

VOTING YOUR WAY INTO A SLUM: SINGAPORE'S ELECTION DILEMMA

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There is an unusual region in Singapore called Hougang, whose residents have collectively rejected lavish, State-funded, urban renewal offers. As they have been doing so for more than two decades, Hougang stands out for its aged flats and amenities in one of the richest countries in the world. This curious situation arose from the Singapore Government's stance that urban renewal of electoral constituencies should depend on political affiliation. This essay looks at the ethics of the situation.

Think Summer 2014 • 35

Understanding the slum threat

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This curious situation arose from the Singapore Government's stance that urban renewal of electoral constituencies should depend on political affiliation. Thus in 1996, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), cautioned:

You vote for the other side, that means you reject the programmes of the PAP candidate... If you reject it, we respect your choice. Then you'll be left behind, then in 20, 30 years' time, the whole of

Singapore will be bustling away, and your estate through your own choice will be left behind. They become slums. That's my message. ('We will fight GE as local election', *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1996.)

Goh's message should be understood in the context of electoral system of Singapore, a Westminster-style democracy: each candidate competes to represent an electoral constituency by winning a majority of votes from Singaporeans living there. At the national level, the party with the majority of elected candidates secures the right to form the Government. Singapore has had a PAP Government since 1959, with the party having an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats and therefore immense control in policy-making. As no PAP candidate has won in the constituency of Hougang for over two decades, this region faces the prospect of becoming a slum.

Lying in the logical gap between voting for a non-PAP politician and choosing to live in a future slum is Singapore's estate upgrading policy (hereafter, EUP): PAP constituencies get priority in upgrading. While this may look like mundane pork barrel politicking, the PAP has vehemently denied such accusations, offering an intriguing defense of their approach.

Apparently the PAP Government is constrained by fairness, as explained by former Minister for National Development, Mah Bow Tan ('Upgrading for all wards, but PAP ones first', *The Straits Times*, 11 June 2006.). He argued that the costly EUP is possible only because there are budget surpluses funding it. In turn, these surpluses exist only because of the economic growth derived from good Government policies. At the source of this virtuous sequence are those who voted for the PAP candidates, thereby paving the way for the surplus-generating policies to be implemented. Thus, at a 2011 local university forum, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong replied to an

undergraduate who asked why his Opposition-run ward was bereft of estate upgrading:

Between the people who voted and supported the programme and the Government, and the people who didn't, I think if we went and put yours before the PAP constituencies, it would be an injustice.

Let us build on this to make explicit the PAP's argument: the feasibility of EUP is wholly or largely due to good governance, which in turn exists only because the PAP Government has been voted in. Those who deserve credit for voting in the Government therefore deserve credit for the feasibility of EUP – the more credit one deserves, the more one should get out of EUP. Those who voted for the PAP contributed more towards (and thus deserve more credit for) voting in the PAP Government than those who voted otherwise. Therefore, they should get more out of EUP than those who voted otherwise.

The purported foundation of EUP is meritocracy. Who would reject meritocracy?

Two trends and a problem

EUP has spawned two trends. Firstly, upgrading carrots have been dangled at every election since 1997, and were received with a mixture of indignation and resignation. For instance, in the run-up to the 2012 Hougang by-election, a resident wrote:

While the rest of Singapore's estates are moving on with the upgrading and rebuilding of more facilities, Hougang seems to have remained the same for the past 20 years... Hougang residents should now move on and seek to live in a better, cleaner and more comfortable environment. (Chua Boon Chiew, 'Time to move on, Hougang', (Letter to the editor), *The Straits Times*, 23 May 2012.)

Yet others slam the PAP for abusing State funds in pursuit of party interests. Consider the assault from Sylvia Lim, Chairman of the Workers' Party:

To state the obvious, everybody pays taxes whether they live in PAP or opposition wards. There are no tax rebates for those living in opposition wards. Minister Mah had previously said that he could not 'look PAP MPs in the eye' if he gave the same priority in upgrading to opposition wards. But how, then, does he look these taxpayers in the eye? ('PAP's selective upgrading policy belies 'Staying Together, Moving Ahead', Workers' Party Press Release, 11 June 2006.)

Lim's response is similar to the critique by Basant Kapur:

There is... a fundamental difference between the role of a political party when it seeks to win an election, and the role of the same party when it acts as the government of Singapore. As the Government, it has a fiduciary obligation to act on behalf of all Singaporeans, who pay taxes, undergo national service, and so on. It should be completely apolitical in the disbursement of public funds for the betterment of lives. (Basant K. Kapur, 'Ruling party's fiduciary duty is to all S'poreans', (Letter to the editor), *The Straits Times*, 13 June 2006.)

