

THINK-TANK

The Republic of Common Sense



BY KISHORE MAHBUBANI

THE Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy celebrated its fifth anniversary last week. Fortunately, the school had a lot to celebrate. In less than five years, it has achieved global recognition. But why did it succeed?

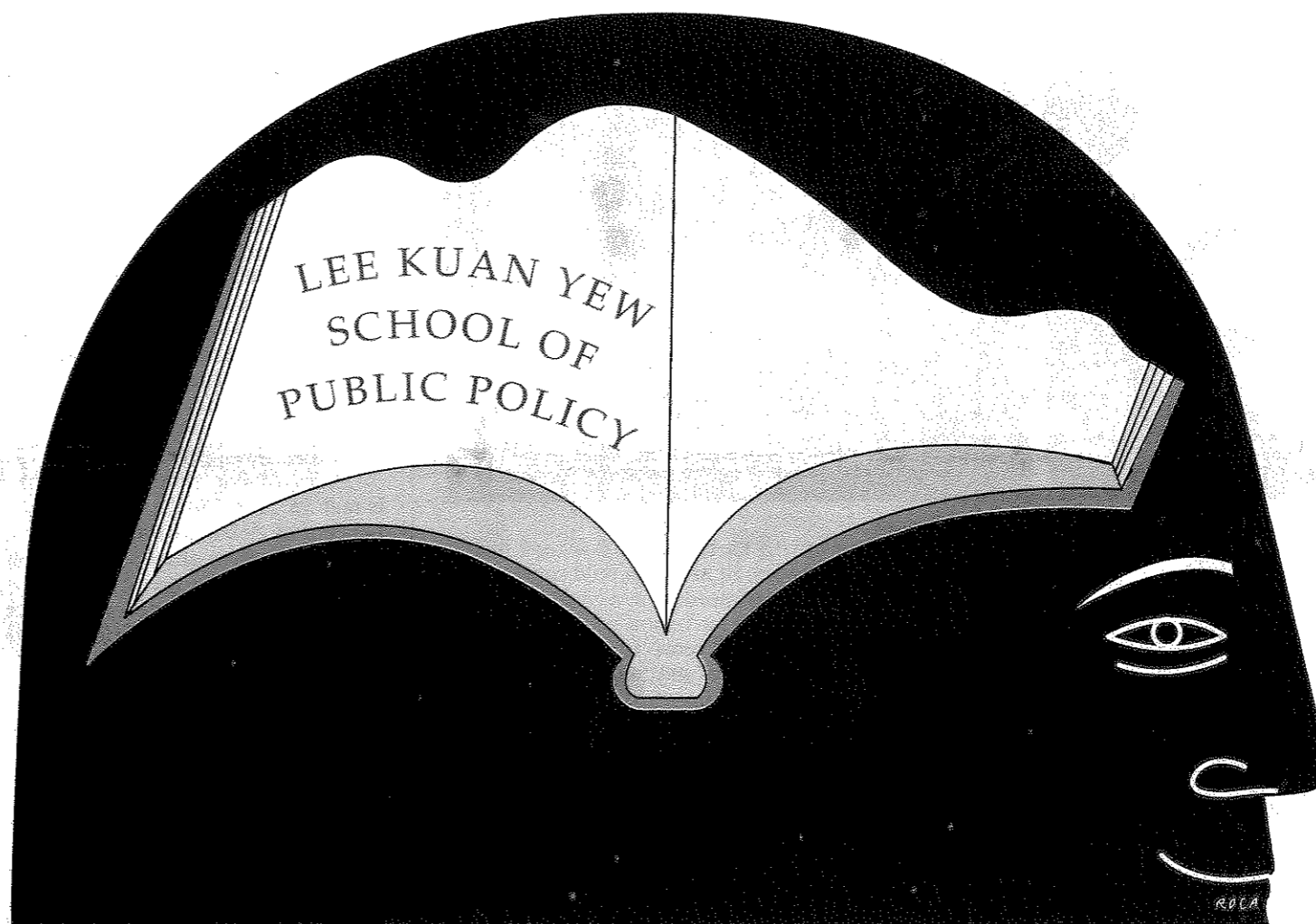
Many factors explain its success. The name of the school has been obviously a huge gift. So too has been the generous support from many donors and stakeholders. But there is an "X" factor that has been little noticed or discussed. This article will try to unravel the "X".

