The Population White Paper: The hidden rationale for Singaporeans' concern

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Introduction

Singapore commemorates its golden jubilee this year with a slew of nation-wide events. This celebration serves as a point of reflection for Singapore's achievement in the past 50 years. However, it is also timely and crucial to reflect on issues that had sparked tensions amongst the citizenry. The promulgation of the Population White Paper (PWP) and its impact on Singaporeans has been an issue widely written by many academics but the rationale for Singaporeans' reaction over the PWP has yet to be explored in greater depth. This paper, thus, weighs in on the reasons for Singaporeans to be less inclined in accepting the PWP.

Singaporeans sent a strong signal to the ruling political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), during the 2011 General Election where only 60 percent of the votes were cast in favour of the PAP. In comparison, they garnered 75.3 percent of the votes in the 2001 general election (Ho, S.,2014). In just a decade, the ruling party had suffered a loss of 15.3 percent of the votes. The waning popularity of the party could be attributed to several hot-button issues including large influx of migrants into the city state (Banyan, 2011). A survey done by Institute of Policy Studies revealed 52 percent of voters felt immigration was an important issue in the 2011 election (Institute of Policy Studies, 2011). It was often argued that the expansion of migrant population had made Singaporeans feel like 'strangers in their

own country' (Jones, 2012, pp. 311-336) and 'perceive and experience the presence of foreigners in the work setting as taking away their jobs' (Sun, 2014). This had thus, created the "us/them (Vasu & Cheong, 2014, pp. 1-23) divide among Singaporeans and foreigners in the city state. As such, it was no surprise that some Singaporeans were less inclined in accepting the Population White Paper.

The PWP postulated for an increase in the number of migrants to mitigate the effect of an ageing population coupled with declining fertility rates. The policy paper stated that the, 'falling birth rates coupled with increasing life expectancies will result in an ageing and shrinking citizen population and workforce' (National Population Talent Divison Prime Minister's Office, 2013, p. 10). Hence, to tackle this demographic challenge, it proposed to expand the size of Singapore's population from 5.31 million (accurate as at June 2012), to an approximate 6.9 million by year 2030, primarily increasing the size of migrant population to 3.1 million by the year 2030 (National Population Talent Divison Prime Minister's Office, 2013, pp. 46-49). This implied that 45 percent of Singapore's population could potentially be composed of migrants in less than 15 years. Thus, by increasing the migrant population, the PWP aimed to mitigate the demographic challenges, and also achieve sustained economic growth for Singapore. However, some Singaporeans did not agree and find resonance with the idea of increasing the

size of the migrant population.

Singaporeans were concerned about the various issues an increased migrant population may bring to the city state, there (they?) were: the erosion of Singaporean Identity, negative socio-economic repercussions and the lack of infrastructure to support a population of 6.9 million. However, though the three feared consequences could explain why Singaporeans were perhaps less receptive to the proposals of the PWP, there was a primary reason which may have not been explored as yet. Singaporeans may be unable to foresee the benefits of an increased influx of migrants, because it was not communicated to them effectively. Thus, this paper argues that Singaporeans were less inclined to accept the PWP primarily because it was not framed appropriately to augment deep understanding and appreciation of the merits of having more migrants in Singapore.

The narrative approach could possibly be a communication tool that may convey the policy proposals in the PWP to Singaporeans more effectively. Walter R. Fisher, in his article, *Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,* asserted that humans are story-telling animals called '*Homo Narrans*' and that, 'the paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is 'good reason' (Fisher, 1984, p. 277). Fisher also introduced a communication paradigm of '*Homo Narrans*', called the narrative paradigm.

This narrative paradigm assumes humans are 'essentially story tellers' (Fisher, 1984, p. 277) and they make decisions based on 'good reasons' which are based on 'history, biography, culture and character'(Fisher, 1984, p. 277).

Furthermore, the paradigm postulates that human rationality is largely influenced by the consistency of the 'story' presented to them, which is termed as 'Narrative Probability' (Fisher, 1984, p. 277). Moreover, the paradigm also assumes that '*Homo Narrans*' employ 'Narrative Fidelity' by testing whether the story presented to them has proven to be true in their personal life (Fisher, 1984, p. 277). In addition, it also assumes the world is filled with different stories which humans must choose wisely to lead a good life (Fisher, 1984, p. 277). The narrative paradigm suggests people could relate to stories which are consistent and incorporate real-life experiences. Thus, in order to agree with the idea of increased influx of foreigners, Singaporeans ('*Homo Narrans*') must be presented with a narrative, which includes 'good reasons' justifying the need for foreigners. The narrative should be coherent and incorporates the essential details of Singaporean's real life experiences.

