

MERITOCRACY AND PUBLIC SERVICE EXCELLENCE¹

Max Everest-Phillips²

Abstract

Meritocracy can drive social mobility and benefit both individuals and larger society. As such, states governed by meritocratic principles enjoy higher economic growth through better performing public service. In this way, this paper discusses the Singapore's case of turning meritocracy into a development factor. Specifically, author considers the role of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, in building the country's meritocratic civil service and fostering good public administration through public servants' motivation, promotion of the rule of law, integrity, and non-tolerance of corruption. Author, accordingly, suggests that Singapore's successful case can serve as a catalyst for other countries in their pursuit of public service excellence despite newly emerging debates over the notion and understanding of meritocracy.

Key Words: *meritocracy, public service excellence, public service motivation, new public passion, economic growth, development, Singapore*

Meritocracy seems a patently self-evident good: it offers a fair system, which results in better outcomes for both the individual and society. Meritocracy can provide talented and hard-working people from all walks of life with a means of advancement and the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the larger society. It can be a powerful vehicle for social mobility and incentivize people to do their best and reach their fullest potential.

Furthermore, a country governed by the best and the brightest must surely be better run than one that is not, and there is good evidence to support that conclusion. For example, research suggests that states run by meritocracies have higher rates of economic growth than those that do not (Evans and Rauch, 1999); improve civil servants' capability and performance (Anderson et al., 2003);

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² Max Everest-Phillips is currently the Director of the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) in Singapore. He was previously the Director of Governance at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London managing delivery of governance reforms to the Commonwealth's 54 countries. Mr. Everest-Phillips earlier held position of the Senior Governance Advisor in the Department for International Development of the UK.

are valued by citizens as fostering accountability (McCourt, 2000); are systematically associated with less corruption (Recanatini et al., 2005); and attract well-educated people to public service, who in turn are linked to higher tax revenue mobilisation, reduced corruption, better public financial management and higher economic growth (Arezki and Quintyn, 2013).

Singapore, the small island state where the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GSPSE) is based, offers a fine example of the impact of meritocracy on development outcomes. The founding father and first prime minister of independent Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, recently died. The obituaries all agreed that his extraordinary success was in no small part due to his rejection of anything other than hiring and promoting officials solely on merit. His often stated belief was that, "If you want Singapore to succeed... you must have a system that enables the best man and the most suitable to go into the job that needs them..." (Quah, 2010).

In 1965, the city-state was a small trading port with an unemployment rate of 14%. Fifty years later, its unemployment rate had dropped to 1.9%. In 1959 Singapore's GDP per capita was 510 US dollar. Now it is one hundred times bigger. His success is exemplified by the fact that Singapore's per capita income is today much higher than that of its former colonial master, Great Britain.¹ Whatever Lee Kuan Yew may have got wrong, on meritocracy he was 100% right.

Perhaps, one reason for Britain's comparative under-performance is that, while The Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 was famous for promoting meritocracy in Britain, it actually set extraordinarily low expectations. The stated aim for its reforms was merely to remove only the "decidedly incompetent, or incurably indolent" (Ibid.).

Lee Kuan Yew, by contrast, is credited with a much more extraordinary transformation, and this meant more than just a meritocratic civil service. It was thanks to his long-term vision that a small, fledgling republic with no natural resources was moulded into one of the best run countries in the world. But, certainly, at the core of this success was his understanding of the need for good public administration that required the creation of a "clean, efficient, effective and indeed exceptional" public service ethos.

That provided the other key ingredient for public service excellence: strong intrinsic motivation. This is one of a range of important

¹ US \$55 182 compared to \$41 781: World Bank 2013 data.

topics on which the excellent and very cordial relations already established between the Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana (ACSH) and the GCPSE will be able to build in the coming months.

So, Lee Kuan Yew instilled in public officials a sense of urgency and purpose, and of efficiency and impartiality. The rule of law and excellence in decision making was promoted. He tackled corruption using a zero tolerance approach. As he once put it, "Singapore can survive only if ministers and senior officers are incorruptible and efficient." (Quah, 2011). Integrity was essential; anti-corruption was, and still is, enforced without fear or favour.

