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Towards ICCS 2025

Where Next for Singapore?

By Harvey Whitehouse

SYNOPSIS

Harvey Whitehouse explores Singapore's future, emphasising the importance of social cohesion and sustainable growth in an era of global instability. He argues that rituals, education, and inclusive leadership can reinforce national identity and trust. He also argues that Singapore, at a crossroads, must focus on equitable and sustainable development to remain a global success story.

COMMENTARY

Singapore is famous throughout the world as an economic success story. That success was partly a result of forward-thinking leadership and high levels of social cohesion.

In a world in which the rules-based order is collapsing and many democracies are being torn apart by polarisation, populism, and declining trust in leaders and institutions, a key question facing Singapore today is whether it can continue to adapt successfully to threats from within and from without, while continuing to maintain the levels of cohesion and future-mindedness that got the country where it is today.

At the University of Oxford, I created the [Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion](#) to understand better how the most successful societies in world history have managed to pull together to achieve extraordinary feats of cooperation. My colleagues and I have created a vast database of world history known as [Seshat: Global History Databank](#), named after the ancient Egyptian goddess of writing and record keeping, to help us understand how the most successful civilisations in human history won out in competition with their rivals.

We have also been running surveys and experiments all round the world to unveil the psychology behind [global cooperation](#) and [effective leadership](#), as well as seeking solutions to [crime](#) and [intergroup violence](#). The secret to success turns out to lie in some unexpected places – such as the way rituals are performed.

Rituals as a Way of Life for All

My colleagues and I have been investigating one of the most powerful drivers of prosocial behaviour, based on the fusion of personal and group identities. One of the main causes of identity fusion is the sharing of personally life-changing experiences, such as enlistment in national service.

When a country's identity markers – such as its flag or anthem, or its iconic buildings, national sports teams, and cultural achievements – become associated also with personally meaningful experiences, people can pull together to achieve remarkable things.

But in many countries, collective rituals are declining, and people's identities are being increasingly shaped by behaviour modification algorithms designed to sell us fashion labels and political attitudes, herding us into silos that can easily be exploited by populists and disrupters. How can Singapore avoid the same fate?

During my visits to Singapore over the years, I have become a keen observer of how the country has successfully managed people's psychology to scale up cooperation. But now I believe Singapore stands at a crossroads. The results of our research may be of use to Singapore's leaders as they look to the future.

Fostering Cohesion in a Polarised World

Compared with [beleaguered Britain](#), levels of cohesion and trust in Singapore remain high. However, according to the latest surveys of public opinion in Singapore carried out by the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), things appear to be heading in a somewhat negative direction. The wealthy are increasingly perceived as taking more than their fair share, grievances are increasing, and trust in leaders is declining.

According to the Director of the Institute of Policy Studies at a conference held earlier this year, [cohesion in Singapore is coming under strain](#), particularly among younger people. Fewer twenty-somethings are getting married and having children. The demographic deficit is being topped up by immigrants from China and India, who bring welcome investments and skills but do not automatically contribute positively to societal cohesion. However, in addressing these issues, Singapore has a golden opportunity to draw on its extraordinary capacities for future-minded policy making and cohesion building. Here's how.

Sustainable Economic Growth

First, for any society to maintain cohesion, it needs a strong collective identity and ideally a high level of fusion with the country. But that also means being ready to develop new identities flexibly in response to changing circumstances.

Singapore built its identity over the past sixty years on economic growth. However, growth at all costs is unsustainable. Singapore has many impressive tourist attractions that are premised on a different narrative: one of stewardship of the planet.

Go to Gardens By the Bay and you will be blown away by verdant plant life melded with state-of-the-art technologies and exhibits championing care for the environment. Go to Singapore's zoo and or bird paradise, and you will be regaled with warnings about biodiversity loss and the importance of wildlife conservation. The next step seems obvious: create a new vision for Singaporean identity as a world leader, not just in economic growth but in *sustainable* and equitable growth that will reward everyone.

Valuing Norms and Traditions in Education

Second, to embed that identity, make full use of your world-renowned education system. Singapore's schools are the envy of the world, particularly in science and maths provision.

Our research shows that children learn from others in two fundamentally different ways. They imitate to acquire instrumentally useful skills by copying competent experts. And they build on that type of social learning by creatively innovating and improving on those skills.

But children also imitate to affiliate. Particularly during adolescence, they copy their peers fastidiously and are very sensitive to the threat of exclusion. Our research suggests that participation in well-designed rituals during this crucial stage in development is vital to creating a future-minded and prosocial citizenry.

Schools that overemphasise instrumental outcomes (e.g., grades and salary at graduation) at the expense of establishing strong bonds through ritual and tradition are failing the younger generation. Conforming to conventions, norms, and rituals not only helps children manage their impulses, but it also helps them develop the patience needed to secure better outcomes in the long run.

As America's [snowflake generation](#) goes into further decline, and Europe follows sheepishly behind, Singapore has the potential to lead the world in showing how educational norms and traditions can create a cohesive, resilient, and morally mature citizenry.

Inclusive Leadership

Third, the Singaporeans who have been showing me around the town, introducing me to university colleagues, and bringing me around in taxis, all tell me that their leaders are remarkably smart. They should be because they are paid a lot. However, being competent at complex tasks cannot be guaranteed by extrinsic rewards alone.

The best leaders are ones who care about their followers and are willing to persuade them to do what is right and good rather than merely pander to popular opinion. In recent years, this has gone particularly badly in many other democracies.

Although Singapore's system of government is less vulnerable to that problem, it is not immune to it. Creating a new future and identity for Singapore will not happen without the right kind of leaders, with a passion not only for power and success but for a better society for everyone.

That will mean drawing on the pool of talent from a wide range of professions, demographics, and interest groups and curating an environment conducive to building not only a greener economy but also an enduringly cohesive population.

Harvey Whitehouse, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Magdalen College, is Director of Oxford's Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion. His latest book, [Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World](#), argues that the key to a more peaceful and sustainable future lies in better understanding our evolutionary inheritance. He was the inaugural Visiting Fellow in the Social Cohesion Research Programme (10-24 March 2025) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This commentary is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2025.

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