



## Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus

*Donald Low, Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh*

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Singapore is changing. The consensus that the PAP government has constructed and maintained over five decades is fraying. The assumptions that underpin Singaporean exceptionalism are no longer accepted as easily and readily as before. Among these are the ideas that the country is uniquely vulnerable, that this vulnerability limits its policy and political options, that good governance demands a degree of political consensus that ordinary democratic arrangements cannot produce, and that the country's success requires a competitive meritocracy accompanied by relatively little income or wealth redistribution. But the policy and political conundrums that Singapore faces today are complex and defy easy answers. Confronted with a political landscape that is likely to become more contested, how should the government respond? What reforms should it pursue? This collection of essays suggests that a far-reaching and radical rethinking of the country's policies and institutions is necessary, even if it weakens the very consensus that enabled Singapore to succeed in its first fifty years.

## **Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus Details**

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## Celeste Chia says

This book showed me that economics and policy making isn't really my cup of tea. I found the use of academic, theoretical models to assess the effectiveness of policies/ governance less useful than comparative case studies. For sure there were good points covered in the introduction of the book: our rising income inequality, strong positive case studies of states with high social welfare, etc. However I took offense at some offhand generalizations that were made about the populace (are younger, socially liberal people really economically and politically more liberal, and pro-opposition?). Finally, I read the piece "the old normal is the new normal" by Thum Ping Tjin with great interest. It's always refreshing to use history to examine myth generation of dissent and progress.

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## Cassandra Chung says

For books on economics, history and politics, I usually take at least two to three months to read thoroughly. However, Low and Vadaketh's book was incredibly simple to read (at least for a person with only an A-Levels Economics background)!

I suspect the reason this book was relatively simple to read is because of the way it is structured. The book makes an excellent start by pinpointing the societal and economic myths that shape Singapore policy: this is crucial because the following criticisms within the book hinge on the fact that these myths are and continue to be subscribed to. The progression of the book continues smoothly: the essays all highlight the underlying problem of Singapore's society & economy and how these specifically affect various industries within Singapore. I also liked the fact that the authors of the essays used simple English (which probably contributed to the relative ease I had going through this book)!

This book is a sharp, incisive, simple-to-read and frank analysis of Singapore's society & economy; I would highly recommend it to anybody interested in policy in Singapore!

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## Jess Scott says

The opening line of this book is as follows:

*"Singapore's economic success masks some uncomfortable truths about life in this city-state."*

The text is very neatly organised into three sections:

- I. The Limits of Singapore Exceptionalism
- II. Policy Alternatives for Post-Consensus Singapore
- III. Governance and Democracy: Past, Present & Future

The chapters cover a wide range of topics, from economics, to inequality, to land mass / population

challenges, housing policies, democracy, meritocracy, as well as the concept of defining a national identity.

I like how most of the chapters have a distinct two-part feature, in terms of first explaining the issue at hand before offering viable and constructive solutions.

For instance, Chapter 9 explains why the trend of increasing income inequality in Singapore is worrisome.

Far from it simply being an issue about money, the authors cite an academic paper which correlates a high initial level of high inequality with the decreased likelihood of establishing social programmes that enhance social trust. And why is social trust important? Because it leads people to be “more inclined to have a positive view of their public institutions, participate more in their civic and political organisations, [and] to be more tolerant of [others].”

Historian Thum Ping Tjin’s chapter, “The Old Normal is The New Normal,” is a condensed version of Singapore’s political history (dark events included). This chapter is notably hard-hitting for it demonstrates how the lesson of history is clear — that “only democracy, dissent, and diversity can offer the leaders and ideas required to meet Singapore’s challenges.”

In Chapter 12, Donald Low analyses what went wrong for the PAP during the 2011 General Election (GE 2011). He writes that the Singapore population has become “more demanding of transparency [and] accountability.” Wise advice is laid out, such as how high ministerial salaries contribute towards the weakening of political discourse which is “not conducive to mature, reasoned public debate of our policy problems.” The chapter also suggests that political reforms “founded on the virtues of fairness, equality and resilience” will help sustain Good Governance.

