

Best of British in Singapore

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There seems to be no end to the increasing wave of violent crime which is currently gripping our society. Media saturation seems to make us blase to the daily catalogue of horrific acts and when children under the age of fifteen mercilessly mug and murder old ladies, we surely need to find the root causes of the problem in order to solve it. One course of action in such a search might be to examine the effect on the youth of today of addictive, malicious computer and video games in which both killing and crime are trivialised. Lack of both discipline and mutual respect haven't always been an enigma in Britain, but are now as much a part of the post-modernist era as pop music.

On a recent visit to Singapore, it was a joy to feel safe whilst walking the litter-free streets at night and it really seemed to be a nation at one with itself. A nation in which the destructive minority intent on wrecking innocent victim's lives are well aware of the hefty consequences of their illicit actions. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore and its Prime Minister for 31 years, was interviewed by *Time* magazine on April 2, 1994. His common sense answers to the interviewer's questions concerning crime in America and the young in Singapore may be seen as a lesson for the West in general as he has certainly succeeded in creating a safe, respectful and trustworthy society. The policy makers would do well to take note of his advice so as to redress the current lacking of a balance between law and order and civil liberty.

Ironically for us rainswept islanders, at the start of the interview he stressed the impact Britain had on him in 1946 when he was 23-years-old. He remembered how bombed and damaged the place was and yet how proud, disciplined and well-behaved the people were. When he saw the way in which newspapers were piled high at the entrance to underground stations and how everyone took their copy and then dropped their coins or left a pound note and took their change, he thought what a civilised people we were. His memory of the bus conductors cautioning passengers to "Be careful, everybody on board, take care, upstairs please", inspired him to want to reproduce this great civilisation in Singapore.

Prime Minister Lee spoke of the approach towards crime in Singapore stressing that it is the government's business to provide individuals with what they cannot provide for themselves--a safe and stable society for a secure life. He emphasised the necessary drafting of a whole series of do's and don'ts carrying penalties which make people behave civilly and avoid being a danger to others.

On the advice he would give Mr. Clinton to help America arrest its internal problems he insisted: "You must have discipline at home. You must have certain values respected. The schools can only supplement what the home does. But when you have homes without discipline; so many single mothers and so many married couples with both mother and father out earning money, and the children uncared for, you have a real problem . . ."

Arguing that the problem with America was the enormity of the damage done by the gun, he reasoned that without guns there would not be so much brutality. He stipulated that the one reason for the low level of crime in Singapore is that having a gun is an offence which carries a life imprisonment sentence and so only the really hardened professional criminals take the risk and this policy has really been effective.

In 1992 Singapore, which is the same size as Los Angeles, had only 58 murders, 80 rapes, 1,008 robberies and 3,162 car thefts whilst in the same year the U.S. city experienced 1,100 killings, 1,855 rapes, 39,227 robberies and 65,541 car thefts. Prime Minister Lee pointed out that Singapore did have tight controls, for instance there is a S\$1,000 instant fine (approx. 90,000 pesetas) for dropping litter, but that these were effective. Coupled with a law forbidding the chewing of gum, this may appear to be a little excessive, but Prime Minister Lee asked the interviewer the point of excessive liberalisation in the West if we couldn't walk the streets without fear of being attacked and possibly even killed for our possessions.

The export of our once law-abiding society to Singapore has certainly paid off and the politicians could examine the way in which Singapore has transformed into one of the world's wealthiest nations and not suffered a simultaneous explosion in its crime rate. A fresh approach to sentencing in the U.K. which emphasised justice and made the offender "pay" for his crime act as more of a deterrent. Whilst I am not advocating the imposition of a "Police State", I am sure that most law-abiding citizens in the U.K. and especially the families of murder victims who have suffered the double blow of bereavement and of later seeing the perpetrator being given a very lenient sentence, would welcome a thorough crack-down on crime.

When asked whether there was a danger that Singapore would rest on its comfortable laurels and lose its competitive edge, Prime

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Minister Lee replied that there was a danger of a younger generation growing up and only knowing year-in, year-out growth but that the rewards are structured so that they are directly related to effort and the harder you worked the better the reward. He also conceded that the young knew that Singapore is so small, open and subject to external forces that they couldn't afford to take anything for granted.

"If the U.S. goes into recession, there is nothing we can do about it. Our exports will nose dive--that's 25 to 30 per cent of our exports and that's that," he remarked. However, Singapore's GDP is forecast to grow by a healthy 7 and 6 per cent in 1994 and 1995 respectively against a world industrial countries' GNP of 2 and 2.7 per cent in the same years.

With the imminent handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese in 1997, it is highly probable that Singapore will take over as the financial centre and become the new jewel in South Asia's crown. The phenomenal rate of land reclamation and construction of hotels would certainly suggest that they are gearing up for it.

In spite of the fact that Asian growth was 7.4 per cent in 1993-94, compared with a world growth of 0.6 per cent, 800 million of the one billion people classified as poor in the world live in Asia. Hopefully, with further economic reform and liberalisation, the poorest economies of South Asia, where some 500 million people endure the daily misery associated with deprivation, environmental decline and unchecked population growth, will soon be able to achieve the growth rates of the rest of Asia.

Should the current affluence of Singapore and South Asia's other newly-industrialising power-houses--Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan who will collectively enjoy growth of about 6.5 per cent in 1994-95--have a "knock-on" effect and revitalise the region's poverty-stricken economies, then the "work ethic" of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's model society will have really paid dividends.