



Defending the Legitimacy of Singapore Elections:

MARUAH Position Paper on the Role of the Community Development Councils (CDCs) and Local Government in Singapore

MARUAH's 4th paper in our Electoral System Review

9th October 2014

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Executive Summary

1. The present paper is the fourth in MARUAH's research on electoral reform —“Defending the Electoral Legitimacy of Singapore Elections”. These papers are premised on the rightful access to a free and fair election as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 21 and 22).
2. For the past 17 years, the Community Development Councils (CDCs) have, alongside the Town Councils, been the appointed connectors of local government. They were tasked with promoting social cohesion and the administration of social assistance programmes. However, unlike the Town Councils, which deal with estate management, the CDCs are appointed by the People's Association (PA)—an executive arm of the government—and are legally a part of the latter.
3. The non-electability of the CDC head, or Mayor, contravenes Article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly—“Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity...to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives”. The latter is to be conducted through elections in which “real popular input [is] institutionally accommodated (Comment 79, UN Human Rights and Elections Handbook)”. Restrictions to the provision of real choice thus constitute a violation of peoples' political rights. This is so as the Mayor is first elected through partisan political processes and then appointed to the position of Mayor by the ruling party.
4. The non-elected nature of the CDCs and Mayors means that Singaporeans are deprived of their right to have a say in how their CDC is operated, and feedback on the services and programmes provided by their CDC. As the programme agenda and terms of engagement are still pre-defined by the CDC management, this can be alienating to Singaporeans who would like to get involved in grassroots activities without getting into the partisan politics and work alongside a Mayor who has been elected and not selected through a political election.
5. We devote the greater part of the paper ([Section 4](#)) to assessing the performance of the CDCs in terms of their twin objectives of social cohesion and social assistance. In neither case has there been spectacular success. There appears to be considerable duplication of the efforts of other government bodies. The generous amount of government funding for the CDCs—every \$1 donated to the CDC, for instance, is matched with up to \$4 by the government, and capped at \$24m annually—could be used for other purposes too. Also, the CDCs have become increasingly redundant in a sea of organisations competing to provide

social services. Some have even explicitly taken over the CDCs' social security assistance function.

6. We then looked at examples of local government in other countries (Japan, UK, US) to compare some possible models (Section 5).

7. MARUAH is therefore of the view that the need to correct the political incommensurability between the non-electability of the CDC mayor and his/her partisan status, a contravention of the ICCPR principle enshrining the right of citizens to partake in the conduct of public affairs through freely chosen representatives, is given added urgency by the apparent failure of the present costly state-dominated grassroots system to deliver its stated goals. Admittedly Singapore has not ratified the ICCPR and the current approach of elections through a Group Representative Constituency (GRC) – the thesis of MARUAH's second paper – and the appointment of Mayors through a partisan political system, will provide challenges for Singapore to comply with the ICCPR. In our opinion, electoral reform has a crucial role to play if we are to improve the situation.

8. As such, MARUAH is making the following recommendations (Section 6):

- i) Dissolve the existing CDCs in their current political form;
- ii) Replace them with Councils *led by popularly elected non-partisan mayors*;
- iii) The PA is to cede all control of the existing grassroots organisations to the new Councils; and
- iv) Funding to these Councils to come from the government, with full discretion in the expenditure of these monies.

9. Anyone who can satisfy a set of very basic criteria (e.g. Singapore citizen/PR, no criminal record, etc) will be allowed to stand for election as mayor. The mayors will have an instrumental role to play. Their prominence does not come simply from being the leaders of their Councils but as elected persons with the final authority (and hence accountability) to direct and allocate funding for all forms of participative grassroots and civil society activity within their districts, according to the popular will. It is the hope that, unlike the current Town Council chairmen and CDC mayors, they shall be the face of lively and vigorously-involved communities, and a more cohesive nation.

Table of Contents

1. Preface	5
2. Community Development Councils (CDCs)—The Early Days	7
3. The Role of the CDC Mayor—A Short History.....	8
4. Key Challenges for the CDCs	11
a) <i>State-Society Relations: Elected MP in a Non-Elected Office</i>	11
b) <i>Building “Social Cohesion”: a Lack of Value-Add in Relation to Existing Agencies</i>	14
b.1) <i>Overlaps with existing Grassroots Organisations</i>	14
b.2) <i>CDCs: A Reflection of the General Failure of the Government’s Social Cohesion Efforts ..</i>	16
c) <i>Social Services: A Hollowing Out of the CDCs’ Role</i>	18
d) <i>Concluding Remarks.....</i>	23
d.1) <i>Original Intention Lost: What Role is Left for the CDCs?</i>	23
d.2) <i>Cost.....</i>	24
5. Local Government Abroad	26
a) <i>Japan</i>	27
b) <i>UK</i>	28
c) <i>US</i>	29
d) <i>A Comparative Discussion</i>	31
6. Local Government for Singapore.....	33
a) <i>Current Role.....</i>	33
b) <i>Recommended Role.....</i>	34

1. Preface

1.1 The present paper focuses on the role of the Community Development Councils (CDCs) as the appointed beacons of local government, and their relationship with the other key players on the grassroots scene, principally the People's Association (PA) and the grassroots organisations. We seek to understand how successful they have been in achieving the goals set out for them. Are the CDCs, with their partisan, non-elected mayors, really the way to go? Or do people deserve better?

1.2 Singapore is in a new era in its socio-political evolution. The watershed experience of the 2011 General Elections (GE 2011) has roused many from their political slumber and awakened them to the centrality of politics to life in society and as a country. Over and above having delivered the worst ever electoral performance to the ruling party – the People's Action Party (PAP) - the 2011 elections will be remembered principally for the new spiritual horizons it has given birth to. If politics is the art of the possible, then people have come to the realisation that this is not some occult matter for an anointed few, but an all-encompassing dynamic process in which everyone has a contributing stake. Prior to 2011, the general understanding was that politics was an entity which could be sealed off hermetically from the masses and entrusted to an elite group of enlightened leaders. But GE 2011 exposed this long-standing myth in an almost visceral manner: Singaporeans for the most part have always had a political consciousness and this was never “set aside” so much as it has been systematically neutered and constrained by the state. The term “depoliticisation” does not, therefore, imply the absence or delegation of political consciousness but points rather to the violence imposed by a regime of coercive politics, as has also been asserted by critics.¹

1.3 The truth is that politics must evolve to a higher level for the sake of Singapore's future. Given the nature of today's world as well as Singapore's peculiar constraints, politics is much more essential to its destiny than other larger, more physically endowed countries which can afford the luxury of coasting along, so to speak, and even of social discord. Singapore must be a single, nimble player in the global landscape if it is to survive, and this requires a collective effort. But in order for our nation to succeed, people must buy into the collective project with heart and mind—and how this overall direction is to be aggregated and distilled is precisely a matter of politics.

1.4 In his famous 1991 speech², George Yeo called for a pruning of the metaphorical Banyan tree in order that civic life, still very much a weak point here, might have space to grow—for this was the glue which “*holds a democracy together*”.³ Whilst we will always

¹ As researcher Lisa Lim has written: “PAP dominance in Singapore is ... also due to coercion in the form of an everyday concern the people have about potential backlashes from the government if deemed to be politically ‘subversive’.” *Hegemony and Political Dominance in Singapore*, American Sociological Association, 2005 p.17

² <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/yybg19910620s.pdf>

³ *Ibid.* p.10

need “*a strong centre to react quickly to a changing competitive environment*”, a good dose of pluralism must be allowed to flourish.⁴ A good starting point would be to balance central authority with what we might call participatory local democracy.

1.5 Ideally local communities are given a measure of power—via some form of representative local government—to influence and control local social and municipal affairs. To be sure, the latter is not itself the desired end state with regard to a more elevated politics, but only a means to that end. By vesting power in the hands of local communities, it is hoped that this galvanises people into participatory political activity at a level they can understand and identify with. This would be a good training ground for healthy and robust democratic participation (cf. de Tocqueville⁵) which will then contribute to a vibrant national political arena.

1.6 Unfortunately, the current system of “local government” under the Community Development Councils (CDCs)-People’s Association (PA)-grassroots organisations nexus leaves much to be desired. Far from providing the political space needed for residents to take effective charge (albeit indirectly) over local social affairs, these constitute a coherent parapolitical network whose ultimate aim is to dictate the rules of engagement and set the agenda for all forms of grassroots and communal activity. Local residents are “free” to act and self-organise only insofar as their activity accords with the pre-established ground rules. Opposition politicians are explicitly barred from playing any role within this framework simply on account of their partisan allegiance. It is claimed that people are free to do as they wish, as long as they keep within the law, but this overlooks the crucial fact that the system itself does have an influencing effect on individual behaviour and thinking.⁶ Hence no genuine form of local government is possible in Singapore without a qualitative (i.e. political) modification of the current system.

1.7 In what follows, we start by charting the evolution in the early days of both the CDCs and the office of Mayor. Then we explore the challenges faced by the CDCs, a constant theme of which is a lack of significant value-add to existing efforts and initiatives by the other grassroots and local players. In the next section we consider the examples of local government in three other countries to see if there are any instructive lessons for Singapore. Finally, we sketch our recommendations for an improved version of local government here.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.11

⁵ “Town-meetings are to liberty as primary schools are to science”—de Tocqueville, A.. *Democracy in America, 1835, 1840*

⁶ In the opinion, for example, of Bai Tong Dong, Professor of Philosophy at Fudan University, the current deplorable ethical climate in China is primarily a *systemic* issue and not the result, as is popularly imagined (including by political leaders in China and some abroad), of some innate human baseness gone wild. “It is the system itself which engenders unethical behaviour...China is in far greater need of a systemic, rather than an ethical, overhaul.” <*Can Confucianism Save the World?*> [Lianhe Zaobao, 22 June 2014, p. 8.](#) The conceptual relevance of this to Singapore is readily apparent.

2. The Community Development Councils (CDCs) – The Early Years

2.1 The Community Development Councils (CDCs) were first mooted by then Prime Minister (PM) Goh Chok Tong at the 1996 National Day Rally. The idea was to carve Singapore into 10 to 15 communities on a geographical basis, with each CDC consisting of either an entire town like Ang Mo Kio, or comprising a combination of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and single wards⁷. Considered “new grassroots organisations”⁸ at the time, these Councils were and continue to be appointed by the People’s Association Management Board, whose chairman is the Prime Minister. 9 CDCs were set up by the end of 1997, and all but two⁹ contained at least one Group Representation Constituency (GRC), which has between four and six wards¹⁰.

2.2 From their inception, the CDCs took over from the then Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS), the administration of a slew of national schemes such as applications for Medifund, Edusave bursaries and academic awards, thus freeing up the Ministry to concentrate on policy formulation. At that point, they were also supposed to coordinate and lead—without, however, being superior to—the existing grassroots organisations such as the Citizen Consultative Committees (CCCs), Residents’ Committees (RCs) and Community Centre Management Committees (CCMCs)¹¹, the objective being to foster greater community bonding among residents.¹²

2.3 After a few years the government felt that the CDC system was “quite haphazard because the geographical spread [didn’t] make sense to people.” Tanjong Pagar CDC, for instance, covered not only the Tanjong Pagar area but also West Coast and Buona Vista, “confus[ing] people who live[d] there.” As such, in November 2001, it was announced that the 9 CDCs would be consolidated into 5 larger ones¹³ (namely: the South-east, North-east, Central, North-west and South-west CDCs). With this, the number of people served by each CDC was now evened out at about 400,000 as compared to between 200,000 and 800,000 before. The remainder of the then MCDS-administered social assistance schemes were also devolved to the new CDCs.

