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WILL PRAGMATISIM UNDERMINE SINGAPORE'S NATIONAL IDENTITY?

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The Singapore model of development and governance has often been described and celebrated as pragmatic. In this talk, Professor Kenneth Paul Tan will discuss the ways in which the Singaporean nation-building project has been served by pragmatism, how it can be undermined by a debased form of pragmatism, and what dystopian futures we might expect if that happens.

TIME (MIN)	
0:00 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Thank you Vidya for that very very kind and I have to say generous introduction. Thank you also for making reference to my 12-page CV, which is of course the abridged version of my CV. Thanks it's such a pleasure to be here this afternoon and to talk about pragmatism which is something I've given quite a bit of thought to over the years. And it's come together, I think in more recent years for me in the writings that I've been producing more recently.
0:51 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And I want to just kind of draw your attention to some of them just as a way of framing how I've come to think about pragmatism. So I have a book that was published just last year. It's called *Singapore Identity Brand Power*. And in this book I discuss how nation building, the act of, the exercise of building a national identity connects profoundly with the exercise of creating a brand. So nation building as a means of developing an identity in spite of the very traditional cleavages that we see in Singapore surrounding race, language, religion, but also some of the new differences and cleavages that are emerging as a result of more profound insertions into globalization, such as inequalities to do with material access, inequalities to do with ideology, liberal, conservative, secular, religious and so on so forth. All these diverse changes still need to be managed, when we think about nation building. So this book thinks about nation building and how that connects to the exercise of developing an external face, the branding exercise. What do we look like as a city as a nation to the rest of the world. And the book then connects these two exercises of identity formation with soft power. What sort of power does Singapore wield, in the international environment? And that is significant because we are a small state. And we know that the world we live in is often described as particularly dangerous for small states that basically have to attend to big power politics, the rivalries that happen well beyond our shores. What happens between China and India for instance has a very profound

	impact on the space that we have to play with. So building an identity for an internal consumption, building an identity for an external consumption have a lot to do with the kinds of attractiveness, efforts in being attractive to the rest of the world, useful to the rest of the world in ways that then allow Singapore to act opportunistically in order to preserve itself in the very first instance but also to prosper where opportunities present themselves. So this book kind of connects these different exercises and finds very clear connections between them. A year before that I had written another book called *Governing Global City Singapore.* And in that book I discussed how the two you might say schizophrenic aspects of Singapore, the fact that it is both a nation state as well as a global city, creates a variety of contradictions and tensions that on the one hand produce the conditions for being dynamic, for always rethinking, always re-exploring, always remaking. But on the other hand, these tensions and contradictions also create the conditions for stasis, for the lack of unity, lack of coherence. And it is these kinds of tensions that I explore in the book.
4:31 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	You bring these two books together as I have done in the last year or so and we start to wonder about what sort of future Singapore is headed for. We have these exercises that are still ongoing, building that identity, that national identity, building a brand for external consumption, tending to the internal fabric, external face, and then thinking about Singapore's place in the world and all the while being separated or being impacted by a very fundamental contradiction between being a nation and being a global city. So what sort of future does Singapore have in that context? And as I think about Singapore's future, it's very difficult to think about that without considering the role of the state. And of course the state that we have in Singapore is a strong one right, strong in many respects.
5:26 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	We might think of the state as strong in terms of at least these three things. That it is a clean government. Relatively clean government that it is elite in the sense of being meritocratic.
5:50 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	The capacity to attract talent, to attract the best minds and so on and so forth in order to populate the leadership positions in the public service, and a state that is able to act outside of received wisdoms and dogmas, a pragmatic state. So you might think of these qualities as exemplifying the kind of state that Singapore has seen over the last decades and the success that Singapore has also enjoyed as a result of it. And that part of the story, I think is real and worth celebrating and worth being optimistic about. I think is very important when we think about future prospects to be optimistic, to have a sense that there are good futures that we can look forward to but have to work very hard for. But it's also very important I think, not to be overcome by too much optimism and to spend some of our efforts towards figuring out what could go wrong. So I think it is our responsibility as well to think about dystopian futures for Singapore. What could go badly wrong for us, right? What sort of choices might we make today which could produce futures that we would regret? What are the signals? What are the drivers? What are the trends that we observe today, which if we ignored them, we would actually end up in a bad place. So I think it is our responsibility

