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S'pore dreams of a future without the winner-takes-all competition

Public policy and individual agency can support Singapore's holistic development and citizen well-being in a 'compassionate meritocracy'

Terence Ho

The Straits Times' associate editor Chua Mui Hoong's recent commentary about the Singapore dream souring from a turbocharged culture of upgrading is a timely reminder that material success should not be the sole aim or yardstick of achievement for us as individuals or a nation.

Gross domestic product and per capita income, important as they are, capture only one dimension of progress.

Many valuable outcomes – such as job satisfaction, strong relationships, time for leisure and the enjoyment of nature – contribute much to individual and collective well-being, even if they don't appear on the balance sheets of countries or companies.

Fortunately, public policy can target such non-pecuniary facets of well-being. Several policy measures in the recently concluded Budget and Committee of Supply debates attest to this.

Even so, more can be done, both by public agencies and members of society, to improve welfare in ways that go beyond dollars and cents. This is necessary for Singapore's refreshed social compact, based on a "compassionate meritocracy", in the words of Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. We will have to find a balance between competition and collectivism that is appropriate at this stage of the nation's development.

QUEUES, HOUSING AND IMMIGRATION

It is said in jest that queueing is Singapore's national pastime, but in reality, it contributes more to ennui than enjoyment. The time spent in queues at shops, food centres and on the roads may not be priced, but it is not costless.

Much stress comes from jostling with others during busy periods. Tempers may flare as cars queue to enter schools or to find parking space during peak hours. The rush-hour jams on expressways, and packed restaurants, malls and attractions on weekends can create friction and fuel anxiety.

The issue is not that Singapore is not large enough to accommodate 5.6 million people. There are just too many of us, with our heavy work commitments and packed lifestyles, who want to be at the same place at the same time.

So, policies that help reduce peak demand can do much to improve well-being. Minister of State for Manpower Gan Siow Huang devoted a considerable part of her speech in Parliament last week, during her ministry's debate, to explain how tripartite partners support flexible work arrangements. Besides encouraging caregivers and seniors to re-enter or remain in the workforce, such arrangements also help to spread demand for roads, and commercial and recreational space more evenly through the day and week.

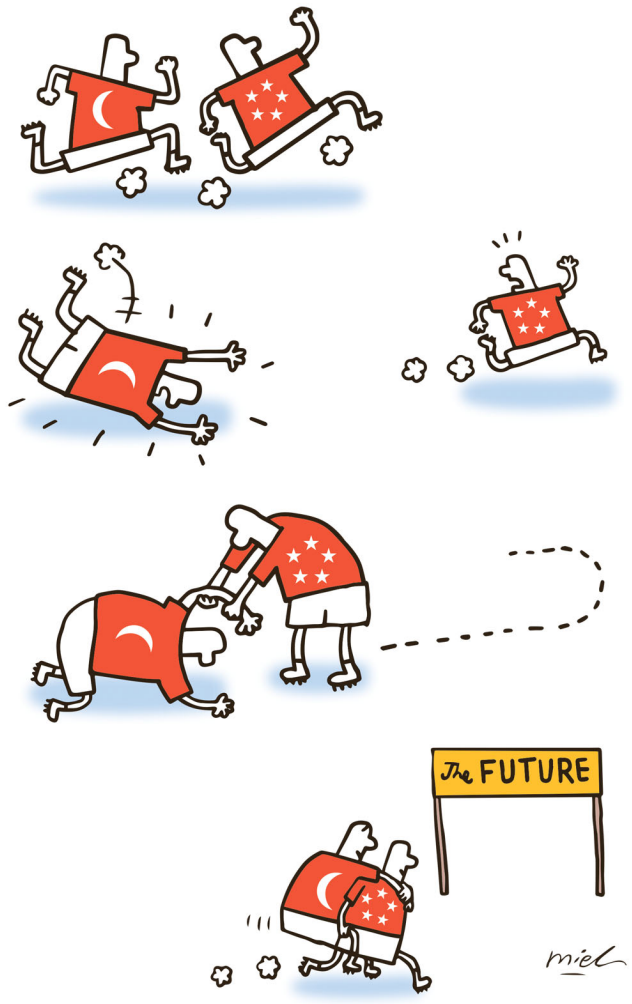
Similarly, in public housing, a robust supply of Build-To-Order (BTO) flats and better ways of allocating them can slash waiting time for new home buyers. The Ministry of National Development has unveiled various measures to ramp up the supply of BTO flats, improve affordability and prioritise young families.

About 23,000 flats are expected to be built in 2023, with the number of BTO projects set to further increase by 2025. Housing availability and affordability are vital to support family formation and give peace of mind to those starting families.