2.4 But while the consolidation helped to resolve these external irregularities, less clear is how far it has had an impact on easing the tensions inherent in the CDCs’ role in relation to the existing pool of grassroots organisations. Even several years later in 2006, then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Wong Kan Seng raised eyebrows in Parliament with some “sharp

⁷ <CDCs In Search of Clear Role> *The Straits Times*, 24 June 2006

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Potong Pasir and Hougang CDCs

¹⁰ <9 CDCs for Singapore> *The Straits Times*, 3 August 1997, p.1

¹¹ *Ibid.* (Footnote 2)

¹² <Mayors ‘can do more for residents than MPs’> *The Straits Times*, 20 August 1996 p. 27

¹³ <Fewer CDCs mean more focus> *Today (Afternoon Edition)*, 12 November 2001, p. 2

words” for the CDCs, telling them “*not to compete with grassroots organisations by also organising constituency events*”¹⁴. This issue would probably not have merited the airtime it received, however brief, had it not been festering for some time on the ground to begin with. In any case, with the consolidation, the CDCs now went from being pre-eminent grassroots entities sitting atop the grassroots pyramid and administering a specific suite of government functions, to more supra-local bodies responsible for discharging all national social assistance and other schemes such as job assistance¹⁵. By 2006, this newfound intermediary role was clearly acknowledged by the Government¹⁶.

3. The Role of the CDC Mayor—A Short History

3.1 The CDCs were to be the social equivalents of the Town Councils (TCs), which were created in 1989, to undertake on behalf of the Housing Development Board (HDB) the estate management of the various constituencies. It was the government’s avowed intention in the beginning for both these Councils to foster social cohesion by involving residents in social assistance activity and municipal decision-making, respectively. Though there do not appear to have been instances in which CDC and TC have ever been geographically co-terminous with each other, it was envisaged for the two, to one day be merged into a single Council (this is described more fully in Section 4D.1).¹⁷

3.2 But this is where the similarities end. Legally, the TCs are only managing agents of the HDB, responsible for maintaining the physical infrastructure of estates. Its chairman is the (an) elected MP¹⁸ of the constituency, and as such is made accountable in a very tangible way for his/her political office to his/her constituents.

3.3 On the other hand, the CDCs belong under the PA and thus, by extension, the government. At first the CDCs were headed by either a chairman or a mayor, with the former being the default mode. In the original People’s Association (CDC Rules) Act enacted in March 1997, no explicit restrictions were placed on the eligibility of the CDC chairman (he/she was simply to be appointed “on such terms and conditions ... as the Board may determine”). A CDC was only led by a mayor when the total resident population exceeded 150,000. The mayor also had to be someone who chaired a TC within the CDC’s jurisdiction¹⁹. It was hoped that in the Mayor, a bridge would be formed between both the

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (Footnote 2)

¹⁵ According to PM Lee, CDCs must “leverage on a strong and extensive network of community partners” to achieve its social cohesion goals. <*CDC-grassroots unity vital*>, *The Business Times*, 25 August 2006, p. 11

¹⁶ According to Wong Kan Seng (2006), the CDCs now occupied an intermediary position between the local and the national, incidentally providing the justification for the Mayors not being directly elected (viz because CDCs are not a form of local government). <*The Ground that Mayors Tread*> *Today*, 13 June 2006, p. 2

¹⁷ *Constitution Amendment Bill*, 28 October 1996.

<http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00065419-ZZ¤tPubID=00069770-ZZ&topicKey=00069770-ZZ.00065419-ZZ.1%2Bid014.19961028.S0003.T00031-bill%2B> (Hansard)

¹⁸ “A Town Council shall consist of the elected member or members ex officio” *Town Council Act, Part II, Section 8(1)(a)*

¹⁹ *People’s Association (Community Development Councils) Rules*, 29 Mar 1997, 5(2) & 6(a)

municipal and the social sides of local government. Only 2 of the 9 CDCs from 1997-2000 were led by mayors.²⁰ Given the dual responsibility involved, the mayor was to be a full time position. By contrast, the CDC chairman was a part-time position.

3.4 Following the 2001 consolidation, all 5 of the new CDCs had resident populations larger than 150,000. Henceforth there were no more CDC chairmen. All were to be led by mayors. The PA (CDC Rules) Act was then amended to remove the clause requiring the Mayor to be someone who was also TC Chairman.²¹ Technically, therefore, the Mayor now need no longer be an MP (although this has not played out in reality so far). Today, none (save one²²) of the current crop of Mayors are TC chairmen. This amendment was probably necessary, since the size of the consolidated districts meant that it was now much tougher to be both Mayor and TC Chairman at the same time. But this was a marked deviation from the original ambitious intention that the CDC Mayors (though not the CDC Chairmen), as TC Chairmen themselves, would provide a unifying leadership overseeing both the social and physical infrastructure at the local level²³.

3.5 Right from the beginning, during the 1997 election hustings, the CDCs took on a partisan political hue, with the PAP warning that seats falling to the opposition could potentially be deprived of a CDC presence²⁴. Even though this threat never materialised, and Potong Pasir and Hougang were eventually included in the scheme, they were nonetheless isolated as single constituency CDCs²⁵, following the amendment of the PA Act (CDC Rules) in April 1997 allowing CDCs to be formed in single constituencies²⁶. By contrast, all the other 7 CDCs incorporated at least one GRC. Significantly, in both these CDCs it was not the elected MPs, but the defeated PAP candidates²⁷, who were appointed CDC Chairmen, ensuring that the CDCs remain within the ambit of the ruling party.

3.6 The rationale was that the inclusion of opposition politicians in CDCs would lead to partisan polarisation of grassroots activities. As the CDCs were responsible for government functions and deployed government funds, it was therefore right that opposition politicians be excluded from the Councils (and indeed the entire grassroots machinery²⁸) altogether.²⁹ Thus

²⁰ Dr Ow Chin Hock, (then) Tanjong Pagar CDC and Eugene Yap, (then) Marine Parade CDC

²¹ *People's Association (Community Development Councils) (Amendment) Rules, 2001, No. S576*

²² Dr Teo Ho Pin, Mayor (Northwest CDC) and Chairman (Holland-Bukit Panjang Town Council)

²³ "Then, local residents can identify the mayor as the person they can look to for both municipal and local community services". <PM Goh: Govt to Increase Number of CDCs, Mayors>, *The Business Times*, 20 March 2000, Page 8

²⁴ *Ibid.* (Footnote 2)

²⁵ <Hougang won't be part of Ang Mo Kio>, *The Straits Times*, 5 May 1997, p.1

²⁶ <Hougang, Potong Pasir to form their own CDCs>, *The Straits Times*, 12 May 1997

²⁷ Heng Chee How and Andy Gan for the then Hougang and Potong Pasir CDCs, respectively.

²⁸ This is the theme of the bruising 1996 parliamentary encounter between Wong Kan Seng, on the one side, and 3 opposition MPs, on the other. *People's Association (Amendment) Bill, 10 Oct 1996*

²⁹ Then-PM Goh: "CDCs are part of the governmental functions. So we are not intending to hand over this ... to non-MPs in charge"

<http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00065419-ZZ¤tPubID=00069770-ZZ&topicKey=00069770-Z>

in contrast to the Town Councils, whose Chairmen—the elected MPs of their constituencies—have, regardless of political stripe, been given financial responsibility over estate management matters, the PAP government has been intent on the other hand to establish itself—via the CDCs and the PA-directed grassroots organisations—as the sole arbiter of the expenditure of funds for local social purposes. The justification for this depends crucially, as we can see, upon the current optics of the CDCs as intermediary arms of the government situated at the intersections of the local and the national. By thus positioning the CDCs as close(r)-to-the-ground vehicles of a benevolent state paternalism which is *at the same time* mindful of its accountability to national taxpayers, the government has sought to claim an exclusive political authority over the management of local social funds. This has severely constrained the relative effectiveness of opposition MPs at the grassroots.

3.7 Importantly, the 2001 consolidation also gave the government the opportunity to co-opt the CDCs into the national political framework, the move being couched in terms of improving the effectiveness of the CDC leadership³⁰. Whereas previously the CDC chiefs (Chairmen or Mayors) were either linked to the official political structure only incidentally, by virtue of their MP status, or else not linked at all (in the case of the Hougang and Potong Pasir CDCs), there would now be formal equivalences between the CDC chief and some official political positions. According to PM Goh (November 2001), “the more experienced mayors would be on a par with Ministers of State and ... even the senior Minister of State, while the younger ones would be equivalent to senior parliamentary secretaries”.³¹ The government could now “check people out in CDCs as mayors and also as ministers of state”, interchanging them between both roles as they saw fit.³² This stands in contrast to the government’s attitude in 1997. Then, it did not appear to view the top CDC position as a human resource matter in its own right, worthy of systematic attention. It was quite content simply to appoint the CDCs and leave them to their own devices.³³

[Z.00065419-ZZ_1%2Bid014_19961028_S0003_T00031-bill%2B](#) Col.819 (Hansard)

³⁰ *Ibid.* (Footnote 13)

³¹ *Ibid.* (Footnote 13)

³² *Ibid.* (Footnote 13)

³³ In May 1997, for instance, when asked if Hougang CDC was too small to go it alone, DPM Lee Hsien Loong quoted the Chinese saying, “The sparrow is small, but all its parts are there”.

4. Key Challenges for the CDCs

A) State-Society Relations: Elected MP in a Non-Elected Role

4A.1 Perhaps we should start by considering the meaning of “Bringing Government to the People” (the goal of the CDCs, as spelt out by then PM Goh in 1996). In clarifying this expression, PM Goh said that the CDCs were local authorities which would handle funds to assist residents, taking over, where possible, the financial assistance functions of government bodies such as hospitals, for instance. The idea was to “bring [these] function[s] down to the community level”.³⁴ However it is noted that even in these limited functions, it was hardly clear that political room for communities to enjoy a measure of self-determination was really available. On the contrary, it was about extending the reach of the state down to the local level and giving residents the chance to be co-opted into a (limited) framework of local government which was still fully state-directed. Allowing people to participate in a process that is dictated and controlled, is a very different thing from giving people the freedom to make self-governing decisions on their own terms.