This paper analyses and evaluates the reasons why Singaporeans may have been less inclined to accept the PWP. In the first section, I provide a detailed account of the PWP and examine the rational approach employed in the policy paper, which may not be the most effective strategy for framing information to the people. This leads me to the second section, where I elaborate on how and why the narrative approach proposed by Fisher, could be a more effective and relatable strategy for framing information to Singaporeans (Fisher, 1984, p. 272). In the third section, I illustrate why the 'Narrative' approach will be more apt for Singaporeans. This will be done by critically analysing the common narratives against the PWP. This leads to the conclusion that a dichotomy exists between the government and Singaporeans where both parties frame and communicate information differently.

The contentious policy paper in 2013

The PWP was a contentious policy paper that sparked a public outcry in 2012. There were intense discussions on the implication of the policy paper by the citizenry and the government. The most debated issue, especially among the citizenry, was whether Singapore could sustain a population of 6.9 million people in the year 2030 (Chong, 2013, p. 1), where 45 percent of them could comprise of migrants (National Population Talent Divison Prime Minister's Office, 2013, pp. 46-49); Singaporeans feared there could be long-term adverse implications if the migrant population increased substantially in the next 15 years (Chong, T. ,2013, p. 2). Though, the PWP, had a slew of pragmatic proposals to achieve a sustainable population in Singapore, it failed to gain traction with many Singaporeans. The citizenry had numerous arguments against increasing the number of migrants in Singapore.

Singaporeans were apprehensive to accept the PWP and had many different arguments against it, which were mainly centred on issues relating to economics, infrastructure and national identity. These three arguments highlighted the possible negative repercussions of implementing the plans of the PWP and hence, many concerned Singaporeans expressed their fear and anxiety over the policy paper (These arguments shall be further amplified in the third section of the paper).

Singaporeans' fear and anxiety became apparent in a rare protest. Thousands of Singaporeans gathered at the Speaker's Corner at Hong Lim Park to express their concern over the PWP on 16 February 2013, just one week after the amended motion on the PWP was endorsed by the parliament (Adam, 2013). Some of the protestors had banners with the following messages on them: 'Singapore for Singaporeans', 'Made in Singapore' and 'Burn the PWP'.[ii] It seemed Singaporeans were not convinced on the amendments made to the policy paper and fear that the government could encourage greater influx of migrants into the city state. Scholars also share the same view on the policy paper. Terence Lee, contended, 'It's a big red flag and they [the Government] cannot go on with business as usual, with their old way of doing things of letting it blow over and letting emotions run their course' (Adam, 2013). In addition, Eugene Tan asserted, 'gone are the old days where the government believes what is the right thing to do and they don't care what the public thinks and do what is right. Doing what is right is no longer enough' (Adam, 2013). It seemed both academic scholars were suggesting that the government should gather more feedback from the ground before tabling new policy initiatives. They also pointed out that 'rational' solutions or policies devised by the government may not be well accepted by the citizenry.

A plausible reason for the lack of appreciation of the PWP could be potentially be due to the rational approach used in crafting the policy paper. However, this may not be the most suitable approach for postulating policies and initiatives, which engender a major impact on the citizenry. Alan Ryan, in his academic paper, *Problems and methods in political science: rational explanations and its limits*, defined rationalisation as (Ray, 2004, p. 187):

the action taken by the agent must be displayed as the 'the thing to do under the circumstances,' that is, the right thing to do under the circumstances.

With reference to Ryan's definition,

there is clear indication the Singapore government had devised its policy initiatives based on rationality i.e. what is right for the nation and what would be the right solutions. However, this may not be the most effective approach. Ryan asserted (Ray, 2004, p. 186):

> Very often the rational explanation of action is not wrong but simply uninteresting in comparison with questions about how actors came to adopt the goals they did, and how they came to perceive the situation in which they are acting in one way rather than the other.

Hence, it is evident from Ryan's explanation that the rational approach may not be the most appealing to people if, the policy initiatives are unclear to the people or, if the government was not able to communicate details of the policy in the most effective manner. The latter could have been the reason for the public outcry over the PWP Singapore.