This takes us to the second trend: criticisms of EUP typically fail to engage with the PAP's argument. Most responses resemble those by Lim and Kapur, stating how Hougang citizens are *just as deserving* of estate upgrading compared to other citizens due to commonalities – like having paid taxes. The PAP does not dispute that all citizens are equal in *those* respects, but insists some have meritorious contributions that others lack. If this is true, then it seems reasonable to reward them accordingly.

Singaporeans usually do not contest the meritocratic principle when it is applied in other areas involving the State. For instance, those who have completed State-mandated National Service are sometimes awarded *ad hoc* cash payouts by the State. These are not enjoyed by other citizens, yet the programme was well-received. Might voting in a PAP candidate be likewise a national contribution that warrants reward? The PAP has argued their case for this, and we have not yet heard why they are wrong. Are detractors contesting (1) the meritocracy principle, or (2) the claim that PAP supporters have made additional contributions, or that (3) those contributions should not be rewarded?

We lack clarity here; one gets the impression that most are talking past one another. Taken together, these two trends promote an undesirable consequence: national controversy exists without an accurate grasp of the core dispute, thereby inhibiting progress in public understanding.

Combating the slum threat

Let us focus on the crux of the matter. I believe EUP is unfair, even if (1) and (2) are true. Thus, I would like to defend (3) while assuming the first two claims. Here are two assumptions I am making for the sake of argument:

- (A) *Singapore would have fared worse if it had a non-PAP government.* While this is by no means obvious, assuming its truth helps avoid unnecessary complication – if it is unclear how effective the alternative government would have been, then it is hard to tell whether PAP wards have benefitted the country or deprived it of an even more effective government. (2) would then be contested, making the scope of the essay too large.

(B) *Apart from voting choices, everything else is equal.* Clearly not all Singaporeans pay the same amount of tax. Thus one may argue there is already widespread inequality of citizen contribution, making it immensely complex to judge who should be rewarded with estate upgrading, and to what extent relative to others. To avoid being bogged down with this, I shall assume Singapore's system of progressive taxation is fair. In fact, to best isolate the significance of voting choices, let us hold that every citizen's contribution is equal, apart from the party they voted for. Another complication may arise: someone who voted for a non-PAP candidate could nonetheless have wanted the PAP to win the overall election. However, she was convinced the PAP would do so regardless of what happens in her constituency, and thus voted for an opposition candidate to secure better checks on the Government. Let us assume there were no such voters as this pulls apart the intent and effect of a vote, making it difficult to tell the actual credit a voter has in determining which party becomes the Government.

With the parameters set, I shall now present my argument. We must first distinguish between voting and electing. In the 2011 General Election, 60.1% of Singaporean voters voted for the PAP. However, the party was collectively elected by all Singaporeans. This is why the PAP may legitimately govern all Singaporeans – not just those who voted for them. For the same reason, Singaporeans who did not vote for the party cannot refuse to fund the Government by claiming they did not vote for it. This is a crucial principle of Singapore's democratic election. Yet it may appear paradoxical: how can a person vote against the PAP, yet elect it as the Government?

No mystery here because voting is an individual choice, while the election of the Government is a collective choice; the former occurs within the latter. We may say there are two levels of choice involved: voting is a 1st-order choice, while deciding on the Government on the basis of the majority of votes is a 2nd-order choice. The 1st-order choice is the means by which the 2nd-order choice is made. If we reject this explanation and lack a more compelling one, then we have no reason to think the PAP legitimately governs those who did not vote for it. But if we accept this explanation, then we must judge the EUP unfair.

The reason can be seen through a story: Bert and Lucy want to have dinner together. He suggests Cookhouse, while she recommends Foodcourt. Lucy manages to convince Bert to go with her idea, which is a good thing since the food at Cookhouse is terrible while Foodcourt serves wonderful cuisine. Once there, they order five prawns for each and split the bill equally. When the food arrives, the two diners are surprised that one of Bert's prawns has been given to Lucy, who now has six compared to his four.

The manager explains: 'Lucy contributed more to both of you coming here and having this great meal to enjoy. Since she has greater credit, then she certainly should get a bigger share between you both!' In reality, the restaurant obviously cannot redistribute their food in this manner; but what we are presently considering is whether that reality is fair. Alternatively, one may claim Bert is morally obligated to give part of his prawns to Lucy. The focus here is what distribution is fair, and not who does the distributing.

So is it fair?

In pondering this, it may help to consider whether Lucy ought to shoulder a greater part of the combined bill since she contributed more towards bringing about that cost. I doubt anyone would say she is morally obliged to pay for part of Bert's expense, and rightly so. After all, each is intending to have her own half of the order and is therefore rightly responsible for independently fulfilling all the

requirements. Having done so, each should receive an equal share; the five prawns cost the same regardless of how the customer's decision came about.