4A.2 In 2000 the Nominated Member of Parliament Madam Claire Chiang pointed out:

“In so far as the CDC defines itself as a bridge between the people and the public sector, it must then see itself as a capacity-building agency within the people sector, and not as a *Government instrument designed for exerting more control over the community*. [Are the] CDC[s] prepared to accept the active, egalitarian participation of citizens who are free to debate, contest and challenge issues that affect them? Or [are they] prepared to only encourage individuals and groups to rise from the grassroots to undertake self-help projects already defined by the CDC management?”³⁵ (Italics Maruah’s writer)

4A.3 At stake here, more broadly, is an equitable balance of power between state and society, and the fact that in the Mayor, we have an elected MP who is placed in a non-elected role, is a worrying reflection of how the CDCs constitute a further incursion by the state on what is already a very circumscribed space for civil society.³⁶ By civil society, we mean not just the range of interest, welfare and advocacy groups but also the average citizen in his role

³⁴ *Constitution Amendment Bill, 28 October 1996.*

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00065419-ZZ¤tPubID=00069770-ZZ&topicKey=00069770-ZZ.00065419-ZZ_1%2Bid014_19961028_S0003_T00031-bill%2B Col.819 (Hansard)

³⁵ *Budget 2000, Ministry of Community Development and Sports*

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00067411-ZZ¤tPubID=00069857-ZZ&topicKey=00069857-ZZ.00067411-ZZ_1%2Bid006_20000314_S0002_T00021-budget%2B (Hansard)

³⁶ “It is evident that civil society remains severely circumscribed in its scope for activism, judging from the state’s control and management of the use of public spaces by civil society groups and actors [...] A denial of real, physical space for more active mobilisation in terms of public participation for civil society can be seen as the reflection of the limitations and constraints imposed on the development of a more equal footing in state-society relations for all sectors.” Ooi G.L., *State-Society Relations, the City and Civic Space in Globalisation, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia*, Edited by Douglass, Ho and Ooi, Routledge, 2008

as a participant in local grassroots activity, which invariably has a partisan political element. Just as the civil society groups are about citizens exercising their basic political³⁷ right to participate in shaping society, so too is the grassroots an important arena for local residents to come together to deliberate or take action on issues bearing upon the community.

4A.4 And similar to how things work at the national level, so too should local partisan politics be a process through which the competing needs of the community can eventually distil itself into a (more or less) single voice, as it were. This process by which the outcome is conditioned is of equal importance to the outcome itself. Thus, in both these instances (civil society groups, residents as grassroots participants) it is desirable, as a matter of democratic principle, that a level playing field be maintained such that all players have enough room to realise their possibilities for action. This, ultimately, is to the benefit of the citizen, for whom these groups and processes work. However, again with the CDCs we see state encroachment onto this space in order to maintain the existing political order.

4A.5 Indeed, the ruling PAP government made it clear that the CDCs belonged firmly within its exclusive partisan orbit and therefore would not, consistent with its erstwhile policy of excluding the opposition from the grassroots organisations under the PA, be admitting any opposition members, even if they were MPs. PM Goh stated that “the CDCs are part of the governmental functions” and therefore opposition politicians were to be strictly shut out of the CDCs’ terrain. The then Minister for Home Affairs (1996) Wong Kan Seng also put it in unambiguously partisan terms: “I have also said ... that I find it very difficult to believe that Opposition MPs will serve this role [i.e. as an intermediary between the PAP Government and the local residents at the grassroots level] well, compared to the people that the Government will appoint.”³⁸

4A.6 The classic example of aggressive politically-motivated state encroachment onto the grassroots turf was the demolition of the resident-funded Sennett Estate Community Centre (CC) in Potong Pasir in 1984 and its replacement by a new government-run (i.e. PA-controlled) CC from which Chiam See Tong (then MP of Potong Pasir) and his party members were excluded in all capacities.³⁹ Whatever material superiority the newly built CC may have had over its predecessor, this constituted in effect a forceful usurpation of the grassroots political space of the locally elected opposition party member by the PAP government. By building a new state-run CC in place of the community-inspired one and shutting out its management, the government did not just make a political incursion, but also damaged the integrity of the grassroots as a political space in its own right, distinct from what goes on at the national level. It is only reasonable to expect that local residents be served at the

³⁷ I.e. Politics in the most fundamental sense, as the basic dynamic process through and by which society organises itself.

³⁸ *People’s Association Amendment Bill, 10 October 1996.*

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00065396-ZZ¤tPubID=00069769-ZZ&topicKey=00069769-ZZ.00065396-ZZ_1%2Bid013_19961010_S0003_T00061-bill%2B Col.655 (Hansard)

³⁹ *People’s Association Amendment Bill, 18 January 1993.*

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00063382-ZZ¤tPubID=00069678-ZZ&topicKey=00069678-ZZ.00063382-ZZ_1%2Bid026_19930118_S0004_T00111-bill%2B (Hansard)

grassroots by those whom they have elected as their MPs, even if they do not belong to the ruling government. It makes little sense to say, as it once was, that the elected MPs were chosen purely in the capacity of Parliamentary representatives and thus have no political prerogative at the grassroots level. The alternative—to install non locally-elected politicians as grassroots leaders—is surely far less defensible.

4A.7 Although the opposition is not being directly hindered at the grassroots, what is happening is that the *effective* space in which they have room to manoeuvre is being eaten away each time the government makes a power grab. As the government enlarges its partisan hegemony, so does the foothold of the opposition shrink. This has grave implications for the political integrity of the grassroots as a vital component of a robust civil society.

4A.8 Another way this hegemony is enlarged, with no less insidious effects, is through the use of preferential allocative mechanisms which benefit the PAP wards disproportionately. Again in 1994 Mr Chiam, as Chairman of Potong Pasir Town Council, had questioned why it was that his Town Council’s application for Community Improvement Projects Committee (CIPC) funds was rejected outright and without reason, when the PAP wards had till then, by contrast, received generous funding. Town Councils have to apply for CIPC funds through their respective CCCs (the advisors to whom are PAP members) who are given full discretion to decide if the application is to be put up to the CIPC (composed of PAP members) for approval. In the case of Potong Pasir Town Council’s application, the CCC had not even passed it on to the CIPC for consideration.⁴⁰ Such a mechanism leads to a gratuitous reduction in political capital for the opposition in the eyes of their constituents, as a result of negative publicity arising from unfavourable material comparisons made between them and the more fortunate ruling party wards.⁴¹

4A.9 In the last section we consider in more detail the proposition that the Councils are operating as “instrument(s) designed for exerting more control over the community”.⁴²

⁴⁰ Exchange between Mr Chiam See Tong and Mr Matthias Yao (SPS @ MND) in Parliament on the Community Improvement Projects Committee, 5 December 1994.
http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00064447-ZZ¤tPubID=00069728-ZZ&topicKey=00069728-ZZ.00064447-ZZ_1%2Bid005_19941205_S0004_T00131-oral-answer%2B (Hansard)

⁴¹ Though the intended walkway was eventually constructed, this came out of the Town Council’s own funds which could have been used for other purposes. <Mayors and the CDCs: Election strategy or radical political change?> *The Straits Times*, 24 August 1996 p. 30

⁴²NMP Claire Chang. *Budget 2000, Ministry of Community Development and Sports*
http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00067411-ZZ¤tPubID=00069857-ZZ&topicKey=00069857-ZZ.00067411-ZZ_1%2Bid006_20000314_S0002_T00021-budget%2B (Hansard)

B) Promoting Social Cohesion: A Lack of Value-Add in relation to Existing Agencies

4B.1 In this and the next section we look at the two officially stated functions of the CDCs: promoting social cohesion and community bonding, and the administration of social assistance schemes. We see that in the former, most of the efforts undertaken by the CDCs in the form of various recreational and cultural programmes and initiatives do not appear to contribute much value-add beyond what the existing pool of national agencies and movements currently offer. In the social services arena, the need to evolve a viable delivery model within the context of the prevailing operating environment has left the CDCs denuded of any role of major significance. Our discussion of the CDCs' effectiveness on both these fronts highlights the need for a reassessment of the fundamental value and relevance of these organisations in our political landscape today.

B.1 Social Cohesion: Lack of Value-Add in relation to Existing PA Agencies and Movements

4B1.1 The People's Association (PA) was set up in 1960, against a backdrop of socioeconomic turbulence, to help foster social cohesion and racial harmony. A Statutory Board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), and administered by a board of management chaired by the Prime Minister, it sets the general direction for its affiliated organisations but gives the individual units freedom to craft their own activities.⁴³ Through its network of over 1,800⁴⁴ grassroots organisations (GROs), the PA organises programmes to promote community action and to encourage more citizens to be active participants in community and nation building. The GROs are situated at virtually every layer of the community structure⁴⁵ and as such are collectively very penetrative. Aside from the GROs, the PA also leads a number of agencies and movements tasked with specific community objectives. The latter group are functionally independent of the GROs, though in general they seem to be quite reliant on them (especially where use of Community Centres is concerned).

4B1.2 In order to promote social cohesion, the CDCs have organised and implemented a range of programmes and activities for their residents. These are on the whole purely CDC conceived and executed, without leveraging on the existing efforts of the other PA organisations. Unfortunately the run of these efforts do not come across as significant improvements or innovations over the current array of programmes already provided by several of the PA agencies and movements—in fact they seem to be somewhat pale versions of the latter. Neither do they fill any unattended gaps.

⁴³ Singh, B. *Politics and Governance in Singapore, An Introduction (2nd Ed)* p. 70-71. 2012, McGraw-Hill Education

⁴⁴ As at 31 March 2009 there were a total of 1,834 GROs.
<http://www.pa.gov.sg/media-files/about-us/annual-report/Financial-Report08-09.pdf>

⁴⁵ The Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) function at the constituency level, providing overall guidance for the organisations below it, the Community Centre Management Committees (CCMCs) manage the Community Centres, the Resident Committees (RCs) are a focal point for the individual housing blocks, and so on.

4B1.3 In the area of Art and Culture, for instance, the CDCs are inclined to run large scale events such as North-East CDC's Annual District Arts Festival.⁴⁶ These are in general participatory platforms for the communities at large for art-related activities. In comparison, the PA has also put in place a range of community artistic events for residents: e.g. the PASSionArts Community Art Galleries, run by the PA Community Arts & Culture Clubs, in which residents and artists are invited to display their artworks at community places; the PASSionArts Hotspots, where residents are allowed to hold artistic performances in neighbourhood spaces; the PassionArts Festival, and so on.⁴⁷ The CDCs' programmes appear to be cast in much the same mould as the PA's, without anything too distinctive about them. In some instances they would even seem to be duplicative—e.g. District Arts Festival vs PassionArts Festival. Given that the PA operates direct through its GROs and has no necessary dependence on the CDCs for the staging of their events, it is therefore questionable how much value-add the CDCs are able to bring to the table.

4B1.4 This apparent lack of value-add also shows up in other fields. In the Youth sector, both the CDCs and the PA youth movements, divisions and affiliated organisations (People's Association Youth Movement, National Youth Council, Outward Bound School, etc) provide outreach platforms and opportunities for youths to improve themselves and their communities. We see that the CDCs' youth programmes tend to be ad-hoc and mutually disjointed, for rather circumscribed objectives and sometimes catering to very specific target groups [e.g. Southeast CDC runs a total of five youth initiatives, including "My First Break", a youth entrepreneurship programme for youth aged 15-19 in the district without the financial means to travel overseas, and "I Love my Teacher", a competition for students in writing the best tributes to their teachers]⁴⁸.

