



Singapore

# Lee Hsien Loong

FULFILLING

THE HUMAN SPIRIT

**I**n this interview on 3 April 2014 with Executive Director Khoo Teng Chye and Koh Buck Song of the Centre for Liveable Cities, Singapore Prime Minister **Lee Hsien Loong** gives his take on urban liveability and describes his hopes for his country 100 years ahead. He also reveals which other cities he looks to, and what tips Singapore might offer on sustaining a liveable city that meets everyday needs while also fulfilling the human spirit.



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● **Of all the many aspects of liveability, which are the ones really close to your heart?**

A liveable city is a place where people can live, work and play, and fulfil the human spirit. You want to be able to live well – good homes, good neighbourhoods, orderly and safe streets and environment. You must be able to work well – there must be jobs, opportunities, economic growth. You must be able to play well – which means a green environment, and opportunities for leisure, culture, the human spirit. To bring them all together, you must have the governance to make the “big software” work, to pull it all together so that when people come to this place, they say: “Yes, I want to be here.”







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● Does the fact that Singapore has a dense urban environment as well as lots of greenery give you a different perspective on the major concerns in the world today on enhancing the liveability of cities?

Our problems are easier because we are a city in a country, and the country is surrounded by water. It's a controlled environment. If we decide to do something, we can make it happen in all of Singapore.

The other side of it is that in Singapore, the city is what we have. You can go off on weekends somewhere else, but it's some other country already. That makes it more important for us than other countries that we make Singapore a liveable city.

● What are the adjustments in governance which Singapore needs to make to meet future challenges?

Population is a long-term issue. But we must also tackle more immediate issues. People need housing, public transport, utilities working well, jobs, and to have their economic needs seen to. If you plan in isolation, population goes one way and your infrastructure goes another way, you'll have a problem. Even if you plan together, it's not easy because of very different timescales. Population or economic trends can go up and down very quickly. Foreign workers can come and leave. To build a new city, one needs 20–30 years to reclaim the land, and you want to create possibilities so that your successors

01 Mr and Mrs Lee dancing with members of the Country Line Dance Association Singapore, whom they encountered while walking around Marina Bay in December 2013.

02 Mr Lee at the National Museum of Singapore, during Singapore HeritageFest 2013.

● Is there a personal anecdote, something that really struck you in your early life or career, that comes close to the heart of liveability?

I often spend my holidays in Singapore, walking around Marina Bay, our nature reserves, MacRitchie Park, and I'll often find something new, a corner of Singapore I haven't been. I particularly like the park connectors, which we are still building. My wife and I once walked all the way down the Kallang River from Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park to Marina Bay. It's quite a long walk but very interesting. It's urban, but at the same time, we have the greenery and water. I don't think many cities can contrive that.

will have choices. That means you need very competent people, and a lot of information – “big data” – and you must be able to pull it all together to make sense of the data and to respond to it, in real time or strategically over the long term.

● **What is your vision and dream for Singapore, say, 100 years into the future? How would you describe Singapore at that time?**

You cannot imagine what the world will be like 100 years from now. I hope Singapore will still be a country which is prospering, at peace with its neighbours, modern and yet maintaining a history of where it came from. A historic city must have many layers. If it is all built at once, like some of the synthetic planned capital cities, it will lack that richness and depth. But if it grows over the years – you have Chinatown, pre-war flats from the Singapore Improvement Trust period, Housing & Development Board new towns and public buildings reflecting different periods in history – I think that is a city you can explore and savour, and which will hold many memories for the population.

● **Are the softer aspects of liveability becoming more important?**

Yes, certainly. It is a continuing trade-off because you can't live in a museum, frozen in time. You want pieces of the past preserved, upgraded or adapted to new uses so you can look at them and say: “It's the same, yet different.” We're doing that to the City Hall and the former Supreme Court building – putting them to a new use, turning them into the National Gallery. The National Museum [of Singapore] is restored very beautifully in front. If you go behind, you see the modern extension integrated harmoniously into the old building. We can't fix everything in place, and we can't say that no tree once grown will ever be cut down, but we want to keep in Singapore a good mix of history, of the past and present.