We could accept that Lucy deserves some credit for guiding Bert. Nonetheless, this is compatible with considering the credit irrelevant in determining the distribution of the food. It is irrelevant because it does not figure in the requirements for the successful food order – not all credit must be rewarded. The same applies to the distribution of upgrading funds. The PAP was elected collectively by Singaporeans, and likewise funded by all to govern. We could understand Singaporeans as having all decided to pay for the service of the PAP and thereafter paid what is required of them. As such, they ought to be similarly served. This is what fairness demands.

Given our working assumptions, those who voted for the PAP may well have additional credit for Singapore's prosperity; but it is irrelevant to the distribution of upgrading funds, just as it is in the case of Lucy. The election of the Government does not require every individual to vote for the winning party, only that it is collectively elected.

Objections

Sometimes, it seems right to reward team members differently. Take the example of a successful team, led by its brilliantly effective Chief Executive Officer. Should this CEO receive the same reward as the company clerk? It seems not, for one's contribution is far more significant than the other's. Have we now a case for sharing the pie unequally? I believe so. But that is only because the CEO's credit is *relevant* to the company's success. Compared to the clerk, he contributed far more towards bringing about that outcome. The CEO therefore justly reaps a larger share of the returns.

Is the pro-PAP voters' credit likewise relevant? After all, the election of the PAP requires the majority of votes to be

for the party. If so, each pro-PAP voter helped secure that majority – surely this counts as relevant credit not shared by others? To answer, we must examine what suffices to elect the PAP as the Government. Only the collective choice – in the form of the overall election outcome – is required for this. Through participating in the election with prior commitment to abide by the outcome, a voter partakes of and endorses this choice. There is no further condition that she belongs in the majority that cast their individual votes for the PAP. Thus, by fulfilling what is needed, she has done just as much in electing the PAP as Bert has in purchasing the prawns.

This brings out the crucial difference between these two cases. The collective achievement of corporate success is *the sum of achievements* by the members. The sufficient condition for that success simply has to be met by the group – it does not matter how the task of doing so is distributed within the group, thereby allowing differences in relevant credit among members. This is akin to a group working together to raise a million dollars for charity; it would have succeeded even if one group member raised a disproportionately large sum on her own. Contrast that to a group of astronauts having left the Earth. In this case, there is a sufficient condition *each member of the group needs to satisfy* to bring it about that the group has left the Earth.

The second case mirrors the nature of the General Election. For the PAP to have been democratically elected as the Government, it has to be true that each Singaporean elected them, in the relevant sense. Like Bert and Lucy, each agrees to undertake a collective choice, and delivers on the commitments the choice entails – accepting the political rule of the elected party, paying taxes to the State, which funds the party's function as the Government. The election is not the sum of votes of Singaporeans – that would be tyranny of the majority. The Government should have been elected by each, through a fair, agreed-upon collective decision-making procedure.

If anything more is required of the individual to elect the government, then it becomes unclear how the PAP legitimately governs those who did not vote for it. But if nothing else is required, then there is no basis to discriminate between the voters in terms of relevant credit. Either way bodes ill for the PAP's defense: either Hougang residents are wrongly discriminated against in estate upgrading, or the PAP has no right to govern them.

Let us close with a final counterargument. One may argue that the PAP has done all it is obligated to do for all citizens. EUP is the extra mile it goes for those who have supported the party. This additional bit is supererogatory – it is beyond the duty of the PAP and therefore cannot be rightly expected of it. This may be what Mah had in mind when he reasoned:

[T]he upgrading of our older public-housing estates is over and above these basic obligations of the Government. It is funded out of Budget surpluses generated by the PAP Government. No other government in the world has anything similar, in terms of scale and commitment. (Mah Bow Tan, 'Upgrading is a unique programme by Govt', (Letter to the editor), *The Straits Times*, 17 June 2006.)

Think of how you were genuinely nice to a food hawker and in return, he pampered you with an extra large serving of food. In doing so, he was not unfair to other paying customers since he gave them just what they paid for. Giving you a bonus does not require shortchanging everyone else. May we say the same of EUP?

We may not. There is a disanalogy here: the hawker is rewarding some customers with extra portions out of his own resources, while the PAP is rewarding their supporters using State funds. It would be a very different matter if the party is financing EUP. But it is not. Thus, even if EUP is a bonus, it still is a public-funded State initiative and should not be based on party preferences.

The Hougang legacy

Unlike most Singaporeans, Hougang residents do not have spanking new lifts that stop on every level of newly refurbished Government flats. They have seen newer estates in other regions reap the fruits of economic growth, while they cope with their homes possibly deteriorating into a slum. Perhaps they will hear of new, lucrative offers that need only a simple tick at the ballot box.

This is the reality born of EUP. However, the PAP's defense of EUP trades on the confusion between voting and electing. As a result, irrelevant credit is rewarded at the expense of the deserving. This programme therefore badly needs moral upgrading.

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