Donald Low ends off the book on a personal as well as social note. He concludes:

*“As a liberal, the policy and institutional changes I wish to see are those that would make Singapore a more just city-state, one that prioritises the well-being of its citizens over narrow measures of economic progress.”*

The biggest strength of Hard Choices is the diplomatically critical tone throughout the writing. The style is moderate and objective without being too inaccessible to the general reader with an interest in Singapore’s politics and/or policies.

It is this consistency throughout the chapters which renders the writing as effectively persuasive, in terms of why Singapore needs to undergo vital and constructive change in terms of governance. This happens to coincide with a new generation of Singaporeans that are “empowered by the internet and social media,” which as Mr. Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh write in the preface, has enabled citizens to “openly question many of the PAP’s long-held assumptions and beliefs.”

I would definitely recommend Hard Choices to people who may find “anti-government” or “anti-establishment” websites a bit too critical. I believe more than a few Singaporeans would be able to appreciate the book’s presentation of a wide range of pertinent issues, along with real alternatives that should be considered for the betterment of the nation and its citizens.

After all, it’s hard to argue with cool hard logic.

<https://jesscscott.wordpress.com/2015...>

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## **Fred Goh says**

One of the better collection of essays on Singapore politics, policies and the polity since Cherian George's *The Air Conditioned Nation*.

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## **Terencelee says**

Tommy Koh, Singapore top diplomat, said this is an important book and should be read by all. It is indeed a well written and well researched book. The collection of essays are incisive, diverse and extremely stimulating challenging many long held notions that our Government has conditioned us. Reading this helps one to critically analyse what has gone wrong and what the government can and should do to rectify it. This will help you to elevate your understanding of Singapore politics to a much higher and comprehensive level. A very important book.

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## **Wu You says**

*Hard Choices* is a collection of essays that examines Singapore's socioeconomic status and policies. Its central argument is that Singapore should ditch her aversion to social welfare, and offer more redistributive policies in light of the widening income inequality and aging population.

The first few essays were a major turn-off. Filled with sweeping generalizations and arguments like "Scandinavian countries do it so we should do it too", these essays read like the bad GP attempts I used to make. I was ready to give up by the fourth or fifth essay, and the only reason I trudged on was that this review said things will get better.

While not all the later essays were better, my favourites were definitely in the later half of the book. Particularly liked "The Old Normal is the New Normal" by Thum Ping Tjin, which told a brief story of Singapore's socioeconomic turmoil since the 1930s. Thum's essay brought out how crucial context is in making an effective argument. What Thum capitalized on, and what the first few essays sorely lacked, was the *Singapore uniqueness*- a specificity to the historical, cultural, social and political backgrounds that affected our current policies, and will continue to affect future policies. In drawing out Singapore's past, Thum made an effective and nuanced case for an expanded social welfare system and a more democratized policy-making platform. His line of argument is probably not what you'd expect; it was a refreshing read and offered a new framework in thinking about subsequent essays. Even if you are not concerned about policy-making, Thum's essay is still worth a read as an alternative to the Singapore history we normally hear.

*Hard Choices* was a surprising opportunity for retrospection as I read assessments of Singapore's policies back in 2014 (post-GE2011-style, complete with criticisms of an elite government that lives in an echo chamber, does not understand the ground, sticks firmly to old ideological beliefs, and doesn't give a hoot about democracy) and considered the progress made in the past few years.

Overall, not the most enjoyable read - there were probably spikes of interest when I found rare gems - but I am still glad I picked it up. It was a timely reminder to challenge long held policy assumptions before I embark on the next stage of life. And I must say, for someone who used to instinctively recoil from MOAR SOCIAL WELFARE, *Hard Choices* has made me a lot more receptive to the idea.