The Narrative Approach fits well for '*Homo Narrans*'

Singaporeans were perhaps unable to relate to the rational proposals of the PWP as they could be '*Homo Narrans*', as theorised by Fisher (Fisher, 1984, p. 272). Fisher, in his academic paper, *Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,* contended humans are symbol-making and story-telling animals termed as *Homo Narrans* (Fisher, 1984, p. 271):

> The idea of human beings as story tellers indicates the general form of all symbol composition; it hold that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to

establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one's life.

Fisher argued that, through the creation of various symbols, humans develop stories as a way of communication. These stories were instrumental in fostering greater bonds and creating commonality among people, which allowed them to live harmoniously in their own society. Furthermore, Fisher also described, in great depth, about the characteristics of stories that were being communicated. He asserted that, '…a story that participates in the stories of those who have lived, who live now, and who will live in the future' (Fisher, 1984, p. 271). These narratives were extremely important and pivotal to the evolution of successive generation of *Homo Narrans* as they developed commonality, trust and belief amongst them. An example of a common narrative in modern history could be the stories of independence which was remembered by the citizenry. These stories instil a unique sense of national identity that differentiates citizens of different countries. Furthermore, it also served as a strong impetus for people to live together as harmonious citizens. Thus, it is clear that the *Homo Narrans* developed stories involving real life people of the past, present or even in the predicted future, which enabled them to coexist in their society and even in their communities. Apart from introducing *Homo Narrans*, Fisher also postulated the communication paradigm of *Homo Narrans*.

The narrative paradigm explained how and why *Homo Narrans* communicate and behave in certain ways. It is thus, pivotal to delve further on the definitions and assumptions of the narrative paradigm to augment greater understanding of *Homo Narrans*. Fisher defined Narration as (Fisher, 1984, p. 266):

… a theory of symbolic actions-words and or deeds-that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination.

Furthermore, Fisher defined a paradigm as (Fisher, 1984, p. 266):

…a representation designed to formalize the structure of a component of experience and to direct understanding and inquiry into the nature and functions of that experience-in this instance, the experience of human communication.

Thus, in a nutshell, Fisher's narrative paradigm proposed a formalized structure to understand and question the real-life or imagined stories developed by *Homo Narrans*, which ultimately determined how they communicate and behave.

The rational approach employed in the policy paper may not be appropriate for *Homo Narrans*. Singaporeans, being *Homo Narrans*, may have been less inclined in accepting the 'rational narrative' postulated by the PWP. Fisher asserted that *Homo Narrans* need 'good reasons' to believe in a particular story and accept them. It thus, seemed Singaporeans could have been less willing to accept the policy paper since they were unable to muster any 'good reason' for accepting it. Roy Ngerng, in his article, *Reflections on the protest against the* PWP*: Part 1,* stated that, '…the White Paper was based on…making money…' and further asserted that the White Paper, '…allow businesses to be able to take a breather for …wages' (Roy, 2013). Many Singaporeans may share this similar opinion about the policy paper. They may

have felt only businesses benefit from the increased pool of migrants in Singapore and not the citizenry. This belief could have impeded the development of 'good reasons' for accepting the policy paper, which in turn, could have engendered the citizenry to be less inclined in accepting the PWP.

Moreover, the narrative paradigm presupposes that *Homo Narrans* may not accept a narrative which is inconsistent with their own beliefs or experiences (Narrative Probability and Fidelity). This could also have been the case for the public outcry over the PWP. The rational explanation of the policy paper could have been incongruent to the set of beliefs and experiences of Singaporeans. Former Member of Parliament (MP), Inderjit Singh stated that, 'It's not that Singaporeans are xenophobic. If we had built infrastructure ahead of the rapid influx, then maybe Singaporeans would not be so upset' (Chang & Ong, 2012). Singh highlighted that Singaporeans may be upset over the increased number of foreigners in Singapore as they could feel that the current infrastructure is incapable of supporting such a large surge in Singapore's population. In fact, 'almost 70 percent of those interviewed…blame foreigners for causing overcrowding in public transport…' (Chang & Ong, 2012). This showed that the citizenry may have had long standing negative experiences due to presence of foreigners, which could be the crucial impetus for them to be less inclined in accepting the proposals of the PWP. Therefore, Singaporeans may have been disappointed with the policy paper as it lacked Narrative probability and Fidelity.