4B1.5 The PA by contrast leads a cluster of movements and agencies armed with a far more comprehensive and dedicated outreach approach.⁴⁹ For instance, the PAYM—based island-wide at the various Community Clubs and Centres⁵⁰—has a total of 102 dedicated Youth Executive Committees to drive events and programmes in the community. Also, owing to their specialised nature and direct backing from the state, and the fact that they tend to pre-date the CDCs (e.g. the PAYM programme has been in operation since 1971), many of these PA agencies are, unsurprisingly, able to offer richer and more rigorous youth programmes than the CDCs. The newly established Youth Corps under the NYC, for instance, is backed by an advisory committee headed by a Minister of State, and youth volunteers can expect to undergo structured residential training to equip them with leadership and project management skills.⁵¹ The CDCs' schemes appear by contrast to be more casual and

⁴⁶ <http://northeastcdc.org.sg/community-activities/arts/> (Accessed on 9th June 2014)

⁴⁷ <http://pa.gov.sg/our-programmes2/community-arts.html> (Accessed on 9th June 2014)

⁴⁸ According to the youth programmes indicated on the CDCs' websites (as at 9th June 2014)

⁴⁹ <http://pa.gov.sg/our-programmes2/youth.html> (Accessed on 9th June 2014)

⁵⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/PAYMyouths#!/PAYMyouths/info> (Accessed on 19th June 2014)

⁵¹ https://www.resourceportal.nyc.sg/nycp/ShowDoc/WLP+Repository/nyc/programme_fs/yys/yysfactsheet (Accessed on 19th July 2014)

watered-down versions.⁵²

4B1.6 As a final example, in Sports, the CDCs and the PA are likewise united in their vision of using this as a platform for community bonding. Both have some form of sports or physical activity programmes, in particular healthy lifestyle clubs/committees. But what the CDCs are able to achieve in terms of community participation here must pale in significance to the reach and impact of the PA's 84 Community Sports Clubs (CSCs), whose flagship programmes include the Community Sports Festival, the People's Association Children's Football League, and the hugely popular Community Games. Other activities organised by the CSCs include mass walks, mass swims, sports carnivals, bowling, badminton, football and sepak takraw.⁵³

4B1.7 It should also be pointed out, further, that apart from the CSCs there is also the activity of Sport Singapore (formerly the Singapore Sports Council), one of the other Statutory Boards under the MCCY, whose mandate is to "reach out and serve communities", using sport to "create...more inclusivity and integration".⁵⁴ It has recently launched the prominent ActiveSG initiative, which in collaboration with communities, National Sports Associations (NSAs), schools, interest groups, etc, aims to involve all Singaporeans and PRs in sporting activity across the island and has even sponsored each individual to the tune of \$100.⁵⁵ All these make the CDCs' contributions increasingly redundant.

B.2 CDCs: A Reflection of the General Failure of the State's Social Cohesion Efforts

4B2.1 What we have seen in the foregoing is the *de facto* redundancy of the CDCs' social cohesion efforts thus far. This remains an area of concern as it is difficult to ascertain if the sum of all social cohesion efforts (i.e. for the PA as a whole) over the past decade or so has borne fruit. But the reality seems to disappoint. At first glance, this does not appear to be the case, quantitatively speaking. For the Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the PA reported 13.7m⁵⁶ participants having "attend[ed] grassroots activities and courses" (a figure which has been on the uptrend), one of the Key Performance Indicators for the PA as laid out in the annual Revenue and Expenditure Estimates on the Ministry of Finance's Budget website. These remain as numbers and the monitoring and evaluation processes need to go beyond the numbers to offer us a sense of the qualitative reality.⁵⁷

⁵² Central CDC's Imagine! Community Action Network, for instance, a platform for youth community involvement, provides mentors and holds learning journeys for participants. But this is not on the same level of rigour as the structured residential training programmes provided by the Youth Corps. <http://www.centralsingaporecdc.org.sg/imagine/> (Accessed on 19th July 2014)

⁵³ <http://pa.gov.sg/our-programmes2/sports.html> (Accessed on 9th June 2014)

⁵⁴ <http://www.sportsingapore.gov.sg/about-us>. (Accessed on 9th June 2014)

⁵⁵ <http://www.sportsingapore.gov.sg/newsroom/media-releases/2014/4/activesg100-for-every-singaporean-to-play-sport> (Accessed on 30th May 2014)

⁵⁶ http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2014/download/53%20MCCY%202014.pdf p. 193

⁵⁷ As one commentator has written: "[H]owever, it is important to remember that the performance of the CDCs cannot be measured only in terms of the projects they undertake or the number of people they serve. [...] If, instead, the CDCs end up

4B2.2 The words of various politicians too have voiced concerns. Zainudin Nordin (then Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP), for instance, has “weighed in on how grassroots and civic organisations should join hands to find ways to *facilitate more meaningful interaction* among residents”⁵⁸; the PM has urged the CDCs to ‘work with grassroots and community groups to *engage* residents’⁵⁹; CDCs have been praised for coming up with such ideas as grooming so-called “Community Care Ambassadors” in order to “*encourage people to look out for each other*”⁶⁰, and finally just recently the press has reported that in our housing estates today neighbourly relationships still tend not to extend beyond a superficial level⁶¹ [all the italics are ours]. In spite of the considerable participation rates in PA grassroots activities, therefore, it would appear that at the core nothing much has changed—nor should this be surprising, since increased participation *per se* does not necessarily indicate better community bonding (say, if everyone keeps to his or her group of friends/family). The question posed sixteen years ago of the CDCs—whether they had succeeded in “replacing selfish individualism with community, isolationism with fraternity?”⁶²—is still very much relevant today.

4B2.3 Given also the sizable amount of money the PA (including the CDCs) spends on these community bonding activities—based on the latest available figures, for FY2012 the PA (including CDCs) had spent a total of \$94m⁶³ on non-financial assistance related programme expenditure for community bonding and other social enhancement initiatives—one certainly has added cause for disquiet at the issue of redundancy on the part of the CDCs.

4B2.4 It might be suggested that given enough time the CDCs could perhaps carve a niche for themselves one day. This would presuppose some area(s) in which the CDCs have a clear functional uniqueness—as far as fostering social cohesion is concerned—over the surrounding pool of PA agencies, movements and GROs. Yet even just defining the conceptual difference on this score between the CDCs and the GROs (CCCs, RCs, etc) is difficult, let alone the more sophisticated and dedicated agencies. Are the CDCs meant to add on to or complement the work done by the GROs? But if so there should be no reason for that anxiety among the latter about being crowded out from their operational space by the CDCs. In response to this the PA has claimed that the CDCs can avoid encroaching on the space of the GROs by focusing either on “programmes that offer practical assistance to residents” or on “larger events with economies of scale”.⁶⁴

drawing from the same old pool of government grassroots activists [...] this would certainly be to the credit of those tireless individuals, but it would not say much for the success of the scheme as a means of bonding Singaporeans.” <Opposition MPs should get a role in CDCs> *The Straits Times*, 27 April 1997 p.3

⁵⁸ Lim Wei Chean, <Yes, more helping hands> *The Straits Times*, 9 November 2006

⁵⁹ Goh Chin Lian, <CDCs urged to enlist more helping hands> *The Straits Times*, 30 June 2009

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ <Most neighbours just say ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye’> *The Straits Times*, 8 June 2014

⁶² <Have CDCs succeeded in Bonding Singaporeans?> *The Straits Times*, 22 August 1998

⁶³ PA Annual Report 2012/2013 <http://online.flipbuilder.com/nvbl/mstp/#p=104> p. 12

⁶⁴ <The Ground that Mayors Tread> *Today*, 13 June 2006

4B.2.5 Yet it is not clear how these events and programmes are to be carried out and managed in such a way as to avoid duplication. It is possible to organise larger scale events. But this does not make them essentially different from those which are smaller.. Hence, in conclusion, it is hard not to be pessimistic about the essential value proposition of the CDCs with regard to social cohesion. They are just more of the same (ineffectual) thing, though wrapped in a different guise. What is needed is a radical overhaul of our conception of social cohesion and, accordingly, the means by which we are to get there. We return to this in the final section.

C) Social Services: A Hollowing out of the CDCs' Role

4C.1 In the early 1990s the government sought to expand the social services sector without enlarging its presence, and coined the strategy – Many Helping Hands - through which this was to be achieved.. The idea was to enlist the active participation of various stakeholders in society, such as family, community and non-profit organisations and private corporations in providing support for vulnerable segments of society who would have trouble coping on their own⁶⁵. At the time, the main players in the arena were (and today still are) the Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs), of which there are currently over 400, and which receive funding from the government through the National Council for Social Service (NCSS) [via the Community Chest]. The NCSS, a Statutory Board under the MSF, provides technical support and indirect leadership for the sector but is not a central executive body—from the beginning the MHH approach emphasised that the government would shrink its presence until it became just one among many other helping hands,⁶⁶ and henceforth playing a facilitative rather than a direct role.

4C.2 In the partnership envisioned between the community and the private and public sectors, the accent was placed on the community as the active source of that invaluable “human touch”, so vital if we were to build a “caring and compassionate” society⁶⁷. But as having a central authority would only stymie these latent impulses, it was best that the VWOs be left to their own devices, free to operate without being subordinate to any top-down directives (the VWOs are labelled “partners” of the NCSS⁶⁸). It was also held that this laissez-faire approach would give agencies the freedom to customise programmes and services best suited to their target recipients, while leveraging their areas of expertise⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ Mehta , K.K., & Wee, A. (2004) *Social work in context: A reader*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish

⁶⁶ <Promised Results will Come in Time> *The Straits Times*, 25 April 1992 p. 32

⁶⁷ Abdullah, T. (1995) *Speech at World Summit for Social Development*.
<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/gov/950310074254.htm>

⁶⁸ http://www.ncss.gov.sg/About_NCSS/Mission.asp

⁶⁹ Ang, B. L. (Transcript of Nov 17, 2008 Speech) *The Singapore Experience*. Formerly found at
<http://www.cpu.gov.hk/english/dcuements/conference/e-ang.rtf>

4C.3 At the time of the emergence of the CDCs in 1997, the main public sector player in the social services landscape, apart from the NCSS, was the then MCDS. Its direct contribution to the social service sector came in the form of social assistance delivery (i.e. financial and job assistance), a function it bore until the administrative transfers of these schemes to the CDCs (though policy formulation still resided, of course, in the Ministry). But it must be noted that though social assistance forms a key component of the sector, there are nonetheless a wide range of other social services such as cater to the elderly, youth-at-risk, vulnerable families, the disabled, special needs children, and so on. These latter functions are performed by the VWOs.

4C.4 However, by the mid-2000s the inherent weaknesses in the MHH approach started to show. It was criticised as being “fragmented, piecemeal and not easy to navigate by end-users”⁷⁰. The absence of a central executive coordinating body also meant that the flurry of activity on the ground lacked professionalism, vision and effectiveness.⁷¹ But in order to tackle the problems of the MHH, without compromising its core principles, the government has had to evolve a new public sector social delivery model which has had the inadvertent effect of relegating the CDCs to an increasingly peripheral role.

4C.5 But before going further, let us take stock of the fragmentation issue on two fronts, both of which are symptomatic of the same fundamental problem that has plagued the MHH. First, “human touch” aside, the free-for-all supply-side ethos of the MHH was a natural expression of the dominant government mentality according to which an individual’s particular needs were discrete entities that could (or in any case, should) be satisfied on an ad-hoc basis, without essential relation to the person as a whole. Overly infused with an economic logic, it was implicitly assumed that the person in need of assistance was in a similar position to a customer at a supermarket, a self-motivated consumer of discrete social service products, whose welfare was enhanced in proportion to how well-stocked and varied the shelves were. Under such a rigorously enforced market-based view, the notion of centralised coordination (read: “Intervention”) was always going to be held at arm’s length⁷² (perhaps “human touch” is simply the obverse moniker, on the supply side, of “freedom of choice”).

