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A Talk

by

G G Thomson
Abie's Travelling Seminar - 5-29 September, 1971

A Talk (extemporal) given by Prof. G.G. Thomson to the Seminar at Abie's offices in King Court Hotel on Monday, September 6, 1971.

In a way, I represent the growth of mass communication in Singapore in that, when I arrived in Singapore (in military uniform) during the occupation, my first task was to show films of D. Day in Europe and the Battle of Burma to answer the Communist charges that the British had not fought their way back; that the Communist had taken over Malaysia; and that the British merely came in to take over a success which they had not earned. After that I became the first Public Relations Officer in Singapore when I was appointed the government's Public Relations Officer. This was a completely new concept in Singapore at that time. It was the first recognition that the public and their opinion mattered. The public must be informed and the public responses must be considered. After the war, the press of all languages had the task of recovery and of getting themselves organized.

My second job in Singapore was as Supervisor of the Elections to give political form of expression and power to public opinion.

My third task was when the present government appointed me to run a Political Study Centre for civil servants. Since government is administration, the mind of the administrator is no less important than that of the public or of the ministers themselves. And so this was a task of getting the ideas of the new political way of life through to the civil servants who would and could then translate them into practice. This in a way represents three phases. First, the recognition that there is a public, that the public exists. Secondly, to formulate and give priority and power to public demand. Thirdly, to train those who carry out the public's demands in terms of schools, housing or health, or in any other way.

What makes Singapore's experience interesting and unique are these: As this is partly practical but also theoretical, let me make my point in terms which are general.
First, Singapore is a pure example of the species of Colony. That is, Singapore was established as a colony when Raffles founded it 150 years ago. Singapore was not founded as a political unit, nor was it founded as a cultural or religious unit; but as a business unit to which men came to do business with each other; and in that sphere, only business opinion was public opinion. Political and cultural ideas each could live in their particular ways. I make the point that Singapore is entirely a new creation to emphasise that there is no age-long tradition as in India or China among the Asian cultures; there were no established political institutions.

Secondly, Singapore is essentially man-made and therefore the communication of man to man from the beginning has been part of the pattern of Singapore. This means that when we use the phrase 'nation building' as we do in our jargon, it is literally true. That is, nation don't come from God or from history or from any great tradition. We are building a nation; and nationalism is an attitude. To say that Singapore is national is to say that there are two million Singaporeans thinking nationally. And until that is achieved the nation is not entire. A nation is an idea; a nation is an attitude, a nation is a way of acting and only through the full development of communications between the top level and the bottom level can this prime task be carried through. In nation building, communication has not yet moulded us because we were not a white sheet, a parchment for politicians or historians to write on. We were not a primitive people who had to be civilise. We are people of three of the proudest cultures of Asia — from China, India and from Malaysia. But we couldn't build a Singapore on three foreign cultures, living in isolation side by side. We have had to compete with a high level or argument, and of impact, to compete with the pulls of three of the greatest cultures in Asia. Nation building for us has therefore been a very deliberate process and mass communication has played its essential part.

Thirdly, Singapore is a city state. We are all concerned with urban diseases; yet urbanization is the highest form of civilization. Moreover, all politics start from cities whether it be the city states of the Ganges Valley, the city states of the Yellow River or the city states of Greece and later, of the great
Italian and German cities. Association is the essence of politics. There is something distinctive about cities, and the science of politics has been careless in trying to use the idioms of city situations in great geographically dispersed countries. What is peculiar about the city is that there is a greater intensity of life. Human psychology operates on human psychology; there is a clear community image: Power is more visible and concentrated. There is a greater intensity of argument because men can meet frequently and discuss great and small things together as shared problems. But above all, what we tend to forget in the science of mass communication is the basic form of communication which is personal communication and rumour. Perhaps we exaggerate the power of the mass communication media in Singapore, because of the effective use of rumour by the coffee shop, or by the greatest mass communicators of all, the taxi-man. If you want to get news round Singapore, tell it to the taxi-man. This is meaningful within a compact city state. I would like to suggest that one of the things that you in AMIC might do is to study the peculiarities and the difficulties of mass communication in a City-State.