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### **Lionell An says**

The book presents refreshing ideas about the state of Singapore - chiefly on societal and political terms. It challenges existing, well-entrenched narratives that have been indoctrinated in many, not for the sake of being subversive or anti-establishment, but to explore new ways forward operating in the new normal that is a highly educated populace inhabiting a globalised city .

Reading this book has exposed me to many new ideas and concepts about political science and made me more acutely aware of the endless possibilities in policymaking. (as opposed to a cold, hard reductionist way of solving problem)

The book is a compilation of thesis papers. Hence, the chapters in the book do not necessarily present distinct concepts that build on from chapter to chapter because the book was not specially written for that. Instead, there are significant overlaps in ideas in many of the chapters as some of the papers are written by the same author. While it can reinforce your grasp of the concepts, it can become mundane at times.

For that reason, and also because of the academic nature of the book, isn't as smooth or entertaining a read as your typical non-fiction. There were also times I struggled with following the line of reasoning as some of the terminologies and concepts were new to me. All in all though, I am happy with the read because there has been a lot of learning on my part. (I am assuming that is how such academic compilations are.)

Highly recommend to anyone interested in the future of SG, who is also looking for an intellectual and academic read to reinvigorate the mind after NS!

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### **Shao Chong says**

This is a book that open up your mind to ideas that will never be articulated by the main stream media for obvious reasons.

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### **Sean Goh says**

Thomas Friedman on Singapore's key strengths: It is small (and thus can be very agile and flexible and forge political consensus more easily), and it has no natural resources (and so will never suffer from the complacency or resource curse that has blighted many resource-rich countries). Vulnerability is not necessarily objective fact.

Equality of opportunity cannot be easily separated from equality of outcome. Unequal resources easily translate into unequal access to opportunities, e.g. to quality education.

One should not subsidise businesses that have highly specific manpower needs (hence requiring importing people), rely heavily on imported labour and talent, provide few jobs for native Singaporeans, or are highly land-intensive.

A system that distributes rewards based on relative performance reduces social trust, cooperation and cohesion (REP ftw!) Success becomes a limited resource. It is not an argument for switching over completely to absolute performance. Many scarce rewards have to be allocated by relative merit. But recognise the costs imposed on society.

Global cities like New York and London are pointed to as examples of the necessary demographic make up of global cities. However these examples are global cities connected to much larger heartlands. No matter how cosmopolitan they become, there will never be any doubt about what it means to be British or American. The identity of these cities is never in question.

A vulnerability perspective suggests that the risks of uttering any ethnical inflammatory statement is sufficient grounds to bar all discussion. But a resilience perspective believes that the only way to strengthen the system is to air all opinions - positive and negative - in the belief that open discussion will ultimately foster greater tolerance, trumping the risk of bigotry festering in silos.

In this rapidly evolving multipolar world, Singaporeans can find common ground with more people than any other nationality. Simply put, they have more cultural touch-points with more people. The Americans, so the argument goes, find it easier to deal with Singaporeans than with any other Asians. The Chinese, similarly, have less trouble communicating with Singaporeans than with people from other English speaking countries.

There are also complaints from some employers that many local Singapore university graduates lack sophisticated language competencies, social skills, diversity of thought, and a multicultural outlook. As one such MNC recruiter told me, "Singaporeans all think alike, that is why we need to hire expats."

The reason for excess demand for labour at all skill levels is the overly aggressive GDP growth targets requiring massive investment and promotion of multiple industries. These include the IRs, large scale pharmaceutical manufacturing, life science projects, IT, digital media, creative industries. Most recently Big Data and a space industry are being promoted to foreign investors.

Regardless of the TFR of its native population, no city in the world with only 3.5 million people (as at 2000) can absorb such massive and diverse investments in just ten years. It is not possible to be a 'jack of all hubs' because excess demand will eventually push up costs and reduce competitiveness for all. Furthermore Singapore does not possess a market-based comparative advantage (abundance of resources required) nor a competitive advantage (large local market or comprehensive supply-chain) in these sectors. These investments have had to be subsidised by tax and other investment incentives, including the liberal importation of labour and talent. There is no way local Singaporeans could have filled all the requirements of the above.