Some people ask: Why not slow down population growth? Indeed, while immigration is necessary to offset the decline in the local workforce and meet the needs of the economy, it has to be carefully calibrated in view of land, infrastructure and societal constraints. The influx of well-heeled migrants to Singapore may have brought in wealth and created jobs, but it has also fuelled rising rents and imposed other social costs.

Hence, the recent announcement to raise the qualifying criteria for permanent residency under the Global Investor Programme is timely.

Much has been said regarding citizenship tests following a suggestion by Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh to introduce an English language test for new citizens. Whether such tests are introduced, the point is that having new citizens well integrated into society can alleviate social tensions impinging on Singaporeans' sense of security and well-being.



Even as our educational system seeks to broaden the concept of merit, we must be careful not to inadvertently subject students to even greater stress by obliging them to excel in both academic and non-academic pursuits.

In its next phase of development, Singapore must aim for quality growth that improves both material and non-material well-being. Smarter interventions to address crowding, queues and social disamenities can reduce the strain on us all.

TEMPERING COMPETITION IN SCHOOLS

Among the key contributors to stress among children and their parents is a highly competitive education system. This is where the "rat race" begins.

Recognising this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has rolled out a suite of measures to mitigate the stress of examinations and free up more room for creativity and holistic learning. These include the adoption of full subject-based banding, which eliminates streaming and the stigma felt by many Normal-stream students, and the removal of mid-year examinations in junior colleges and the Millennia Institute.

MOE also announced in March a change to the way GCE A-level scores are calculated, so that students will feel free to choose a fourth content-based subject based on interest, without worrying about the risk of dragging down their overall score.

But public policy has its limits. The fact that places in the most popular educational institutions and courses are limited means that some way to select students will still be needed.

Even as our educational system seeks to broaden the concept of merit, we must be careful not to inadvertently subject students to even greater stress by obliging them to excel in both academic and non-academic pursuits.

Upstream changes in the education system also cannot resolve downstream tensions in the labour market. Intense competition in the school system ultimately derives from the pressure young Singaporeans face in the pursuit of well-paying jobs, particularly in a high-cost city like Singapore. Hence, greater financial assurance and lower pay differentials across occupations will be more helpful in blunting these societal pressures.

RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK AND HOME

In improving societal well-being, we must recognise that public policy can go only so far, and it is also up to individuals to shape the kind of society we want.

How we treat our colleagues at the workplace can do much for mental health and job satisfaction, beyond the pay and perks of a job. An over-exacting

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Maturing with grace and committed to excellence

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boss may achieve better results in the short term, but the long-term impact on staff morale and retention may well outweigh the gains.

As announced in the Budget, government-paid paternity leave will be doubled from two to four weeks, but the question is how many employees will feel comfortable taking the full allotment of leave.

Relationships within the family matter even more. Beyond legal and counselling fees, the cost of broken families lies in the emotional toll they exact on family members, especially children. The role of upstream intervention is crucial in sustaining healthy relationships and strong families. The year 2022 was designated as the Year of Celebrating SG Families, but there should be no let-up in programmes to support marriage and parenting in 2023 and in the years to come.

Still, it is incumbent on individuals to invest time in strengthening relationships, and to exercise understanding towards employees and co-workers who need to safeguard time for their families.

COMPETITION VERSUS COLLECTIVISM IN A 'COMPASSIONATE MERITOCRACY'

Amid a national conversation about forging a more "compassionate meritocracy", some worry about how Singapore will sustain its competitiveness, and whether the next generation of Singaporeans will grow soft.

The truth is that even if there is leeway for some to opt out of the rat race, Singapore as a nation must remain driven and competitive. It goes without saying that the world does not owe Singapore a living, and other countries are not standing still in the competition for trade, investment and jobs.

Competition in schools and the workplace, notwithstanding its downsides, has produced a highly disciplined and competitive workforce with a drive for excellence.

The pertinent question then is how Singapore can retain this hunger to succeed while forging a more compassionate society with greater attention to social and individual well-being. Is it possible to have a stronger social safety net and better assurance for Singaporeans, without compromising our much-vaunted work ethic?

Differential rewards will still be necessary, along with low taxes on the broad middle class to encourage work, enterprise and innovation. At the same time, we must avoid winner-takes-all, cut-throat competition that undermines our social fabric and erodes mental well-being.

The challenge is how to channel competition – whether in school or at work – in ways that bring greater benefits to both individuals and the community.

It will take a blend of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to achieve this. Respect for every job requires decent wages along with a greater focus on worker well-being and satisfaction from a job well done. The five Cs of material success (car, condominium, credit card, cash and country club) should give way to the three Cs of care, connectedness and contribution – taking inspiration from the 2023 Action Plan for Successful Ageing.

This is how Singapore society can mature with grace while remaining committed to excellence. It's not a choice between competition and collectivism, but seeking to dovetail the two so that Singapore remains a home we can enjoy, with a brighter future for our children.

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