

**Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Contribution to the  
Anthology of Essays on Anti-Corruption  
Success in combating corruption – views on the Singaporean experience**

Corruption is a scourge that can never be tolerated. Countries have tried all ways to combat it. They create anti-corruption agencies. They pass strong laws. They promulgate codes of conduct for public officials. Companies pledge to conduct business cleanly. Yet often corruption remains endemic, a cancer in the society. How then has Singapore achieved some measure of success in eradicating corruption? I put it down to four factors.

First, we inherited a clean and working system from the British colonial government. We had many compelling reasons to want to end colonial rule and to be masters of our own destiny. But to their credit, the British left Singapore with a working system and sound institutions – English laws, a working Civil Service, and an efficient and honest judiciary. Importantly, the Colonial Service officers upheld high standards. People like Sir William Goode, our last Governor and first Head of State, had a sense of duty and stewardship. After Singapore, Goode served as Governor of North Borneo, now the state of Sabah in Malaysia. He left an impression in North Borneo, as in Singapore. Even a generation later, the people of Sabah still remembered him fondly.

Second, when the British left, our pioneer leaders were determined to keep the system clean. The People's Action Party (PAP) first came to power in 1959, when Singapore attained self-government. However, it was by no means a no-brainer for the PAP to fight to win the 1959 General Election.

The country faced a myriad of problems: poverty, poor public health, an acute housing shortage, a stagnant economy and an exploding population. Did the PAP want to inherit these overwhelming problems? Why not become a strong opposition party, and let another party govern and fail?

In the end, what decided the issue for Mr Lee Kuan Yew, our founding Prime Minister, and his team, was the overriding need to prevent the public service from going corrupt. One term of an incompetent, corrupt government and Humpty Dumpty could never be put together again. So the PAP fought to win and formed the Government. When they took their oath of office, Mr Lee and his PAP colleagues wore white shirts and white trousers. It symbolised their determination to keep the Government clean and incorruptible. That set the tone for Singapore ever since.

Third, with strong political will, we institutionalised a robust, comprehensive anti-corruption framework that spans laws, enforcement, the public service and public outreach. We enacted the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), which puts the burden of proof on the accused to show that he or she acquired their wealth legally. Any unexplained wealth disproportionate to known sources of income is presumed to be from graft and can be confiscated.

The PCA provides for extra-territorial jurisdiction, so that the actions of Singaporean citizens overseas are treated the same as actions committed in Singapore, regardless of whether such corrupt acts have consequences for Singapore (Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau 2016a).

Our anti-corruption agency, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), is well resourced and independent. It is empowered to investigate any person, even police officers and ministers, and conducts public outreach to raise public awareness and shape social norms (CPIB, 2016b). We pay public servants fair and realistic wages benchmarked to private sector earnings and, in return, demand the highest standards of integrity and performance.

Fourth, we have over time developed a society and culture that eschews corruption. Singaporeans expect and demand a clean system. They do not condone giving or accepting 'social lubricants' to get things done. They readily report corrupt practices when they encounter them. Singaporeans trust that the law applies to all and that the Government will enforce the laws without fear or favour, even when it may be awkward or embarrassing. Businesses have confidence that, in Singapore, rules are transparent and fairly applied. The story is told of a businessman who visited

Singapore from an Asian country used to different operating norms. He left puzzled and disturbed that he could not discover the going rate for bribes to officers at different levels of government. He concluded wrongly that the prices must be very high!

Singapore has achieved some success eradicating corruption, but we are under no illusions that we have permanently and completely solved the problem. Corruption is driven by human nature and greed. However strict the rules and tight the system, some individuals will sometimes still be tempted to transgress. When they do, we make sure they are caught and severely dealt with. Two years ago, we charged an Assistant Director from the CPIB itself with misappropriating S\$1.7 million.

We keep our system clean not just for ourselves, but also to uphold our international reputation. Thus we deal strictly also with those who use financial institutions in Singapore to launder money or transact ill-gotten gains from corruption. We are zealous in protecting the integrity of our financial centre and business hub.

There is a Chinese proverb: 'If the top beam is askew, the bottom beams will be crooked.' Keeping a system clean must start at the very top. A Singapore armed forces officer, on a course overseas, was once asked by his classmate how Singapore kept its system clean. He explained our arrangements and the central role of the CPIB. His classmate asked a follow-up question: but to whom does the CPIB report? The Singaporean ingenuously replied that the CPIB reported directly to the prime minister. This elicited further puzzlement. Much later the Singaporean understood why. The real question he was being asked was, who guards the guardian?

There is no formula to solve this ancient riddle, but we are determined to uphold the highest standards of integrity from the top level of the Government down. In 1996, rumours spread that Mr Lee Kuan Yew and I had received improper discounts on property purchases. The Prime Minister, then Mr Goh Chok Tong, ordered a full investigation, which found that there had been nothing improper. He brought the issue to Parliament, which held a full debate lasting three days (Parliament of Singapore 1996).

Both Mr Lee and I spoke. In his statement Mr Lee Kuan Yew said, “I take pride and satisfaction that the question of my two purchases and those of the Deputy Prime Minister, my son, has been subjected to, and not exempted from, scrutiny ... It is most important that Singapore remain a place where no one is above scrutiny, that any question of integrity of a minister, however senior, that he has gained benefits either through influence or corrupt practices, be investigated” (National Archives of Singapore 1996).

Trust is slow to build, but fast to lose. We have spent more than 50 years building up confidence in Singapore. The integrity of the Government, the system and the men and women in charge has been key to Singapore’s success. We are determined that that integrity and reputation must never be undermined and will long remain a competitive edge and a source of pride for Singapore.

## **References**

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