4C.6 This same underlying mentality was also reflected in the very construction of the social assistance structure whose administration the CDCs took over—a number of schemes were put in place to assist only those who were able to meet the stringent and precise criteria. This effectively engineered the market (you should step forward to seek assistance only if you truly deserve it) by pre-defining, in quantifiable terms, what legitimately constituted “needs”. Under such a scenario, the CDCs were precluded, quite naturally, from engaging the applicants on

⁷⁰ Mehta, K. *Nov 17, 2008 Parliament Speech*

⁷¹ C.f. Denise Phua. *Debate on President’s Address, 8 November 2006*.
http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00001625-WA¤tPubID=00004832-WA&topicKey=00004832-WA.00001625-WA_1%2B%2B (Hansard)

⁷² The government has continued to defend the decentralised approach. <Helping hands ‘should coordinate’> *The Straits Times*, 12 February 2009 p.32

anything other than a purely legalistic basis. This failed, however, to tap on the CDCs' unique strength of "local knowledge and networks"⁷³—for the essential groundwork here was just that of obtaining information (on the applicants' actual situation) and though it is true that the CDCs were vertically reliant on the GROs such as the CCCs and RCs for help with the reconnaissance, this cannot have fulfilled the true import of "local knowledge and networks", which, rather, should be about leveraging purposefully established horizontal linkages.

4C.7 Among the consequences were that, in social assistance, there were many deserving candidates who would fall through the gaps in the existing matrix of schemes because the criteria did not admit of flexibility in deciding eligibility. In the larger social service arena, the unrestrained haphazardness of the MHH, apart from the effects on the end-users, also worked against cooperation between agencies. For example, it was pointed out in 2004 that both the CDCs and the NCSS each had their own information databases, but these were not coordinated with, and operated separately from, each other.⁷⁴

4C.8 In order to improve the situation, the ComCare schemes (under the ComCare Fund) were introduced in 2005 so as to inject a much needed dose of administrative discretion in the disbursement of assistance monies.⁷⁵ Their purpose was to provide a safety net for deserving people who happened not to qualify for any assistance under the first tier schemes. All these were still to be undertaken by the CDCs. This was followed soon after by the establishment of the ComCare Local Networks (CLN), which were essentially chains composed of various community players within a given locality—including the CDCs, GROs, Family Service Centres (FSCs), VWOs, schools, and so on—all linked up with each other and acting as a cohesive outreach unit.

4C.9 The intention was for the individual seeking or requiring help, who would otherwise flounder in the MHH wilderness⁷⁶, to be guided along each step of the way (for often the services of a plurality of agencies are needed for a given individual/family). Together with the ComCare schemes, the CLNs marked a major shift in awareness from the early days of the MHH: it was recognised that the individual's needs do not exist in isolation from the whole person and that a holistic approach to social service delivery had to take root. It is reasonable to presume that the CDCs were made to lead their respective CLNs, for they were the only organisations capable of wielding "local knowledge and networks", which function they finally seemed destined to fulfil.

⁷³ *Social Services in the 21st Century*. p.5. 2001 (NCSS) <http://www.ncss.org.sg/documents/SS21.pdf>. This point was also noted by the former Tanjong Pagar CDC mayor Ow Chin Hock. <CDCs: What else can they offer?> *The Straits Times*, 24 March 2000 p.5. Finally, see footnote 14.

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http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00000929-WA¤tPubID=00004662-WA&topicKey=00004662-WA.00000929-WA_1%2B%2B (Hansard)

⁷⁵ 2006 Parliament Speech from Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sport. [HEAD I - MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS 09-03-2006](#)

⁷⁶

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00079157-WA¤tPubID=00079158-WA&topicKey=00079158-WA.00079157-WA_6%2Bbudget%2B (Hansard)

4C.10 But things were not going to stay this way for long. Since the fundamental shift in approach towards a more integrated social delivery model, the policy trend has been in the direction of increasing the public sector footprint on the ground. This is not to be understood as the government enlarging its role as a provider (viz becoming a bigger helping hand), rather it wants to be more pro-active in counteracting the structural defects of the MHH. For just when it seemed like the CLNs might perhaps hold out for a time as a corrective for the MHH, it was announced in March 2013 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)⁷⁷ that it was setting up 20 Social Service Offices (SSOs) across the island by 2016.⁷⁸

4C.11 These are one-stop centres providing integrated guidance and assistance on the whole gamut of social services. Similar to the CDCs under the CLN system, the SSOs size up a person's overall situation and help link him or her up to one or several relevant help agencies—except that here they are in a position to do a better job. As there are a large number of SSOs (compared to the CDCs), each is responsible for a smaller geographical area which raises the effectiveness of service delivery. The reduction in physical (and symbolic) distance facilitates interaction between social workers and help seekers, and should also boost efficiency by reducing reliance on, if not cutting out altogether, the vertical middlemen (the GROs). Another key point is that the mainstay of the CDCs' social service agenda until now—the administration of the national social assistance schemes (i.e. the ComCare schemes et al.)—has also been transferred to the SSOs. Moreover, only a minority of CDCs (2 out of 5) have developed their own local assistance programmes, and these tend to be just good-to-have, rather than crucial, initiatives.⁷⁹

4C.12 Though the relation between the SSOs and the CLNs has not been officially clarified so far, it seems reasonable to assume that the original role for which the latter were created has been quietly, in effect, supplanted by the former. This is not to say, of course, that the CLNs have been rendered defunct, far from it. They still play an important role in terms of being able to link disparate organisations and agencies and have proven their usefulness in situations where multiple sources of help are needed.⁸⁰ They have intrinsic value as vehicles for a sort of real-time inter-organisational social vigilance, with the CDCs as the unofficial nerve centres. Yet for all this it is now apparent that as far as social service delivery is concerned, the onus for case management no longer rests, at least *in the first instance*, on the shoulders of the CLNs—and thus by extension the CDCs—as was originally the case.

⁷⁷ In November 2012 the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) split into the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the MCCY.

http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/pressreleases/2012/July/statement_from_theprimeministeronnewministries.html

⁷⁸ <http://app.msf.gov.sg/PressRoom/SocialServiceOfficestobesetupinHDBtowns.aspx>

⁷⁹ E.g. Northwest CDC runs a whole slew of such good-to-have schemes: e.g. providing packets of milk to School Pocket Money Fund beneficiaries, reaching out to the needy elderly to provide them with free eye screening, etc.

http://www.northwestcdc.org.sg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177&Itemid=124

⁸⁰ http://app.mof.gov.sg/newsroom_details.aspx?type=speech&cmpar_year=2012&news_sid=20120322707580580220 (para 5)

4C.13 To be sure, the Minister for Social and Family Development Mr Chan Chun Sing, in his Ministry's Committee of Supply speech earlier this year, indicated that the SSOs "will not duplicate the role of the ... CDCs". But this is just a matter of course, for now the CDCs, having relinquished their former role to the SSOs, will take on a modified (i.e. watered-down) job scope. As Mr Chan puts it:

*"Imagine a five-ring Olympic ring in the social service chain. The first ring is a community ring. The community is the first line of support, the first line of **detection** (emphasis ours) [...] This is where CDCs, and many other kind-hearted individuals come in because they mobilise the community support group."*⁸¹

4C.14 Without having to refer to the rest of the Minister's analogy, and despite the symbolic pretensions to equality (cf. the 5 interlocking rings) it is apparent that the CDCs are not the ones doing the real work (this is left to the SSOs and FSCs).⁸² This would still be palatable if, in its allotted role, it was in a position of pre-eminence. Yet if what is required in this first line of support is essentially a matter of detection, then in fact the CDCs are most unfavourably placed, in comparison to the other community players such as the GROs which are much closer to the ground. Of course, due to their networking capability (which, owing to the CDCs' greater elevation, is superior to the SSOs') the CDCs will always form an indispensable part of the social service picture. Yet nonetheless it is doubtful their role will amount to anything more than a passive and co-opted one. The CDCs will not be there to move, but to be moved.⁸³

4C.15 Hence, in conclusion, we have seen that the need to fashion a viable model of social delivery within the unforgiving context of the MHH has resulted in the CDCs being relegated to a more peripheral role. In the battle to reclaim wholeness from the jaws of fragmentation, the CDCs were always on the wrong side of the general policy trajectory. As supra-local bodies, they are a step too far removed from the ground to be able to deal as effectively with the demands of an integrated approach taking care of the whole person as compared to agencies performing that function at a lower level. From 2001 when the CDCs took over the remaining social assistance schemes, to their present denuded role, we have seen an effective hollowing out of their social service function.

⁸¹

http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00005844-WA¤tPubID=00005841-WA&topicKey=00005841-WA.00005844-WA_2%2Bbudget%2B (Hansard)

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ If we take a project such as, for example, the YMCA Project Bridge, a collaborative effort between YMCA, North West CDC and the National Youth Council, in which youth-at-risk are put through activities- and mentoring-based programmes designed to help them realise their potential, it is clear that the CDC is there only to facilitate the process.

<http://www.ncss.gov.sg/documents/RapportMayAug2011.pdf> p.15

D) Concluding Remarks

D.1 Original Intention Lost: What Role is Left for the CDCs?

4D1.1 In the previous section we treated the social cohesion and social service functions of the CDCs as separate objectives. However, in the beginning in 1997 both these objectives were actually meant to go together in an organic and unforced manner, in much the same way as the Town Councils were intended to foster community bonding through involving citizens in the municipal decision making process. By devolving a number of national assistance schemes to the CDCs, it was hoped that a participatory style of administration would have spin-offs for community bonding. This was not to be a coldly dispensatory affair but rather one in which roped-in volunteers engaged beneficiaries on a personal contact basis.⁸⁴

4D1.2 As new grassroots organisations,⁸⁵ the CDCs' power to administer these schemes (in partnership with the GROs) was to be the springboard from which face-to-face contact between the more well-off volunteers and the residents in need could be realised.⁸⁶ Respect would be built on the part of beneficiaries towards their better-off fellow-resident volunteers: an up-close and personal exercise in alleviating the psychological tensions between the haves and the haves-not.⁸⁷ In large districts, there would be full-time mayors handling both CDC affairs and Town Council management, to whom district residents could turn to for both municipal and social issues.⁸⁸ There was a genuine faith in the possibility of reinvigorating the old *Gotong Royong* community spirit.

4D1.3 However, since 2001, with the reorganisation of the CDCs from the initial nine to the current five, and the resulting distancing of the Councils from the grassroots,⁸⁹ the two objectives have become dissociated from each other, standing apart as separate and distinct. The main driver responsible for this was perhaps the changes taking place in the social service sector. With cries ringing out in Parliament in the mid-2000s over the effects of the disjointedness reigning under the Many Helping Hands approach, concerted efforts were made to create a new integrated and client-centric social service delivery model, culminating in the

⁸⁴ <Coming soon: Mayors to help increase bonding> *The Straits Times*, 19 August 1996 p. 24

⁸⁵ <Mayors 'can do more for residents than MPs'> *The Straits Times*, 20 August 1996 p. 27

⁸⁶ PM Goh stressed the importance of personal contact: "When the same benefit comes from a faceless bureaucrat, there is no bonding at all, and the citizen feels he owes the community nothing." *Ibid.* (Footnote 85). Also: "I want them to go and visit the families of the recipient, so that they will understand why they are on public assistance." <PM: Community councils a way to ensure cohesion> *The Straits Times*, 26 August 1996 p. 1

⁸⁷ "The more able and successful should help the less able and the less well-off, as they used to do and were respected for doing. The community, especially those who receive help, will naturally respect the successful who look after them instead of resenting their success."—PM Goh. *Ibid.* (Footnote 88)

⁸⁸ In any case, this was to be the long term objective. PM Goh again: "My own vision is for the CDCs and Town Councils to evolve into one [...], that over time, as our population becomes more settled in the various new towns and old towns, they should have a situation where a CDC and Town Council would be in charge of an organic town." *Constitution Amendment Bill*, 28 October 1996. *Ibid.* (Footnote 17)

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* (Footnote 10)

establishment of the ComCare schemes and the ComCare Local Networks. The CDCs' social assistance administration role henceforth became more involved (by their nature the ComCare schemes require more thorough engagement) and also this was no longer a standalone function—CDCs had to integrate social assistance with a holistic appraisal of the individual's overall social service needs (as required under the CLNs). In a curious echo of the CDCs' idealistic origins in the not so distant past, the CLN policy also came bearing the promise of interpersonal intimacy, except that now social cohesion was no longer part of the equation.⁹⁰

4D1.4 Thus it was that the idea of social cohesion became 'unhinged' from its original moorings, and the CDCs have since been having an awkward time with it. Since there is little ground-up communal impetus, the CDCs have had no other recourse than to implement top-down initiatives geared at getting residents to come together and hopefully in the process produce that magical glue.