Fourthly, in Singapore we have always been a sophisticated people even before we were an educated people (if I may draw that distinction) because we are a nation of shop-keepers, a nation of merchants, a nation of traders. And if a trader is unsophisticated, he is a peasant or a failure again. He has to be sophisticated in order to survive. So in what was an intensive international market place, there has always been a high level of sophistication. Now that we have virtually universal education in Singapore, and education in four languages, mass communication is a necessity to stimulate people. Just as to stimulate the appetite to eat food and to deny food can only create trouble, education is a stimulus to knowledge, a capacity to hear, a capacity to digest, a capacity to express and a capacity to act and these must be satisfied. As education is given and as we want to be an active society, this creates a special problem for us in a mass communication in Singapore.

Our mass media have not been prime political agents in themselves, as were newspapers in other countries. The great tradition of the Indian Press was that the Indian newspapers took a political
alignment in the national cause and played a major part on all fronts. The Chinese press played this role in part as expressing the view of a majority deprived by a colonial system of their due place in the sun then they were tied to the old Chinese tradition. The Chinese press themselves were communal and not primarily national factors. The English language press were never prime movers with the brilliant exception of our present Minister of Foreign Affairs who in a now defunct newspaper (voluntarily defunct) 'The Singapore Standard' wrote a feature called "I Write as I Please". I am still trying to persuade Mr. Rajaratnam to republish them. But with this one exception of Mr. Rajaratnam who was our first Minister of Culture and Information in Singapore, we have had no memorable political journalism.

Nor was the radio a prime politically creative force because the radio has always been under government control. It was quietly-educative; tentatively preparatory in terms of community civics rather than of national politics; it was concerned with playing a part in widening ideas in education in the democratic postures of men. Nevertheless, radio and the press were not in themselves prime factors. They were literally media, they were mediators of ideas created by other people, translating and conveying them, not initiating them. As for films, I think in no Asian country has the film played a part as the creator of political attitudes. Our film makers were predominantly concerned with the commercial films and therefore again the film has played no part.

The mass media in Singapore have not been prime agents in this nation building process. They responded to the lead taken by the current government and I think this partly explains the dilemma that the press has been in recently.

What use then have the present government made of the mass media?

Let me make some generalizations, and then make a final summing up of the points I have been trying to put to you. The party in power, the PAP, led by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, our Prime Minister himself, and Mr. Rajaratnam have always been conscious of the
importance of mass media for we have always had politics of ideas. And therefore the tone of our political speeches has been those of pedagogues of practical power. It has been a teaching role. I always remember the late John Strachey, who was the Secretary of State for India in the Labour Government which negotiated India's independence in 1947 with the Indian leaders, saying, when he came to Singapore in the early 1960's, that there were two 'tutor-politicians' in the world, one was Pandit Nehru and the other was Lee Kuan Yew, who used the mass media and the radio to take the whole nation into a collective tutorial on the problems of politics.

One reason for this was our high standard of education. The second was that we were battling the Communists, and the Communists could not fight us with guns and had to argue and agitate. This was one of the benefits of having the British here, that if the Communists have fought with guns, the British army would have gone into action. The Communists had therefore to take on the PAP in the field of organizations and the field of agitation. And in building his personal role and the political organization, Lee Kuan Yew had this unique situation and showed himself a master in the political field. You don't fight Communists basically with guns. You can fight the Communists and eliminate them but you don't eliminate their ideas by guns. This was a straight forward confrontation by argument, and this was of particular importance, because the Chinese educated were frustrated and alienated half citizens in Singapore because they didn't speak the politically dominant colonial language of English. Communism came into the Chinese Middle Schools which taught the high intellectuality of the Chinese education with its long tradition, with the urgency and with the bitter frustration of alienation of many of our youngsters. When Communism had got this hold there had to be an intensity of argument; to guide its force constructively to the national task ahead. The PAP has always been a party of ideas, a party of programmes, a party of persuasion. And naturally when they came to power they were very much concerned to use the media to educate in means and ends.