A significant proportion of scarce local talent is siphoned away by the large state and quasi-state sector and by MNCs, often to work overseas.

The government should discard its implicit but long-standing goal of asset appreciation and end its reliance on housing as a de facto form of retirement funding. Compared with other markets, the housing market is particularly prone to speculative booms and busts. Relying on such a volatile market to deliver retirement security - where surely one of the key goals of public policy should be to shelter citizens from the vagaries and uncertainties of the market - not only creates too much risk to citizens, but is also highly regressive and inequitable. The proper goal of housing policy should be to maintain price stability. The real lesson from Japan's lost decade is that a real estate boom and crash has long-lasting, deleterious effects on the economy.

The lessons from the northern European experience: in considering the design of social programmes, the

technocratic objectives of efficiency and getting incentives right should be complemented by a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the wider societal benefits that inclusive social programmes may generate. In theory 'means testing' promises to limit moral hazard and deadweight funding. In practice they often result in high administrative costs, stigmatisation, and rent-seeking behaviours.

Instead of direct unemployment benefits a unemployment savings programme could be set up (like CPF but for unemployment). For lower income workers the state could contribute more. Another option is wage-loss insurance, which kicks in when reemployment occurs, paying the worker a percentage of the difference between old and new jobs, encouraging people to reenter the labour market soon, even at a lower wage.

The PAP's good governance stems from it tackling the great inequalities and the vast poverty that existed alongside the wealth. It empowered its citizens by creating a system of social justice and opportunity, protecting and preserving citizens' rights, and allowing citizens to share in the gains of economic growth, earn fair wages, and attain a livelihood commensurate with the effort they put into building Singapore.

Gerrymandering and other antics skewing elections in favour of the incumbents may lead voters to apply affirmative action to the opposition, voting for them simply to 'level the playing field'.

In highly unequal societies, people tend to see the world as a zero-sum game. What is good for others not like me must be against my interests. They also guard what they have jealously and resist efforts to extend the benefits and privileges they enjoy to other social groups.

(Regarding baby bonus scheme) The lesson for policymakers in all this is not that economic incentives do not work or produce perverse consequences. Behavioural economists have also highlighted instances where financial incentives complement and work in tandem with intrinsic motivations as well as instances where incentives reinforce valuable social norms. What policymakers should strive for are policy solutions that create the right incentives and reinforce and support desirable social norms, such as those of fairness and inclusion. Policy should not go against the grain of incentives and people's psychology. What matters just as much as the policy itself is the social context.

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### **Chen Ann Siew says**

Good collection of thought provoking essays, questioning some of the basic assumptions behind Singapore's public policies.

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### **Yuhuai says**

A thought - provoking read. A common theme throughout this compilation is the authors identifying and discussing socioeconomic issues pertinent in contemporary Singaporean society along with the interpretations and approaches held by governmental institutions. These perspectives and approaches are usually found wanting upon analysis, and reasoned alternatives are then proposed. My main gripe with the book is that even though the authors, particularly Donald Low, acknowledges that the current ruling party and the associated governmental institutions are insulated and averse to risk and dissenting opinions, the solutions proposed are often relatively radical. The book would benefit greatly from some discussion on how this gap could be crossed - how should policymakers ease the transition from the current status quo into the

ideal state that the authors have in mind (or, barring that, how the electorate can convince these policymakers to do so)? Without such a discussion, the solutions feel wholly impractical - regardless of how intuitively plausible they might seem.

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### **Vinod Ravi says**

Everyone needs to do themselves a favour and read this book. You might not agree in entirety with everything said in it, but it certainly sets you thinking hard (pun partially intended, heh). And if you can't afford the time for the whole book, read especially Chapter 11. It's my favourite of the collection, a riveting comparative account of the past and present of this little red dot.