His legacy can be a catalyst for other countries to reform. In this time of rising inequality globally it is important to create a more level playing field through public service excellence. High quality education, access to healthcare, and good public transportation, for example, can all contribute towards providing citizens with equal opportunities for advancement. In an increasingly unequal world it will be important that meritocracy does not devolve into elitism, with little opportunity for those that are not already privileged to move ahead. It is also important to recognize that meritocracy does not obviate the need for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Meritocracy after all, does not exist in isolation.

It is interesting to note that the term was first used in Singapore's parliament in 1971; then next in 1976, and since then with ever increasing regularity – it was used fourteen times in 2014. The MP who raised the topic first, in 1971, noted:

*Let us ... work for a society in Singapore where, on the one hand, people are rewarded and promoted on strict merit, and, on the other, ample opportunities are afforded to those who are hampered by poverty. In other words, let us build not merely a society based only on meritocracy, but let us have a meritocracy-plus society.*¹

So is this then what might be wrong with meritocracy? It is important to remember that the first use of the term was a negative one. A British sociologist called Michael Young wrote a book in 1958 called "*The Rise of the Meritocracy*". In this book, Young warned that a new elite class was emerging that was increasingly out of

¹ Dr Augustine Tan, on 30 July 1971. Dr. Tan (陈惠兴) was People's Action Party Member of Parliament for Whampoa from April 1970 to 1991. He was a lecturer at the University of Singapore (1968-1971); Political Secretary to the Prime Minister (1975); and Professor of Economics at the Singapore Management University.

touch with ordinary people. This elite married partners of similar social backgrounds and used its money to buy the best possible education for its children. This observation proved prescient, as with the 'legacy preference' system in some elite universities in the US whereby the children of graduates are three times more likely to be accepted due to the huge weighting this fact is given during the admission process (Hurwitz, 2011).

A similar phenomenon is evident in both Singapore and Japan at a much earlier stage in life, whereby for highly exclusive primary and junior schools that set pupils of the fast track to the best universities, weighting is given to the surrounding exclusive catchment area, or to alumni parents (Yonezawa and Baba, 1998).

In recent years a debate has evolved in both countries about what 'merit' is regarded as best. In the early stages of development, many like Lee Kuan Yew were in no doubt it simply meant the best educated, those with the best degrees from the best universities. Ong Teng Cheong, later the 5th president of Singapore, was the first person to attribute Singapore's success to meritocracy by making a remark during the 25th nation-building debate in Parliament on 29 June 1984:

... despite our small size, we have made life in Singapore pleasant and attractive. We have converted Singapore from a scruffy town into a litter-free Garden City. ... Our success in nation building is based on multi-racial harmony, meritocracy, social conscience, fair sharing, efficient Government and willingness to stand up for ourselves.

Yet, this simplicity is increasingly being disputed nowadays. Don't officials also need to be in touch with the citizenry, and empathise with their lot?

So, scholars and politicians in Singapore and Japan are increasingly questioning whether a law degree from National University of Singapore or Tokyo University, really qualifies its proud recipient to deepen democracy through co-creation of policy with citizens, rather than simply telling them what to do. That said, it is also interesting to mention that very recent research from the US suggests that lawyers working in the public interest, as state prosecutors or similar posts, are much happier in life than their contemporary lawyers working in the private sector who invariably earn far more (Sheldon and Krieger, 2014). This serves as a proof of that New Public Passion for

public welfare, on which the UNDP Administrator has so elegantly talked recently on a couple of occasions.

Let me then conclude by noting an interesting fact: Michael Young, whose book *"The Rise of the Meritocracy"* in 1958 first coined the term, in 1978, twenty years after he invented the word, was appointed to the unrepresentative, unelected elitist Upper House of Parliament in the UK, the House of Lords.

That ironic example, illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of the meritocratic system, seems a fitting point on which to conclude.

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