4D1.5 Today the CDCs are very different creatures from what their progenitors had envisioned them to be. The installation of the Social Service Offices is, despite the consolatory noises coming from the implementing Minister⁹¹, an effective checkmate on any lingering ambitions the CDCs may harbour towards playing an active and influential role in the social service sector. Their erstwhile role of administering the social assistance schemes has been transplanted to the SSOs, and it is likely they will end up serving a more back-end, networking function in support of the Offices. As regards social cohesion, instead of being a hard-earned but organic spin-off from local participatory politics, this has come to be regarded by the CDCs as something of a commodity to be manufactured one-sidedly on their part. In this respect the Mayor—whose essential task is social cohesion—becomes something of a non-entity. For if it is true that the structural conditions of grassroots politics are what is hindering the participatory activity which alone can give rise to genuine cohesion (as argued in Section A), then the insertion of a high-profile Mayor at the top of this pyramid is hardly going to make a real difference.

D.2 Cost

4D2.1 The entire PA's (inclusive of CDCs) budget is a substantial one. After the National Environment Agency (NEA), the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and a number of Polytechnics, the PA is the Statutory Board which receives the biggest amount of government funding.⁹² Between the Fiscal Years (FY) 2008 and 2013, its overall operating budget

⁹⁰ Thus one cannot help being struck by an ironic sense of *déjà vu* when Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon (then Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports) says in Parliament in 2006: "I feel that a strong message to get across today is that for the ComCare Fund, we will take a 'people-to-people' approach".
http://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00001562-WA¤tPubID=00004830-WA&topicKey=00004830-WA.00001562-WA_1%2B%2B (Hansard)

⁹¹ The SSOs fall under the Ministry of Social and Family Development, while the CDCs are under the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Youth.

⁹² The NEA's estimated FY2014 operating budget is \$697m:
http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2014/download/29%20MEWR%202014.pdf p. 83

(inclusive of the CDCs) increased 46% from \$291m to \$424m.⁹³ In addition, the newly created Social Service Office Division (SSOD) has been allocated an operating budget of around \$44m.⁹⁴ These are not small sums. In view of the considerations outlined earlier regarding the CDCs' lack of value-add towards existing community bonding efforts on the part of the other PA agencies and movements, as well as their diminished social service role, the costs involved in running the CDCs should be subject to careful scrutiny for a more prudent allocation of resources, especially given the sums of money involved.

4D2.2 But so far no such rationalisation appears to have taken place. If we look further into the numbers, we see that over the past few years *both* the PA (excluding the CDCs) and the CDCs have seen increases in that portion of their allocated budgets relevant for our purposes. Between the Fiscal Years 2009 and 2012 (latest available PA figures), the PA's annual expenditure on non-financial assistance programmes increased from \$32m to \$50m,⁹⁵ while that for the CDCs went up from \$34m⁹⁶ to an estimated \$44m.⁹⁷ The same dual-increase pattern no doubt repeated itself with regard to staff costs (for more work requires more manpower), which between FY2009 and 2012 increased 50% from \$149m to \$223m for both the PA and the CDCs combined.⁹⁸ As such, the CDCs and PA together spent around \$320m in FY2012 for their manpower and non-financial assistance programme needs combined, up from \$225m in FY2009. If what the CDCs are currently doing (or not doing) can be done equally well if not better by other government agencies and organisations, then it needs to be asked if we should not be redirecting some of the monies currently allocated to the CDCs for other uses instead.

4D2.3 Another challenging area is the Mayor's salary. As mentioned earlier, the office of Mayor has been made equivalent to at least a Senior Parliamentary Secretary and at most to a Minister of State. Now individuals holding such Executive positions are necessarily MPs to begin with, and so have both executive and legislative responsibilities. There is therefore something of an incongruence in linking the Mayor's office with these positions, for the Mayor has neither formal executive nor legislative powers. Added to this the fact that all the Mayors wear multiple hats (the most 'bedecked' being Dr Teo Ho Pin⁹⁹), and so cannot possibly devote as much time and energy to their mayoral responsibilities than if they were less encumbered elsewhere. As such, the mayor's salary, easily several hundreds of thousands of dollars, stands at odds with the government's much vaunted principle of fiscal

⁹³ Revised estimates for FY2008 and FY2013:

http://www.mof.gov.sg/budget_2009/revenue_expenditure/attachment/MCYS_EE2009.pdf p. 56

http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2014/download/53%20MCCY%202014.pdf p. 189

⁹⁴ Under "ComCare and Social Support Programme"—Net decrease of \$32m + Increase of \$12m = \$44m

http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2014/download/23%20MSF%202014.pdf p. 56

⁹⁵ <http://online.flipbuilder.com/nvbl/mstp/#p=104> p.102 and <http://www.calameo.com/read/000485916ba3dc3fdf3aa> p.88

⁹⁶ <http://www.pa.gov.sg/media-files/about-us/annual-report/Financial-Report08-09.pdf> p.93

⁹⁷ <http://online.flipbuilder.com/nvbl/mstp/>

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* (Footnote 89)

⁹⁹ Mayor (Northwest District), Chairman (Holland-Bukit Panjang Town Council), MP (Bukit Panjang), and 5 other political and civic appointments. <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/mp/teo-ho-pin>

conservatism.

4D2.4 More fundamentally, the true effectiveness of the entire grassroots complex “needs to be reassessed in view of the massive resources that are injected into them at the taxpayers’ expense.”¹⁰⁰

4D2.5 In the next section, we look at local government in three other countries. Under what circumstances is democratic local government able to balance both the community and social good?

¹⁰⁰ Singh, B. *Ibid.* p. 81

5. Local Government Abroad

Japan

5.1 After the war, the Allied Occupation imposed a set of decentralising reforms on Japan's political system as a means of democratising the country. The 1947 constitution established the "principle of local autonomy" and guaranteed features such as the separation of local from national administration as well as the direct popular election of chief executives (governors and mayors) and assembly representatives¹⁰¹.

5.2 Although the central authority exerts overall administrative control, local governments possess significant power in influencing national policymaking. In the late 60s-early 70s, in response to the effects of Japan's rapid economic growth, many local governments turned their attention towards addressing the concerns of their constituencies. In the early 70s, many local initiatives (particularly on pollution), together with pressure from opposition parties and bureaucratic lobbying, forced the central government to execute similar programs. Today, it is the localities rather than the central government which hold the policy initiative¹⁰².

5.3 Unlike other advanced democracies, Japanese political parties share power with the bureaucracy and big business, and their national influence depends significantly on the amount of leverage they are able to enjoy at the local level. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) started out by establishing its power in relation to the national bureaucracy¹⁰³, canvassing the support of mayors and other municipal actors who, in their mutual consultations with the bureaucracy, would act on behalf of LDP politicians seeking re-election.

5.4 The strength of local governments and politicians in Japan is reflected in how, of late, they have become more independent of the major parties (LDP and DPJ)¹⁰⁴, to the extent that localities have even begun to use the LDP or parties in power to influence national administrative decisions¹⁰⁵ for their own benefit.

5.5 As the political and administrative heads of the municipalities, Japan's Mayors, who are directly elected, are invested with strong executive powers. They work with their locally elected assemblies, proposing and vetoing local acts.

¹⁰¹ Takeshi and Krauss, *Democracy in Japan*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989. p. 146

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 155

¹⁰³ Muramatsu and Iqbal. *Understanding Japanese Central-Local Government Relations: Perspectives, Models and Salient Characteristics*, p. 9

¹⁰⁴ Lipsky and Scheiner. *Japan Under the DPJ*, p.319

¹⁰⁵ Muramatsu and Iqbal, *Ibid.* p.14

5.6 Japanese mayors run for elections as independent candidates, with party endorsement only coming in once the formal campaign begins. It is not unusual to see popular mayors backed at the same time by the ruling party nationally and opposition parties locally. All this is testimony to the high degree of mayoral autonomy relative to partisan politics¹⁰⁶ and the other governmental players.

UK

5.7 Presently there are 326 municipal units in England, these are categorised both horizontally—metropolitan or non-metropolitan; and vertically—upper-tier (County) or lower-tier (District). Some are also single-tier units (unitary authorities). The vast majority of these units are run by councils led by a Council Leader (or mayor) elected by their fellow councillors, themselves elected by their constituents. This indirect mandate has been the traditional practice, and is still prevalent today. Only in 15, including Greater London, are they led by directly elected mayors¹⁰⁷, a legislative watershed brought about in 2000 by the Labour government. The councils are not permitted to do anything not explicitly authorised by Parliament (considered “*ultra vires*”)¹⁰⁸. As things stand, the councils are granted both the power to “promote economic, social and environmental well-being”¹⁰⁹ and to “do anything that individuals generally may do”¹¹⁰.

5.8 British local government has historically been torn between the centralising impetus of the state (the legacy of the Norman invaders) and the decentralised chaos of the pre-existing Anglo-Saxon communities. The evolution of local government in the UK up till modern times has been characterised as “reactive incrementalism” with “little strategic direction”. Although the Norman state did not bother about “the locals” unless things got so bad as to affect the metropolis (e.g. disease, riots, etc), the centralising drive from the centre saw the replacement of the more atomistic Anglo-Saxon social units with larger structures such as boroughs and counties. These shared the provision of local services and administration with a dizzying array of statutory, non-statutory and private providers.¹¹¹ It had to wait till the Victorian 19th century before local government was made more coherent and uniform through a series of legislations which formalised certain principles and processes.

5.9 The first mayors were the ceremonial heads of the borough councils in Norman times, councils comprising self-selecting Aldermen. Suffrage and a powerful mayorship were notions unheard of until the Victorian period, when the realities of rapid socio-economic development

¹⁰⁶ Toru Hashimoto, mayor of Osaka, established the Japan Restoration Party *after* becoming mayor

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.citymayors.com/mayors/british-mayors.html>

¹⁰⁸ Garrard, J. *Heads of the Local State: Mayors, Provosts and Burgomasters since 1800*. p 158. 2007, Ashgate

¹⁰⁹ The so-called “well-being” power. *Local Government Act, 2000*

¹¹⁰ A new “general power of competence”. *Localism Act, 2011*

¹¹¹ *Elected Mayors and City Leadership*. Summary report of the Third Warwick Commission, 2012. p. 16-19

induced legislation which created first, the “rate payer” and later the right for the rate-paying population to elect the “town” councillors responsible for managing local affairs.¹¹² However, that the mayor himself could wield power was turned into reality not as a product of legislation but through individual endeavour¹¹³, abetted of course by circumstance.