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● **What is your take on a case like redeveloping the Bukit Brown Cemetery? Is it a sacrifice we have to make along the way?**

The Bukit Brown NGOs [non-governmental organisations] are pressing for preservation, and I respect their point of view, but I think in Singapore, we have to make choices. We've done it in Bishan, which used to be a large cemetery, and today we have a very vibrant town. Even along Orchard Road – if you're old enough, you remember that we used to have Ngee Ann Kongsi graves. They're all gone now. Would we have been better off if we had kept all those as cemeteries, and then squeezed our city into little plots of land in between? I don't think so. It's painful; we have to adjust, to give something up.

Today, you can keep a significant part of such history in virtual form – you can record all the graves, have a 3-D computer model, a virtual tour. We should also make the effort so that some significant bits are preserved and integrated into the new development so people know what was there before. I think that's necessary. It's important to have young people learn something about their own history.

● **Are there cities around the world that you look to?**

I think that cities like New York, even Seoul, their city management is in many respects more advanced than ours. When Michael Bloomberg was Mayor of New York, he made an enormous effort to upgrade the city services, making sure the maintenance was well done, the schools all up to scratch, and the neighbourhoods safe; and monitoring the city with a network of sensors and cameras, with information coming in so you know if there is a flood, an accident or fire, what the status is, so you can react.

We don't have a similar city control room in Singapore, and we can do a lot better. Video cameras today are so cheap, you can connect them up easily via the Internet, you've got 4G everywhere. We should be able to put them all over, in public places, so when something happens we don't have to scramble. In Little India, when the riot took place last year, we didn't have enough cameras, and we were looking on YouTube and the Internet to see what people had posted.



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When people see a hole in the road, a light not working, an accident, there should be an app that lets them upload the information by smartphone. Someone will sift through all this information, and react promptly to fix the problem. If you can harness the population in this way, you get a much better response and the population will feel much more engaged.

● **Is there a top-of-mind example for you from other cities on softer aspects such as heritage?**

Suzhou has become a [UNESCO] World Heritage Site; they are this year's winner of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize. I have visited Suzhou over the last 20 years and seen the great changes in the city. They have systematically upgraded their city. They've moved some

of the population out so it's not so crowded; they've cleaned up the river that surrounded the city, so now you can sail on it. They've cleared up the slums, and the behaviour of the people has changed. Now you've got Starbucks-type places. People dress up and go out, and there are many cultural amenities. They built a new cultural centre outside the city on Jinji Lake, in the Suzhou Industrial Park. It's a remarkable transformation.

I think Singapore helped to start it moving, because we built the Industrial Park, and that got investments in and gave them some revenues. Also, it opened a window for them on the world. The degree to which the Suzhou population now is connected to the world was unimaginable 20 years ago. They know what's happening; they travel.

01 Mr Lee (right) with CLC Executive Director Khoo Teng Chye at the **URBAN SOLUTIONS** interview.

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● **When people from around the world ask you what tips they can pick up from Singapore, what do you tell them?**

I tell them I'm just solving my own problems in Singapore. It may be interesting to you; come take a look. If you think it's relevant, we are happy to share the knowledge because there are no secrets in these matters.

That's what we did in Suzhou. We went, we tried to build an industrial park that also included housing, infrastructure, urban development, commercial areas, as well as industrial estates, which would bring in investments. It was not that we were teaching a class and disciples took notes. This was a model which was working, and other officials, mayors, party secretaries came from all over China. They took a close look, took inspiration, went back to their own cities and provinces, and now there are industrial parks all over China. I think they all picked up something from what they saw in Suzhou.



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● **What do you think is the biggest challenge to enhancing liveability in the future?**

We are, in Singapore, just a city in one country. And the country is the city. We have to keep this city up there, at the same standard as the great cities in the world. That means you have to keep on maintaining a very high standard of performance – not just the government, but also the population; to be able to work together and make the system work. Then you can raise standards gradually, and the level will continually improve, year by year, step by step.

01 Mr Lee visiting the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park in September 2010.



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