Any gardener knows that a plant grows and thrives well when it is planted in the right soil. No gardener can grow healthy and vibrant plants on barren soil. Hence, one key reason why the Lee Kuan Yew School has thrived is that it was planted in one of the most enabling public policy environments in the world. It is hard to find a better garden of good public policies than Singapore.

Real practical benefits have accrued to our students because of the experience of studying and living in Singapore. One of the first exercises we give to incoming students is to get them to walk through an HDB estate. Then we ask them what lessons they can learn just by paying attention to the details and asking "why" and "how". They learn many lessons.

One of the first lessons they learn is how safe Singapore's public housing estates are. In addition, they can see how well-maintained they are. In Singapore, we often take regular estate maintenance for granted. The PUB delivers services that work 99.9 per cent of the time. The former chairman of the PUB, Mr Lee Ek Tieng, was proud of this fact.

By contrast, in one of the world's



wealthiest societies, the United States, a long history of budget cuts has led to drastic reductions of maintenance budgets. Consequently, hundreds of miles of water pipes are not maintained regularly. Emergency crews come in only when pipes break down. Similarly, many of the bridges that link Manhattan to New Jersey and Long Island are not regularly maintained.

But the real genius of Singapore's public policy environment does not lie in the list of individual policies. It actually lies in the way different policies reinforce one another in a synergistic fashion. In addition, as my colleague, Professor Hen-

ri Ghesquiere, notes: "In fact, the Singapore Government tinkers, almost obsessively, with its development strategy to cope with new challenges to its competitive position as soon as they emerge on the distant horizon. Yesterday's virtue can become tomorrow's obstacle."

Many of the problems in the world can be fixed by common sense. But the British were ironical when they invented the phrase "common sense". In reality, "common sense" is not very common. This is what makes Singapore so unique. It is a veritable "Republic of Common Sense".

I have no doubt that this is one of the

reasons why many students from all around the world are attracted to the Lee Kuan Yew School. Today, we have 337 students from 52 countries, making us one of the most diverse schools in the world. This reflects well how many countries have heard of Singapore's public policy successes. I recently attended a meeting with Mr Tony Blair. He told us that when he travels around the world and discusses development challenges with leaders, many of them cite Singapore as one of the models for their development.

The school's role, however, is not to advertise Singapore's public policy suc-

cess stories. It has to maintain the same standards of academic freedom, rigour and independence as other leading schools of the world. Hence, it has to subject Singapore's public policies to the same rigorous analysis as it does other countries' policies. Indeed, Singapore should welcome such rigorous analysis as it is entirely appropriate for a learning society that always seeks to be better than it is today.

Rigorous analysis will also reveal that Singapore has not achieved perfection. No society has. Singapore has its fair share of flaws. The more we expose these flaws, the more credible Singapore's success will become, the more profound its lessons will be to the rest of the world.

Singapore will also have to understand that the next generation of challenges it will face will be different from earlier challenges. As Abraham Maslow has explained, all human beings have a hierarchy of needs. In the first phase of development, we need to fulfil our "physiological" needs - for example, food and shelter. In the next phase of development, we will need also to fulfil other needs such as safety and belongingness, followed by the need to be respected, the need for self-actualisation and, lastly, the need for self-transcendence.

So far, Singapore has done well by following its head. Now it will have to pay equal attention to its head and heart. This is where the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and other educational institutions can help. They can repay a debt to the soil they had been planted in.

While Singapore provided a great soil for launching good schools, its soil can now be even more enriched by these schools. They can help to raise the level of reflection and questioning in Singapore. This will be critical as Singapore moves into a new and more challenging phase of its development.

The writer is the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.