Common Singaporean Narratives against the Population White Paper

Narratives centred on economics were postulated by some Singaporeans in

disagreement with the policy paper. The citizenry may have attributed the burgeoning cost of living and the growing competition in employment in Singapore to the increasing number of foreigners in the city state. The former was cited by Gillian Koh, in her article, *Beyond the lightening rod of 6.9 million people*, where she contended that the increase in the number of foreigners in Singapore has engendered, 'financial stress with a rise in cost of living' (Koh, 2013). Terence Chong, also concurred with the same point of view, in his article, *Singapore's* PWP*: Impending Integration Challenges,* where he highlighted that Singaporeans are fearful of surging property prices due to the increased participation of foreigners in the property market (Chong, 2013). In addition, Singaporeans who participated in the feedback session on the PWP stressed they were concerned about the rising cost of living (National Population and Talent Division, 2015). Thus, the citizenry were not receptive to the proposals of the PWP as they may have believed that it could exacerbate the cost of living in the city state.

Apart from rising cost of living, Singaporeans also expressed concern over the growing competition for jobs in Singapore. Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Teo Chee Hean, had in fact, acknowledged the concerns of Singaporeans competing for jobs in the city state. In a parliamentary debate on the PWP, Minister Teo Chee Hean, asserted that (Teo, 2014):

> Since we released the White Paper on 29 January, much of the attention and public reactions have been focused on the population projection for 2030. Singaporeans have expressed concerns over job competition, having too many foreigners, and overcrowding.

In addition, feedback gathered from Singaporeans, also highlighted concerns over increasing job competition (National Population and Talent Division, 2015):

> They (Singaporeans) felt that foreign professionals and mid-skilled workers competed for jobs that were popular with the majority of Singaporeans (example professional/managerial-type jobs, or in MNCs). There were also concerns that job competition from foreigners marginalised older Singaporean workers.

The birth of economic narratives in Singapore could arguably be due to fear of undesirable economic repercussions that ensued when immigration levels rose. *Homo Narrans* believe in narratives that encompass their lived experiences and hence economic narratives were perhaps developed by them.

Apart from economic narratives, it is crucial to also analyse narratives which employed the 'Infrastructural' argument. This narrative postulated that the proposal to increase the number of foreigners in Singapore may not be feasible since the city state has yet to boost its infrastructural capacity to sustain and support the current population size. In their article, *Population increases in Singapore: balancing growth and quality-of-life*, Asher and Kwan contended that (Asher & Kwan, 2013):

> …the first phase of the mass rapid transit (MRT) system initiated in the 1980s was designed for a population target of 4 million people, a figure already exceeded in 2000. An increase in population would only exacerbate congestion in the short-term.

Asher and Kwan highlighted an essential element of the 'Infrastructural'

narrative, which was to illustrate that the current infrastructural capacity was in fact severely under pressure. Given that Singapore's total population stood at 5.31 million people in the year 2012 (PWP), this would mean that the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) at present is being over-utilised. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong concurred that Singapore's population grew ahead of infrastructure. Speaking in a conference on Governance, PM Lee stated that (Chin, 2013):

> We decided, I decided, that we should try and make up for lost time, because you want the economy to grow, you want Singapore to make progress, and you don't know how long the sun is going to shine…as it turned out, the sun remained shinning for longer than we expected. So the population grew faster than we expected, our infrastructure didn't keep up.

Therefore, the 'infrastructural' narrative postulates Singapore's infrastructure could be unable to sustain the growing population.

Apart from employing economic and 'infrastructural' arguments, some narratives also employ the 'National Identity' argument in disagreement to the PWP. Such narratives proposed that the Singaporean identity will gradually erode or dilute as the influx of migrants burgeon. Terence Chong, argued that, with the increased influx of migrants into Singapore, local identities and values will change rapidly and this will engender anxiety and insecurity among local Singaporeans (Chong, 2013). Member of Parliament, Mr Liang Eng Hwa also shared the same opinion as Terence Chong. In a Parliamentary debate on the PWP, he contended (CNA, 2013):

> I am more concerned about the higher proportion of foreigners relative to citizens residing in this island come 2030. I cannot imagine what kind of Singapore it would be like. We still have time to prevent this from happening.

