

THE SINGAPORE HERALD AFFAIR

JOSEPH B. TAMNEY

IN MAY, 1971 THE SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT CAUSED AN ENGLISH-language newspaper, *The Singapore Herald*, to cease publication. Although its circulation was considerably less than the long-established *Straits Times*, in its year of existence the *Herald* had gained many loyal readers. They looked to the *Herald* for balanced, critical commentary on national affairs, something rarely found in the *Times*, at least during the three years (May, 1968 - May, 1971) I lived there. The letters from readers published in the *Times* only became interesting after the *Herald* began publishing provocative letters from the public. Nor is the *Herald* to be considered an expatriate newsheet. After the paper was threatened by the government, a group tried to establish a cooperative that would take over the *Herald*; among the leaders of this move were local staff members and students from the University of Singapore. In fact, on May 21, 1971, the University of Singapore Student Union issued a statement declaring that it was not convinced by the government's arguments against the *Herald*. The statement read: "Till the *Herald* is proven guilty, we assume it to be innocent, and we shall support its right to exist as a newspaper." The closing of the *Herald* was traumatic for the English-educated in Singapore, which is about half the population. They lost the one public voice willing to speak out in a country controlled by one party, the People's Action Party (PAP), if not by one man, the prime minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. As a reader wrote to the *Herald*, "*Herald* is the only English paper that has the guts to criticize the government without fear. I give three cheers to the management and the staff."¹ This sentiment was repeated in numerous letters published in the *Herald* while the paper awaited a final decision on its fate. Why was the paper closed?

On May 24, 1971, the government issued the following statement—

The real issue is not the freedom of the press. It is whether foreigners, including an ex-chief minister of a foreign government, and currently a high-ranking diplomat in its employ, should occupy a commanding position from which they could manipulate public opinion in the Republic. No government can allow this.

The *Herald* was financially backed by a high-ranking Malaysian official and by Hong Kong money. This is undisputed. But what many, such as the University of Singapore Student Union, believe is that the government failed to prove that this foreign money unduly influenced the policy of the *Herald*.

¹ *The Singapore Herald*, May 26, 1971.

The *Herald* affair has been commented on frequently, both in the *Herald* itself before closing and in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER). In the comments, both pro and con, the issue continually referred to is not foreign manipulation of the *Herald* but the broader issue of how much freedom can be tolerated in a developing society.

As one defender of the government's action wrote: "If according to you there is no free press, we would rather have this system which ensures freedom from want and starvation by proper management of the affairs of the country than any system which may give a 'free press' according to your notions, with riots and anarchy."² Similarly another correspondent wrote: "It may be necessary to choose stability as against 'freedom of expression,' whatever that may mean."³

That development requires the absence of criticism, seems a spreading idea in Southeast Asia. Speaking of President Marcos, an article in the FEER contained the following remark:

Deploping the "negative concept of freedom" adopted by the media, he made almost Lee Kuan Yew-ish references to "the duty of the press to strengthen and fortify the freedom of the country in which it operates." "The press," he warned, "was weakening, through the reckless exercise of freedom, the very society in which it thrives."⁴

In a recent report on the University of Malaya prepared for the Malaysian National Operations Council, the students were counseled "to pay greater attention to the real problems the Malays face and less to elitist interests, such as opposing the Internal Security Act and urging intellectual freedom."⁵

There is a general fear that criticism will destroy the nation, and the *Herald* affair is just one symptom of this fear. Almost two years before the closing of the *Herald*, Derek Davies wrote of Singapore:

Obviously a conflict exists which, put broadly, is between the enormous pressures for progress and efficiency on the one hand and the system of checks and balances necessary in a free society on the other. The demands of Singapore's 'Rugged Society' have placed some restrictions on the power of the trade unions, while the press is far from convinced that it is free to comment, critically if need be, with the threat of the newspapers' licensing system hanging over its head. Inordinate delays in legal processes led recently to the abolition of the jury system for murder trials, while the dangers of a high birth rate led to the swift (not to say ruthless) passage of a bill legalizing abortion.⁶

Mr. Davies, in my opinion, is correct in emphasizing the importance of efficiency to the Singapore government. Criticism delays change, and so offends the impatient Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

² M. Coomaraswamy, "A Singaporean's Disgust," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 26, 1971, p. 31.

³ W. M. Chua, "Freedom Can Wait," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 26, 1971, p. 35.

⁴ "The Impatience of Job," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 26, 1971, p. 17.

⁵ James Morgan, "Hub of Imbalance," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 7, 1971, p. 15.

⁶ "Rugged Sensitivity," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 21, 1969, p. 461.