5.10 Hence, by and large, local government has always been subordinate to the central government, which over the past decades has tended to manipulate the former to suit its political agenda. The radical restructuring of local government based on the two-tier model in 1974 enabled the Conservative government to vest authority in the delivery of key services to those municipal classes whose political support it traditionally enjoyed (e.g. the non-metropolitan counties were given authority over education and social services)¹¹⁴. Likewise, in 1985, the Thatcher government abolished the Greater London and other Met County Councils (MCCs), thereby transforming these areas into “unitary authority areas”. It seems the MCCs, in particular the Greater London Council under Labour’s Ken Livingstone were proving too ‘troublesome’ for Mrs Thatcher and so had to go.¹¹⁵

5.11 Since New Labour’s legislative introduction of the elected mayor in 2000, in the hope that a dynamic mayoralty might restore interest in local democracy and provide a new leadership for London¹¹⁶ and other cities, there has been fierce debate in the UK on the merits of the office. Supporters have attributed its slow take-off among municipalities in the decade or so since, as well as the inevitable intellectual resistance, to (among other things) a general reactionary “disinclination” among the national political elite to delegate power to localities, which in turn reinforces public apathy¹¹⁷. Indeed, the results thus far among localities which had opted for the elected mayoralty do seem to speak in favour of the office (more on this later).

US

5.12 In contrast to the UK, a unitary state without a written constitution and in which powers granted to local government by Parliament may just as easily be taken away¹¹⁸, the US runs on a constitutional federal system, comprising the national, state and municipal tiers. Under this system of decentralised power, American democracy is more alive at the local level compared to its British counterpart (although this can be overstated).

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 18

¹¹³ Joseph Chamberlain, whose political manoeuvrings helped consolidate Liberal power in Birmingham, transformed the Mayorship from ceremonial head to political leader. *Ibid.* p. 18

¹¹⁴ Kavanagh, Moran, Jones and Norton. *Politics UK (4th Ed.)* p. 480-481. 2001, Pearson Education

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 482

¹¹⁶ Watts, D. *Understanding US/UK Politics.* p. 35. 2003, Manchester University Press

¹¹⁷ Leslie, C and Lodge, G. <http://www.citymayors.com/government/uk-elected-mayors-08.html>

¹¹⁸ Watts, D. *Ibid.* p. 170

5.13 The principle factor here is the legislative autonomy relative to the federal government that US municipalities enjoy (unlike in the UK); they are more beholden to State rather than to federal laws.¹¹⁹ Correspondingly, American mayors have traditionally had executive powers. Richard J Daley, perhaps the most successful mayor in US history, sat as Mayor of Chicago for six consecutive four-year terms beginning in 1955, dying in office in 1976. He oversaw a pragmatic municipal political system styled the “Machine”, which traded tangible benefits like jobs and patronage for votes, and eschewed interference in community “politics”, preferring to observe events as they unfolded and to subsequently lend support to the likely winners. Daley managed to combine political acumen with the ability to manage a big city, and as a result of his success he was able to command huge influence even at the state legislature level.¹²⁰

5.14 But Daley’s success was the result of a masterful “enabling” performance rather than any positive efforts in the way of enhancing local democracy and constructive political participation. With good reason, the leaderships of the vast majority of US municipalities are seen as “reactive” rather than progressive and proactive, and fall in line with, rather than resist or challenge, existing configurations of power and money dictated by the wealthy few¹²¹. Few are the mayors who dare to tread the straight and narrow, and their successors soon revert to the old ways. During his time as mayor of Rochester, NY from 1994 to 2005, William A. Johnson left an indelible mark on the city with his citizen-driven urban development programme based on a form of open and consultative governance that invited community participation and drove the city forward in a range of fields. Along the way, this immensely successful experiment in citizen empowerment also trod on a few toes in the local old-boys network. His successors dismantled his programs.¹²²

5.15 Another pattern that has become prominent since the 1980s with the emergence of so-called Reformers is a certain struggle between “Democracy” and “Technocracy”, or between “Politics” and “Administration”. Backed by a middle and upper-middle class demographic, the desire was to rid local affairs of “politics”, conceived as unproductive petty wrangling between narrowly self-interested groups, to be replaced by a cadre of “managers” and other strictly neutral administrators who would be responsible for ensuring the smooth and efficient delivery of local services.¹²³

5.16 But politics and technical administration need each other, and reality bears this out. In the 1970s Pete Wilson, the mayor of San Diego, held office in a council manager government (i.e. in which executive power is vested in the council manager, not the mayor). San Diego had just benefited from two decades of rapid but smooth growth. Much of the credit for this went, rightfully, to the council manager who had good strategies and leadership. However, once the

¹¹⁹ 10th Amendment to the US Constitution

¹²⁰ Dye, T.R. And MacManus, S.A. *Politics in States and Communities (11th Ed.)*, p. 368. 2003, Prentice Hall

¹²¹ That the US is a plutocracy, not a democracy, is argued by Holland, Nonini, Lutz, et. al in *Local Democracy Under Siege: Activism, Public Interests, and Private Politics*. p. 188-190. 2007, NYU Press

¹²² Favro, T. <http://www.citymayors.com/politics/us-rochester-election-2011.html>

¹²³ Dye, T.R. And MacManus, S.A. *Ibid.* p. 370.

population neared 700,000, the community debated if further growth should be had, and it was in this debate that Mayor Wilson, not the manager, emerged as the one most able to mediate between the contending factions. Pete Wilson later became US Senator and then Governor of California.¹²⁴

A Comparative Discussion

5.17 In the American and British models, as compared to the Japanese, there is less of a correlation between community and social good, given the essential cleavage between local and national governments. In both countries the performance of any given local government has little direct causal relation to its counterparts elsewhere and to the country as a whole.

5.18 The US federal system is such that the actions of individual localities are like falling trees in a huge jungle, which nobody hears (so to speak). The case of William A. Johnson, former mayor of Rochester, NY, whose participatory urban development scheme helped galvanize his community, often against the entrenched interests of the local elite, into much productive collective action—stands out precisely because the vast majority of the other municipal governments across the country are far less inspiring.¹²⁵ But this also demonstrates, of course, that American localities do have the means (in some sense) to take more radical control over their own fate, whatever the surrounding state of affairs.

5.19 Yet this is now an uphill task, for their struggle is not against the higher tiers of government, say, but the stratifying forces of plutocratic big business which penetrate and dominate all spheres of American life. More broadly, there is a mental crisis at hand, a certain “democra[tic] discontent”, characterized in part by the dissolution of the old moral fabric.¹²⁶ If local government is to fulfil its democratic promise, hearts and minds have to be won afresh.

5.20 In the UK the pre-eminence of central over local government means likewise that the social good owes more to the goings-on in Westminster and Whitehall than to what happens in the individual local councils. Yet although British local governments traditionally have not had the autonomy enjoyed by their American counterparts, the introduction of the elected mayor in 2000 seems to be a step in a new direction.

5.21 The elected mayors in the UK—though few in number—have pushed through some of the most innovative policies of the last decade, notably the congestion charge in London, but also in economic regeneration, focusing on areas like crime and skills, and inward investment. Some of the most decrepit localities have also seen complete turnarounds in their fortunes

¹²⁴ Dye, T.R. And MacManus, S.A. *Ibid.* p. 264.

¹²⁵ Favro, T. *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Sandel, M. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy.* p. 417. 1996, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Uni Press.

following their switch to an elected mayor.¹²⁷ The question moving forward thus seems to be how far Whitehall is willing to devolve more power to localities, and to what extent the British public will embrace the idea of a stronger, more accountable local government.¹²⁸

5.22 The Japanese situation is different. Here social good moves in tandem with community good. Despite the formal structure of decentralization, imposed by the Allied Occupation, it has been argued that Japan still remains an essentially singular state, with power vested in the traditional nexus between politicians, bureaucracy and big corporations (the “Iron Triangle”), and in which politicians are in fact the weakest link.¹²⁹ This blend of formal decentralization and essential centralization helps account for the curious phenomenon of Japanese localities being the main germinators and consultative partners of national policy—the prime example of this being the anti-pollution initiatives of the 1970s.

5.23 All three countries are instructive in their own way for Singapore. Japan shows that even in a country with an essentially centralised political culture, having a formal system of decentralised autonomous local government need not mean that politics and administration on both levels is compromised. If local and central governments meet as partners, social and community good can complement each other. Indeed the UK seems to be gradually moving towards such a balanced system (though in a more organic form). The promise shown by the elected mayoralty in the UK is also a good indication that the accountability which comes from a popular mandate gives local government a powerful boost.

5.24 A final point is that size does not matter. Luxembourg, a country about 3.5 times the size of Singapore but with a population a tenth of the latter’s,¹³⁰ has a staggering 118 non-overlapping municipalities, above which there are no higher strata of local government.¹³¹ This works out to an average municipality size of 22km², far smaller than Singapore’s average CDC size of 140km².

5.25 In our next and final section, we discuss the reasons for, and sketch the possibility of, implementing a system of democratic local government in Singapore.

¹²⁷ Leslie, C and Lodge, G. *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Bowen, R. *Japan’s Dysfunctional Democracy: The Liberal Democratic Party and Structural Corruption*. p. 50-51 2003, M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

¹³⁰ Size (2012) Luxembourg: 2,500km² vs Singapore: 700km². Population (2012) L: 0.53m vs S: 5.3m [Source: Google Search]

¹³¹ Article from the Council of Europe website: <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=889711&Site=COE>

6. Local Government for Singapore

A. Current Role of Local Government

6A.1 In an earlier section we asked: how do the CDCs constitute a means by which the state enlarges its power over the grassroots broadly defined, if they are seemingly redundant? If it were only a quantitative matter of enhancing the effectiveness of the existing agencies by way of technical support (say, by providing communication linkages between multiple parties), then this would not constitute any real gains in effective power, for it would then hit up against the limits of the capabilities of the local agencies themselves. An obvious parallel is how a firm (or country) cannot rely on increasing a single factor of production alone (say, labour) as a long term growth strategy. Sooner or later the qualitative limits (i.e. the production model) come down hard, like a sentry's debarring sword, on any future gains conceived along similar lines. Hence just as our fictional firm (or country) needs an overhaul of its production model in order to advance into new sustainable growth territory, so too is it required of our organisation that it helps to bring about changes in the local social dynamics conducive for the advancement of the interests of its underlying political agenda. But how are the CDCs able to play such a role?

6A.2 It might help if we first distinguish between the ostensible aims of the CDCs and what their real function is. Just looking at the twin public objectives of promoting social cohesion and social assistance administration, it is apparent enough that the CDCs are hardly indispensable. But we have mentioned also that their key advantage is in being able to serve as a network facilitator and a master coordinator of sorts. Now the crucial point here is that in setting up this or that network it is never a politically-neutral process. The reasons why a given network is made to comprise a particular set of agencies and not others, or why the network is made to operate in this way rather than that, are carefully worked out decisions borne out of essentially political considerations. This is not, however, to be understood in any Machiavellian sense—rather, in seeding deliberately designed operational linkages between various community-based agencies it is hoped first to induce, before hopefully eventually normalising, a certain desired course of social behaviour (on the part of those whom the network is intended to benefit) which as yet does not exist.