The influx of migrants made Singapore a more culturally diverse place to live in. However, it was also arguable that the growth in cultural diversity could engender the gradual erosion of national identity. However, though the 'National Identity' narrative seemed plausible, it is crucial to test the credibility of the narrative before accepting it to be true reflection of society.

Being *Homo Narrans*, Singaporeans develop and resonate with narratives which are based on their experiences. Fisher asserted that *Homo Narrans* are 'story telling animals'. This fact was evident from the narratives developed by Singaporeans. The three common narratives which were established on ideas related to economics, infrastructure constraint and dilution of national identity could possibly be stories involving Singaporeans and foreigners. Moreover, Fisher also contended that *Homo Narrans* make decisions based on 'good reasons'. And he added 'good reasons' are influenced by certain societal characteristics such as the culture that the society subscribes to. Linking Fisher's argument to Singapore's context, revealed some truth about the popular common narratives. They could have been postulated based on 'good reasons' which were commonly accepted by Singaporeans. For example, narratives which argued on the constraint in infrastructure may have taken shape, perhaps due to Singaporeans' persistent experience of congestion on roads and overcrowded trains during peak hours. This negative experience coupled with a culture, that may not be very receptive to the idea of an increase in

migrant population in the city state, could have been the impetus for the formation of 'good reasons' to establish and belief in narratives involving 'infrastructural' arguments against the policy paper. In a nutshell, the citizenry could have accepted common narratives, which amplified their belief.

Conclusion

This paper employed Fisher's academic work on the narrative paradigm, in an attempt, to illustrate and explain the reasons why Singaporeans were unable to relate and concur with the PWP.

The first section of the paper was dedicated to the PWP and Singaporeans' perception of the policy paper. It was argued that the PWP employed a rational approach in illustrating and explaining policy details, which may not be an appropriate approach in communicating national policy proposals to the people.

The second section of the paper delved on the narrative paradigm which was postulated by Fisher. This section argued that Singaporeans are *Homo Narrans*. It also attempted to explain that they need 'good reasons' to accept narratives by the government, which could be formed when Singaporeans are able to link real life experiences with the narratives (Narrative Fidelity). It is also essential that people are presented with a consistent set of narratives on the issues discussed in the PWP (Narrative Probability).

The third section of the paper analysed three common narratives established by Singaporeans. These are narratives that relate to real life experiences of the citizenry, which revolved on economics, constraint on infrastructure and national identity. Moreover, this section also attempted to link common narratives with

the assumptions of the narrative paradigm. This section, thus, argued that, common narratives fulfilled the requirements of the narrative paradigm.

The PWP could have garnered weak support from the people possibly due to the employment of a rational framework which people, being *Homo Narrans*, may not be able to relate with. Prime Minster Lee stated in an interview (CNA, 2015):

In retrospect, if we have had a bit more time to prepare the ground, to explain it, to soft sell and prepare people to understand what it is that is the issue and what we are trying to do, we should have done better.

Singapore's premier agreed that the PWP may have not have gained traction with the people and that it could have been positioned in a different way to enhance Singaporeans' understanding and perception of the paper. This could possibly be the strategy to address the nebulous and thorny issue of migration in Singapore.

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has grappled with numerous issues relating to population and migration. The past two decades were extremely challenging for the city state as discontentment burgeoned over soaring number of migrants in Singapore. The promulgation of the PWP had, fortunately, been a blessing in disguise; since the government had now, gained fresh perspectives and strategies in handling Singapore's immigrant issue. The recent landslide victory in the General Elections could potentially prove PAP's ability to convince Singaporeans on its population policies.

There is some truth in the argument that the recent landslide victory in the General Election is a possible testament to

government's success in convincing a large segment of Singaporeans to believe and trust in government policies, especially, population policies. Although, issues relating to Singapore's burgeoning migrant population were fiercely debated during election rallies, it seems majority of Singaporeans are, in actual fact, satisfied with the government's measures to tighten the inflow of migrants into Singapore; and being *Homo Narrans,* Singaporeans, could have possibly develop (developed) resonance with the government's narratives centred on Singapore's population issues and its policy solutions. The need for more immigrants in a society with low fertility rates and the importance of sustaining a robust economy could have been disseminated in a relatable manner to the people. In retrospect, it is plausible that the government's departure from employing the rational approach and the adoption of the narrative approach could have been pivotal in developing better understanding between the government and the electorate; and hence, fostering greater trust in the ruling government.

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