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### **Hubert Han says**

Collections of essays, much like orchestras, require a masterful shepherding of individual talent into a symphony. No symphony has ever emerged from a book on Singapore, with many of the musicians inept at playing their own instruments in the first place!

While a handful of essays contained nuggets of information which the reader may find perceptive (Donald Low's few chapters on governance and democracy), many of the essays are either a regurgitation of existent ideas, albeit in fewer words (thankfully), or read like Pinterest wishlists - much of which is eminently unattainable.

The weakest chapters were Vadaketh's on identity and Thum's on national history. Vadaketh's premise is puzzling: since a global city identity is mutually exclusive with a more localised/tribal national identity (this is, of course, contestable), we should wholeheartedly embrace the former. In so doing he makes no mention of the institution of National Service, and severely overestimates the organic roots of national belonging. Thum, armed with his usual grinding axe, criticises the PAP's arrogant we-know-best attitude, before proceeding to decree in an I-know-best attitude that the PAP's policies are 'to its detriment' and ultimately a failure. A historian like him has the opportunity to redefine the boundaries of our national history; it is a pity he constantly squanders this by overcompensating for its current shortfalls.

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### **Jee Koh says**

A thought-provoking set of essays. The main writer Donald Low is persuasive about how widening income inequality in Singapore is destroying the social compact between the government and the people. He argues for income redistribution and the strengthening of social nets, and against the shibboleths that stand in the way, such as elite belief in trickle-down economics, moral hazard, and decreased global competitiveness. He wants policy-makers to look hard at the empirical evidence, instead of being confirmed in their prejudices by past experience raised to the status of ideology.

Low is particularly good at using insights from cognitive research to explain why the governing elite is so slow to adapt to a fast-changing environment. His reliance on such findings is telling. He mainly believes that governmental failure is primarily a failure in thinking. Correct the thinker, and he will correct his policies and processes. At one point, Low assures the reader that the governing elite that he mingles with,

both civil servants and ministers, are well-intentioned and public-spirited. He does not see them as a class, and that as a class they will act according to their class interest. And so his calls to the government to expand democratic freedoms may sound overly optimistic. Nothing is harder for the powerful than to give up their power. His co-writer Sudhir Vadaketh may be less analytically astute, but he has stronger political instincts. He speculates that political change, if it comes, will come from the ground up, and not from the top down.

The one essay by historian Thum Ping Tjin takes a very different tack. By taking a synoptic survey of the twentieth-century history of Singapore, he makes the nice point that present-day Singapore resembles Singapore in the 1920s and 30s when it was the richest and most cosmopolitan city in S.E. Asia. Then, as it is becoming now, it was also the most exploitative economy. When the British found it untenable to hold on to power, they tried to transfer power to the pro-British, pro-business Progressive Party. It was David Marshall and his Labor Party, however, who won the vote and implemented pro-labor policies, such as starting the CPF. Other good ideas came out of that period of intense political debate and contest, ideas that became the foundation of Singapore's success. The implication for modern Singapore is clear: we need multiple political parties that are capable of forming a government. This scenario looks more realistic, especially after the 2011 election, than any proposal to reform the entrenched political elite. Whichever party wins, it would do well to look hard at Donald Low's policy recommendations.

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### **Angelin says**

The main takeaway from this book for me was writing style. I realised the importance of that, especially when presenting controversial and new ideas. At the beginning of the book, the essays presented a bunch of sweeping statements and generalisations that I found hard to swallow, and of which angered me due to the lack of evidence. However, it got better towards the end with Donald Low's essays, which presents facts before progressively challenging the current status, supported by evidences.

If I could take away perhaps the first 7-8 essays, the book would have been so much more enjoyable. Also, this is definitely not a good book for anybody's first look into Singapore's political environment.

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