6A.3 People have desires they seek to satisfy. There are many possible ways in which the rules of engagement can be set for the arena in which people are to strive to attain their aspirations. What politics does is to set these rules in accordance with the prevailing political configuration, by building the terms of engagement into the very fabric of the institutional processes through which people are made to navigate as a means of attaining their aims. To the extent that participation through these channels can be socialised, there is a consolidation of political gain on the part of those credited with shaping and advocating for these processes. A prime example of such a process is that which goes by the name of Meritocracy, with all its attendant rules of engagement as built into its constituent network of public sector institutions (schools, government ministries, etc). What the CDCs are trying to do with their seeding of

local networks is really the same thing (i.e. the attempt to socialise specifically tailored lines of people-to-institution interaction) but on a smaller scale.

6A.4 Hence, the CDCs do in fact serve a vital role from the PAP's point of view. This is not in doing the heavy lifting or the flashy execution, but in establishing and sustaining specific people-to-institution patterns of engagement (insofar as these accord with the PAP agenda).¹³² That they are co-opted in many instances by other national institutions (e.g. NCSS) is beside the point. It is also clear why a political figure is needed to head them, for often political authority will have to be brought to bear upon stubborn bureaucratic impasses or inefficiencies (cf. disposal of fishball sticks along public walkways¹³³). As such it becomes easier to see why the CDCs constitute in themselves an additional incursion into the grassroots political space, despite being at the same time largely redundant with regard to their ostensible objectives.¹³⁴

6A.5 As such, the CDC mayors are politically the uniquely Singaporean equivalent of medieval functionaries assigned to the remoter corners of the kingdom in order to consolidate its rule there.

B. Recommended Role

6B.1 In an ideal system of local government, sufficient power is vested in the local political institution, with open and egalitarian channels for participation and consultation, such that enough people are motivated to partake in the decision-making process, in however minor a degree. Studies have shown that much of the public apathy towards local government in other countries tends to be due in large part to the reluctance of central governments to devolve enough power to the localities.¹³⁵ Merely instituting a process and structure for participation is insufficient if people do not see that their involvement counts for much, and who are therefore unwilling to be co-opted into a system of political (in a broad sense) bad faith.

6B.2 However, in our busy day and age it is not, despite the most ardent enthusiasm, realistic for ordinary people to directly engage in all aspects of local government. Just as at the national level, it will be necessary for residents to delegate the decision making task to a team

¹³² Someone will not fail to point out here that it is cynical (breathtakingly, even) to look to ascribe partisan political motives to all government policy initiatives. But this is to conflate two notions of politics: on the one hand it is the basic dynamic by which society organises itself (much as colour, for instance, is a basic fact of our visual reality); on the other we have the popular image of narrow, partisan sniping. There is no shred of social life which is immune to politics in the first sense. <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesinterviews/primeminister/2014/May/transcript-of-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-debate-on-president.html> (Accessed 15 June 2004)

¹³³ As described by PM Lee during his National Day Rally (2014) speech.

¹³⁴ According to Mr Chiam See Tong, "the PAP is relying on administrative devices [viz the CDCs] to keep itself in power... When they say bonding, it means bonding people with the PAP." <Mayors and the CDCs: Election strategy or radical political change?>, *The Straits Times*, 24 August 1996, p.30

¹³⁵ Ooi, G.L. *Town Councils in Singapore: Self-determination for Public Housing Estates*. p8. 1990. Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) occasional paper; no.4.

of individuals whose leader takes full responsibility. It must be noted though that unlike MPs, this person is not merely a representative but an authority with executive power, with whom the buck stops. He or she will be held accountable through the vote.

6B.3 As such, we recommend the following:

- i) To dissolve the existing CDCs in their current political form;
- ii) To replace them with Councils *led by popularly elected non-partisan mayors*. By non-partisanship we mean only that hustings will not be allowed to take place under any partisan banner. But there is also nothing to prohibit candidates from running who happen to belong to political parties and they need to declare this affiliation openly, knowing that they will function in a non-partisan manner, politically;
- iii) The PA is to cede all control of the existing grassroots organisations to the new Councils (i.e. the PA will fully relinquish its authority over the grassroots political space in favour of the new Councils);
- iv) Funding to these Councils to come from the government, with full discretion in the expenditure of these monies. The state shall not have a right to interfere or regulate in any way except for audit purposes.

6B.4 Anyone who can satisfy a set of very basic criteria (e.g. Singapore citizen/PR, no criminal record, etc) will be allowed to stand for election as mayor. The MCCY will screen the applicants, and reasons are to be given for rejections. Balloting can take place at community centres and schools, like in national elections. The top performing losing candidates will be inducted as Councillors, and similar to the Japanese system both Councillors and residents may eject the mayor with a vote of no-confidence.

6B.5 Apart from these 4 points, which in essence aim at removing the suffocating presence of the state at the local level so as to free up the space for pluralism (i.e. participation) to take root, the other political and state structures shall remain untouched. The Town Councils shall still function as they do, led by the locally elected MP. The social service sector shall hum along the way it has been doing, with the SSOs close at hand to help residents in need. However, the bureaucracy (NCSS, the social ministries, etc) will now have to deal direct with the Councils and not, as in the past, with the PA. It is inevitable, therefore, that the terms of engagement between state and society, currently still nebulous and murky, will finally have to be set down in more concrete terms in order to sustain this new paradigm of state-society relations.

6B.6 Under the above recommendations, the most conspicuous beneficiary will be civil

society (taken in the broad sense to include political parties), and in the longer run, society at large. The removal of most state regulatory restrictions governing various interest groups and vesting full discretionary funding authority in the hands of the Council will have local interest and advocacy groups rushing forth to try to gain a slice of the pie. But the funds though sizable are not unlimited and therefore how they are to be apportioned between all the competing groups will itself constitute, through the mechanisms of consultation, debate, and voting, the very processes of inclusive, participatory local politics which the current system of local government is very far from engendering. It is reasonable— and perhaps a tad hopeful—to expect that the average intelligent resident will also want to involve himself on at least a minimal level (i.e. attending meetings and voting) in this process and thereby do his part to keep the local political flame alive, even if for nothing else than the very self-interested reason that a substantial sum of money sits with the Councils (perhaps more than \$100m each), and given that these have come from his, the taxpayer's, pocket, it behoves him to take an interest in how it is spent.

6B.7 Participation, of course, will not be confined to just the interest and advocacy groups but also the welfare providers. Residents inclined towards that area who do not want to work with the VWOs will gravitate to the freedom offered by the Councils to help build and shape their own grassroots organisations, whose objectives and modus operandi are not subject to the dictates of a single bureaucratic entity.

6B.8 It is also worth considering the possible implications of the partisan political dynamics which may take shape under our proposed system. Candidates for mayor will be required to run under a non-partisan banner. This, however, neither stops them from being members of political parties nor even to espouse the ideas (i.e. relating to matters within the scope of the mayor's function), if any, of their parties. If the intention is to give free play to the voicing of ideas, then the incidental partisan political (and other) allegiances of individuals should not count against their right to participate alongside their fellow residents as full and equal members of the local grassroots scene. Ultimately, it is the ideas themselves which should stand accountable in the court of public opinion, and not the social attributes of those who profess them. But what if residents elect a mayor who is a member of a party different from that of the elected MP? Is this an acceptable state of affairs?

6B.9 Let us push this imaginary scenario to the extreme. During his campaign the mayor-elect had made no secret of his allegiance to certain ideas or principles promulgated by his party, and which he promised would feature strongly in his mayoralty (as far as applicable) should he be elected. He had even gone so far as to criticise the present MP for certain alleged oversights or shortcomings in the latter's handling of Town Council affairs, thereby infusing his campaign with a distinct partisan political undertone. It is plausible that the residents voted the mayor-elect in on partisan lines, seeing that this was a tightly contested ward which previously saw the elected MP winning office by a very narrow margin (i.e. shift in the swing vote working in favour of the mayor-elect). What happens now? Will the local community suffer as a result of the clash of partisan allegiances between the mayor and the MP?

6B.10 We do not think so, for there is unlikely to be room for any headlong partisan clash. In the first place it must be borne in mind that these new Councils have to do only with local social affairs, and again only in those areas in which they have a mandate to operate. The Councils do not have jurisdiction over those social functions best left to the state, whether in their centralised (e.g. education, health) or decentralised (SSOs, MSO) forms. There is therefore little scope for a direct partisan clash insofar as this arises from disagreement over *national* policy formulation. Insofar as there is tension between the mayor and the MP, the dynamic here should be an oblique one obtaining at second-hand, one which does not centre upon a direct tussle over material interests but which rather calls into question each side's broader socio-political assumptions or philosophies.

6B.11 Let's assume the mayor in our present scenario belongs to an opposition party with liberal leanings. Under his term of office his support for fringe activist groups (in his district) sparks heated controversy among residents. The elected MP mumbles dark words in parliament on the perils of loosening controls within civil society and their threat to social cohesion, etc. Fast forward another two years: our district is still riven with controversy, but there is a distinct sense that people there are more engaged in community affairs than their more sedate peers elsewhere. Self-organising welfare activity is on the rise. A buoyant community spirit appears to be taking shape. Here without a doubt there is tension between the mayor and the MP, but this is a healthy non-destructive tension which induces introspection and self-renewal. It is a tension arising from the actual putting into play—at a microcosmic level—of competing practices, whose results serve either to reinforce or undermine the broader existing paradigms, with consequences for the wider political arena. Our proposed arrangement provides an ideal test-bed for political philosophies and worldviews concerning the essence of human nature. A particular conception of the world and of human nature is used by the state to justify the structure of our current political system. But for the sake of political progress this conception needs to be examined in the light of competing alternatives instead of being continually taken as the gospel truth.

6B.12 Another worry might arise to the effect that highly capable people are needed to staff these Councils and how are we going to find enough of such people? The immediate response would be, first, that the number of people needed will not be very large, since the Councils are not taking over the functions of the entire bureaucracy but only that portion which pertains to the heartbeat of civil society and the grassroots. All those other areas which are the rightful domain of the state (education, health, etc) will remain with the state. The next response would be that perhaps “highly capable” is not the quality being sought for here, since what will be key for the Councils will not be their ability to plan and to tweak and to fine-tune so much as being able to canvass, reconcile and mediate. In other words— *political ability*. This is a quality very much in short supply in Singapore, but hardly surprising given the general political environment. We mentioned the ideas of George Yeo and De Tocqueville—the one has advocated more than 20 years ago for the need for a robust civil society in Singapore, that space between the family and the state so crucial as a glue to keep society together; the other has eulogised local participatory democracy as an indispensable training ground for the citizen in his political duties as a member of the state. The Councils will go some way towards fulfilling both these ideas, essential for the future of the country.

6B.13 In all this the elected mayors will have an instrumental role to play. Their prominence does not come simply from being the leaders of their Councils but as elected persons with the final authority (and hence accountability) to direct and allocate funding for all forms of participative grassroots and civil society activity within their districts, according to the popular will. It is the hope that, unlike the current Town Council chairmen and CDC mayors, they shall be the face of lively and vigorously-involved communities, and a more cohesive nation.

6B.14 In the end, it is time we discarded the crippling notion that greater pluralism of an autonomous nature will start us on a slippery slope to social and then national disintegration, for “No artificially sustained polity can hold for long, nor will a state of fragmentation fail eventually to induce a fresh and improved unity”¹³⁶.

¹³⁶ Quotation from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Chapter 1: “话说天下大势，分久必合，合久必分”