An examination of Mr. Lee's speeches, however, suggests that efficiency is not the right word. It is not efficiency which is valued but discipline—an ideal frequently referred to by the Prime Minister. For instance, consider his discussion of the differential development of China and India in his recent Dillingham Lecture at the University of Hawaii's East-West Center:

Could it be that, in part, the difference between the more intense and more *exacting* Sinic culture, and the less intense and more *benign* leisure values of Hindu culture, has made for the difference in results of industrial progress between Eastern and Southern Asia?

Progress, he said, was not consistent "with a *relaxed* culture."⁷ (Underscoring mine.) In a speech at the University of Dar-Es-Salaam, he stated that modernization requires: "first, a highly disciplined work force. . . ."⁸ Lee's contrast between "exacting" and "benign" is consistent with his frequent reference to discipline. To him, Chinese culture is rugged, demanding, disciplined. Criticism is a break in the ranks. Reflecting this same attitude, Lee has referred to academic freedom as an "airy-fairy" abstraction. On one side are disciplined and exacting and hard-working and practical; on the other side are relaxed and benign and leisure-oriented and living in the abstract. Apparently to Lee many freedoms, such as freedom of the press, are associated with the second set of attitudes, and are, therefore, inconsistent with Sinic culture and, consequently, with development.

In Singapore, what does not contribute to discipline is irrelevant. A student reporter attended a forum entitled "Singapore in the Seventies." One of the speakers was a local artist. The reporter commented as follows:

Her speech was interesting. One only felt embarrassed at the way she had to defend the development of the arts. "Rugged resilient Singaporeans" could be created through the arts because artistic integrity requires tough discipline. Surely this is crap!⁹

The cost to Singapore of this stress on discipline is not measured solely in terms of artistic surrender. Adela Koh, once a reporter for the *Herald* and now banned from Singapore, devoted an article to discussing a public forum on the mental health of children. She called the forum a failure because it ignored important topics:

A G.P. with ten years' experience had this to add: "Ours is an achievement-oriented society. The emphasis at every level, starting from the schools and going right through the social system, is on the survival of the fittest. Nobody cares for those who drop by the wayside, in fact the attitude is that it's better for everyone that the weak should be left behind as we march along the road to progress. . . ." What we must do, he says, is to give new worth to human beings, to define excellence in other than material terms.

The doctrine of discipline is costing Singapore in terms of artistic development and human considerations and not just freedom of expression.

⁷ Speech printed in *The Sunday Times* (Singapore), November 15, 1970.

⁸ Speech printed in *The Sunday Mail* (Singapore), November 15, 1970.

⁹ *Singapore Undergrad*, November 30, 1970.

But the argument from efficiency or discipline is not the public justification for limiting criticism, nor is it believed by some observers to be the most compelling covert reason for acts such as the closure of the *Herald*. Dick Wilson, for instance, stresses Lee's concern for unity and nation-building—a concern heightened by the increasing respectability of Peking which reinforces a resurfacing Chinese chauvinism in Singapore.¹⁰ Indeed, Lee is worried about national unity. At the time of the *Herald* affair the Prime Minister gave a talk at a Singapore community centre on the lack of homogeneity within the country's population.¹¹ He spoke of religious communalism in connection with the Malays, and the pride of the Chinese-educated in the Chinese language and culture. Without saying this is a full explanation of the *Herald* affair, it seems clear that freedom to criticize was sacrificed for national unity. Freedom, according to this view, must await the development of a national identity.

But the question I wish to raise is whether a Singapore identity can develop in the present repressive atmosphere of Singapore.

Several commentators on Singapore have very simplistic ideas on the emergence of a national identity. Nancy Ma, for instance, believes that because Singaporeans are becoming multi-lingual, national unity will occur: "A generation or two of this sort of mixing of languages and cultures would ensure Lee's Singaporean identity."¹² But a sharing of language has not integrated the Chinese into Philippine society, the Indians into African society, or the Catholics into Northern Ireland. Surely this faith in multi-lingualism is naive.

The "theoretician" of the PAP, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, claimed that "Technology is the new Messiah which will save Asia from its otherwise grim future." The building of a technological society "can be an exciting and satisfying venture—sufficiently exciting and sufficiently satisfying to weld together groups of immigrants, who have left their past behind them, into a cohesive, progressive, and thrusting community."¹³ Rajaratnam has faith in the new *deus ex machina*-technology. But technological society in the United States has not produced the unity Mr. Rajaratnam so simplistically associated with technological development.

On the one hand, the government restricts freedom until a national identity emerges. On the other hand, there seems to be no meaningful policy for the development of this identity. It is true that the government has introduced the teaching of the history of Singapore into the primary school curriculum, and this was a deliberate attempt to build a Singapore identity. But, surely, one must wonder if the citizens will choose to identify with

¹⁰ Dick Wilson, "A Long View—or Bogey," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 7, 1971, p. 30.

