesn't try to be like San Francisco or London. It doesn't try to be like the most exciting cities. But Zurich attracts talent, especially talent with families. It's got its own edge, and it is a very attractive city.

We have to be ourselves. And that means not abandoning our strengths. I think our cardinal strength is our ability to integrate people of very different cultures, people who in fact started off with very different aspirations although we're now converging. That doesn't happen by chance. It happens through careful planning, and sometimes intrusive regulation.

There's nothing more intrusive than our rules requiring every public housing precinct and every block to have a spread of ethnic groups. That's also how you ensure that the primary schools around the corner have the spread of ethnic groups. And how we get a convergence of aspirations and a sense of sameness in each new generation. We can't leave these things to the market, or let things splinter the way we can all see happening in some other parts of the world.

It requires advance planning, and a consensus between the people and the Government - that this is the way we want to go. If we were a city among many in the country, it wouldn't matter. If San Diego goes down, Austin, Texas will come up or someone else comes up. But if we go down, the country goes down.

So it requires a steady hand, always looking over the horizon. We don't leave things entirely to chance. That's a disadvantage in some ways but it's also the way we survive and how Singapore stays relevant.

I was out birding yesterday with my wife and one of the places we went to look at birds was an old British air force base that has been transformed into a Singapore aerospace area. I wanted to ask you: What are the kinds of industries that you think Singapore should be getting into at the very high end of manufacturing?

First, we build on existing capabilities. The example you gave, of aerospace, is an interesting one. It's built on precision engineering and electronics capabilities, both existing industries. Existing capabilities don't die. We take them, build adjacent capabilities, develop new industries and jump onto new curves.

It's not something you can plan for well in advance, because you don't know how the world will change. But if you keep investing in your capabilities, businesses will grow.

ST Aerospace is now the leading company globally, in third-party maintenance and repair. It is not owned by an airline, and has no captive client. How did they do it without a national airline feeding them with contracts? By building capabilities.

What about the medical sphere? How is that doing?

It's a growth industry globally, and we are well positioned to participate in it. Companies in the biomedical field tell us the main advantage of Singapore is the fact that we are English-speaking and we have in the same laboratories and buildings people from all over the world. There's no formula but there's real advantage in bringing together people who've grown up differently and worked in different parts of the world.

I think heterogeneity now is a great driver of growth as opposed to homogeneity, which can actually dampen growth. And that is a major strength for Singapore.

Forty years after we started, it has turned out to be a great asset in a knowledge-based world. We are the natural place in Asia for Indians, Chinese and South-east Asians to feel at home.

What other industries do you think Singapore is into and should be into at that level?

The whole area of urban solutions is a massive opportunity. What is happening in Asia today and over the next 20 years is a tremendous social transformation and a huge challenge - making cities liveable, managing water resources and sanitation, keeping the air clean and the place green. This is something where Singapore has built up a solid experience, and something we can share and participate in.

Are you a little more optimistic today about the future of Singapore in the present global economy than you were perhaps a year ago, when things were pretty gloomy?

I'm more optimistic and it's not because we are past the worst of the crisis. There is tremendous opportunity coming up in Asia.

It is not just a story of Asia's rise, but about the East moving towards the West. It's about the huge infusion of knowledge and ideas that comes from borrowing practices from the West, in numerous fields. And it is also about the West moving to the East.

A few years ago, the global premiere of *I La Galigo*, a Buginese epic story about creation, took place in Singapore, before it was cast in Indonesia and the rest of the world. It is also interesting that Wu Guanzhong, one of the most significant artists in China and the world today, recently donated 133 of his best oil and ink pieces to Singapore. He did so because Singapore was where the East was moving to the West, and the West moving East.

That is our role as a global city in Asia. We are a meeting place, but never static, always borrowing ideas and influencing each other. And it will shape our society in ways that we cannot fully predict today.

The ICSID World Design Congress Singapore 2009 is a parallel event of the Singapore Design Festival, spearheaded by the DesignSingapore Council of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

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