

Date: 25 October 2007

Subject: General Paper  
Topic: Singapore Society  
Question Source: SAJC Promos

*“Disinterested and indifferent about anything other than their own interest,” Does this accurately describe Singaporeans?*

In 2003, when there was an appeal for all pacifists to join a world-wide protest against American’s invasion of Iraq, the biggest group of anti-war demonstrators were found in the Middle-East, the Europeans took their streets, the Malaysians paraded in Johor Bahru with their banners, albeit illegally and the Americans protested with the most fervor in New York. It was all quiet in Singapore, at least with the exception of 6 potential protestors who were taken by the police for questioning even before they did anything. The event reflected the disinterest and indifference Singaporeans display in face of affairs in the world that are beyond their own. In the eyes of the world social organizations, the apathy demonstrated by Singaporeans in this event was sufficient to convey the message that we simply don’t care. Nonetheless, as Singaporeans, we are clearly aware that the message was wrongly relayed. The idea that Singaporeans are “disinterested and indifferent about anything other than their own interest” is an utter misconception and doesn’t describe Singaporeans at all.

There is something in the Singapore culture that facilitates the emergence of the misconception and it is the distrust in the power of ‘noise’. While most of the world, influenced by Western ideas have come to think that making a controversy out of issues is a display of concern, Singaporeans firmly believes that actions targeted at the point of contention speaks louder than the words. When we believe that the action prescribed makes no difference to the situation, and therefore deemed pointless, the actions will not be taken (after all, the Americans still invaded Iraq eventually). As a result, Singaporeans refuse to stand out to make their ‘noises’ on many issues in the world and this becomes mistaken to be a sign of neglect or indifference about things beyond their own interest. Nonetheless, the fact is that we care and as we become increasingly immersed in globalization, we have come to accept expression of one’s views aloud as a means of effecting change.

Perhaps at some point in the past, Singaporeans were truly disinterested and indifferent about anything other than their own interest. It was a time of chaos, of racial riots, of uncertainty about the future. From there, the government has encouraged the people to take charge of their own fate and thus emphasized pragmatism in both policy making and possibly as a national philosophy. Barely able to make ends meet, Singaporeans were of course only concerned with bread and butter issues that plague almost the whole of the first generation Singaporeans after independence. The statement does accurately describe the Singaporeans of that age, slogging hard for a better life and opting to keep quiet about things that are beyond the interest of making a living.

However, we have moved on since. When the tsunami devastated the whole of Banda Aceh in December 2004, we were one of the first countries to respond by sending food and supplies as well as the army to carry out rescue work. Of course, critics can decry that rescue was carried out under the instructions of the military and the government. Nevertheless, Singaporeans showed their concern for the tsunami victims through the funds raised the huge flow of volunteers to Indonesia to carry out the humanitarian missions. As mentioned, we favoured concrete actions that are able to effect change rather than purely making a hullabaloo. With these help rendered to the tsunami victims, how can Singaporeans be classed as disinterested and indifferent?

Then there is blogosphere to consider. Singaporeans formed an extremely active blogging community that has members residing in almost every corner of the planet. The topics discussed on these blogs can be anything under the sun. These Singaporeans concern themselves with issues all around the world, from the proliferation of extremist views on the Internet, public opinions on United States President Candidates to the simple issues (albeit more self-interest issue) of escalating difficulty in the PSLE Mathematics Paper. While youth apathy is often cited as a problem in the developed countries of the world, Singapore has young bloggers like Gayle Goh voicing out her views on world affairs and her critic of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have even caught the attention of the relevant ministry and inspired a public discussion on the issue. Although the discussion and self-expression was limited to the Internet and local print media, there was no reason why we should consider Singaporeans indifferent about things beyond their interests.

If there was a moment in the recent years when Singaporeans are being portrayed as indifferent or disinterested in affairs beyond our interests, it should be appropriately attributed to the lack of initiative to express our concern for these affairs. Since the proliferation of talk shows and programmes on local free-to-air television that seeks to garner public opinion on all sorts of different issues, there had been enthusiastic and passionate responses. Singaporeans are, in effect, learning to take their concerns on stage, abandoning the Asian attitude associating overt demonstration of one's opinion with arrogance. In fact, it is often deemed anti-social for one to be voicing out a personal opinion rather than a comment on behalf of a group in the community. That doesn't warrant the description of being 'disinterested and indifferent about anything other than their own interest.

In essence, the statement, which might be used to describe our forefathers in the process of modernization, is hardly an accurate testimony of Singaporeans today. It is not even an appropriate generalization for Singaporeans at large. The statement stems from misconceptions about the culture in Singapore and the perceptions of indifference because of our distrust in overt display of concern. Many events, however, have arisen to demolish this misconception and show that Singaporeans do care about things beyond those within their own interests. And as we continue on the journey of modernization, we would embrace the self-expression necessary to prove to the world that we are keen to discuss and act to tackle issues outside our interests.