¹¹ *The Singapore Herald*, May 26, 1971.

¹² Nancy Ma, "The Rigid Society," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 28, 1971, p. 24.

¹³ Speech reported in "Age of Technocrats," *The Mirror* (Singapore), Vol. IV, No. 32 (August 5, 1968), pp. 4, 7.

the short and rather uninspiring history of Singapore, when it is possible for them to choose the Chinese, Indian, or Malay-Muslim tradition. Moreover, the importance of Singapore history as a source of identity seems disputed within the government. In the speech just referred to, Mr. Rajaratnam stressed as one of the advantages of Singapore that they are a future-oriented people. It is doubtful if history can be as significant in Singapore as it can be in India and China.

It can be questioned, of course, if in a society like Singapore it is possible to plan for a national identity. In fact, this would be my position. A new identity must emerge from the attempts of the people to solve the problems specific to Singapore, especially the attempts of the more gifted people. But the present limitations on freedom are making new and creative responses unlikely, thereby putting off indefinitely the emergence of a new identity.

In 1969 Singapore established an elite pre-university school called the National Junior College. On July 29, 1970 the *Herald* printed a feature article on the College. The question was raised whether the school was going to really produce leaders. Reporters found the students to be self-assured and well-adjusted, but they commented: "If leadership is something positive, shown in a willingness to question principles and to act without self-interest, then there is reason to be a little pessimistic." Some students at the College believed Singapore to be a materialistic society. "But they also feel it is futile to even try to raise questions about the structure and development of our society 'for any form of protest will inevitably be suppressed.'" Reporters found it difficult to find independent thinking, or students who challenged the assumptions behind major issues. "They know . . . they were selected because they were 'safe,' because they had approved points of view, and that to continue getting privileges they should continue to play it safe." Surely such an atmosphere is unlikely to produce people who will build a new identity.

In November, 1970, while he was acting prime minister, Mr. Goh Keng Swee gave a speech at the University of Singapore which contained the remark: "And so we have in Singapore intellectual conformity in place of intellectual inquisitiveness, and the sum total is a depressing climate of intellectual sterility." Rightly, Goh said it was too simple to blame this entirely on the government. On the other hand, the government has contributed to this sterility. A student commentator, for instance, related this sterility to "incessant propagandizing over radio and television" and "the gagging of the press."¹⁴ In the same issue of the student newspaper, there was an editorial comment on the University (which is closely controlled by the Cabinet) changing from a three-term to a two-term system: "The University Administration has finally disclosed that the two-term system is definitely being imposed. Once again, we, the recipients of the system, have

¹⁴ *Singapore Undergrad*, November 30, 1970.

been mere puppets, with no say in the final decision." The government has kept the students under control and out of power. There is a fear of government within the English-language University. This does not seem likely to produce people who will give Singaporeans a basis for national unity.

Although this repressive atmosphere pervades all of Singapore, the *Herald* affair would be especially meaningful for the English-educated, and not only because the *Herald* was an English-language newspaper. Because of the history of Singapore, the English-educated have taken as their own, not just the English language but also English political values. So, one writer to the *Herald* submitted this Patrick Henry-type statement: "At this critical moment of our history, it is not the survival of the *Herald* that is at stake; nor is it the freedom of the press that is at stake. What is at stake is the freedom of the entire people. What is at stake is our national conscience and our national pride." We are not suggesting that English values are right for Singapore. We do maintain, however, that if the English-educated are to develop a new identity they will begin with English values and through trial-and-error work out a new system of values. Government action, by calling trial-by-jury and academic freedom "airy-fairy," does not help this process but blocks it. And, as Nancy Ma wrote, "The multiracial society will not be furthered by the alienation of its most genuinely 'Singaporean' components — raised to idealize their brilliant Prime Minister."¹⁵

The *Herald* affair, then, seems part of a growing set of controls preventing free expression in Singapore. This development, we suggest, has at least two causes: 1) Lee Kuan Yew's devotion to Sinic culture, in the form of discipline and order, and 2) the belief that free expression cannot be allowed until a national identity has emerged. As to the first, its cost in humaneness and artistic development seems high. As to the second, we suggest that, in fact, in the absence of free expression, no national identity will develop in Singapore. Finally, we note that, to the extent Lee's discipline-culture dominates public policy, Singaporeans will be forced to act as if they believed in the Prime Minister's version of Chinese culture, while keeping their true ideas hidden. Play-acting on such a massive scale is not likely to produce a new, spontaneously-accepted common identity for all Singaporeans.

¹⁵ Ma, "The Rigid Society," *op. cit.*, p. 24.