When the PAP came decisively to power in 1959, its activities of fulfilment made news. Persuasion had paid off. There was no serious political challenge or change of direction calling for
concentration on the existing mass media. Rather was concentration on new form of organization and participation like the People's Association. The major political concern was to prevent divisions within the Party.

But in 1961, particularly on the issues of whether we should join Malaysia, a major battle was fought. The PAP split. The Barisan Socialis which formed their own party. It was then that the mass media came fully into play. The government set up television deliberately at that time as a means to add impact to its arguments. The Malaysia referendum campaign was our most sustained campaign. If you don't understand this, you don't understand our political psychology in Singapore. This issue of whether we should move from our colonial stage to independence by joining Malaysia was a sustained argument for two years, during which the press, the radio, the television and every media were used to argue this issue out, that the future of Singapore would be determined by the decision on Malaysia. This was when our Prime Minister learnt the television technique of which he is a master. This he learnt as he did his Chinese and other languages by deliberately going back to school. Nobody, I would say, even in RTS, has ever taken the same degree of seriousness in mastering the techniques, as did the Prime Minister himself.

This process of argument was a means of communication of creating the impact of a meeting of minds. Ideas had to be taught and fought; attitudes had to be formed with all the pressure of conformity of a city state. And this is why our experience in the mass communications is worth a study in itself, as special problems in a special setting and seeking a special outcome.

Nationally we were extruded from Malaysia in 1965, and we faced the task becoming a nation on our own. Again the mass media had a national task, as did the national flag and the national anthem to form a national outlook. These things did not happen; they had to be inculcated. And one of the fascinating techniques (I just mention this one, of many, which will be of interest to you), is that with us, the ideas come from the top. And what is very interesting is in the Prime Minister's clever use of words, not a slogan. Words like 'clean', 'green', 'gracious', 'rugged'...
come into our vocabulary. When we use the words, they bring conforming actions. It is interesting to see how, just by using such simple concepts, the people have understood, adopted and acted them. There is therefore a self-conscious use of the media. Communication is not a gimmick, it is not an emotional bath that the country takes from time to time.

With the speed and degree of change necessary for us to survive, we must get the national group idiom right down to the masses. We are mass conscious. The ordinary man is our soldier; the ordinary man is our worker who must become more skilled; the ordinary man is our consumer who either buys at the satisfaction of the West or the more real indigenous satisfaction that we want them to have give; the ordinary man is the voter, and we know that in every facet of the spectrum of our natural life, the man at the bottom must understand, because only when he understands can he respond instinctively, intelligently and imaginatively without waiting for the order to come from the top. This is where mass communication can play its dominant part. And with the high standards of women's education and the equality of their status and opportunities, women too will play a growing part.

What we are and what we have achieved in Singapore is entirely by human contrivance with human resources. We have no economic resources; no traditional skills (except that of the merchant); no political inheritance to mould us into a nation. What we are is only what we make of ourselves. We keep saying we have the opportunity of our focal position on the crucial seaways of South-East Asia. Man must see an opportunity but the opportunity does not necessarily make the man use the opportunity to the fullest. You can't make rubber trees grow by mass communication; you can't discover tin by mass communication; but you can get more out of people. And it is because we knew that our success in the past was, and our success in the future is, determined by making each man make the effort himself, to adjust himself and achieve something that we can never forget the mass and establish regular, full speedy comprehending communication.

That politics is people is a simple truism; and if politics is people, then mass communication is the crucial area of politics.
Only if we can re-motivate, re-activate, re-define the horizons of our younger generation, can Singapore survive. And although we sometimes regret that there is no uranium or oil under Singapore, the best that God gave us was ourselves.