	to think about these bad futures and that I think is a more solid way of building resilience for the future.
7:28 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	But we do have accounts, narratives, stories, that we tell ourselves in order to first of all give us a sense of purpose but also to excite us about a possible future that we might desire. The mother of all these stories of course is the Singapore story, right? Our national narrative and this is a narrative that has been shaped and reshaped, but on the whole has remained rather stable over these decades and they play out regularly in national rituals such as the National Day Parade. We see in the outlines of this story, a clear reference to the place of leadership. Leadership as it relates to ceremonial, symbolic, inspirational aspects, but also leadership as it relates to the actual doing of nation building, national development, tending to the economy, building the city, defending that city and so on and so forth. So a very strong emphasis on leadership as a major factor in Singapore's survival and success.
8:45 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	We also see very clearly, the place of vulnerability, the anxiety that comes to us today from that existential moment of independence, the trauma of independence, at which point we question our viability as a nation state. So all of that trauma is not forgotten but constantly played and replayed in the rituals of the present. But we also tell ourselves in these celebratory moments that we have the capacity, the hardware, the software, whatever you want to call it, to overcome these dangers or at least to mitigate them.
9:26 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Another part of the story refers to another source of danger, potentially, which is the internal diversity. We think of our society as being diverse but diverse in a very very particular way. Often, mainly to do with race and very particular categories of race and very particular proportions of that category of race and we call it multiracialism. And it becomes a source of fear, on the one hand, but it also, as you can see from depictions like this becomes a source of celebration. So fear because it keeps us on our toes and possibly if you are of a more critical, if you're more critical, you might think that that's a way also of convincing Singaporeans that there is a need for a very strong state in order to protect us from ourselves. So you have the fear narrative, but you also have the sense that variety gives us vibrancy in our culture. And if you're economically minded, it also becomes the resources for tourism in such things as that.
10:35 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	We see these depictions of multiracialism played out in a very hyphenated form. That is to say, we say on the one hand that we want Malays to be Malay. We want Chinese to be Chinese. We want Indians to be Indians and we want the others to be other. And to practice all the habits of their culture, or the customs, and the traditions in order to secure its authenticity, if you like. But we hyphenate these ethnic practices and spaces with this sense in which we also can dance together. That we are capable of integrating into something beyond these national identities, we come together and create a kind of national fabric, if you like. So this never resolving tension between the ethnic and the national.

	And we celebrate that as a source of dynamism. We express it in the pledges that we say, sometimes more enthusiastically than others. We sing about it in anthems. And in more popular manifestations of anthems, and we also recognize that part of this assertion of national identity involves these heightened emotions. Call it the orgasmic quality of patriotism for example which we readily weave into our rituals.
12:32 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	That's the old part of the story, but we can see that this national narrative, the Singapore story, is slowly adjusting over time. It's paying more heed for example to the next generation and the aspirations of younger Singaporeans who may think differently. And while at one time it might have been a source of anxiety that younger Singaporeans don't understand the vulnerabilities, the challenges of Singapore, and are selfish, and so on and so forth, today I think there is a greater realisation that that's also the source of new dreaming. So the Singapore story is starting to embrace also the sense in which the current generation is a product of an earlier generation's dreaming, and the current generation should also be dreaming about future generations and so on. So there is a softening, I suppose, of the story and it is also coming to include now, the kinds of issues that Lee Kuan Yew's style of hard politics would have ignored somewhat in the past. For instance, recognising that there are weaker, more vulnerable, more marginal, more marginalised, more minoritised groups within our society that require help. But the hardness of the Singapore story continues to intrude into this account. So whilst there are people in our midst who need help, the story is still about how they need to be strengthened so that they can be not dependent on others, that they can support themselves, that they can be resilient, that they can bounce back. So it is still that sort of hard story about being responsible for yourself and basically standing up.
14:16 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So out of this widening diversity, more complex diversity, we still insist that there is a narrative. Perhaps these days the narrative is not a single unitary top-down singularly-structured narrative, but one that consists of multiple stories that are woven together into a super national narrative. In spite of all this diversity so we say this is the fabric of our existence and that becomes the basis of home, and that home we call Singapore.
14:59 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So the broad outlines are still there. When we look at the efforts to present an outward face, the video campaigns of the Economic Development Board for instance or of the Tourism Board, we see very similar modulations of these stories, that the account of vulnerability, not being sure about whether we can succeed, and survive moments of anguish.

15:26 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And then, very quickly, an account of how we overcame. So visible signs of corporate success, the airlines, urban development, more recently science technology, biotechnology, and even more recently youthful achievements in the areas of gaming, and also other aspects of achievement that we didn't in the past take a lot of interest in, sports for instance, lifestyle, fun.
16:06 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	But always anchored to something called home. Increasingly, the product of nostalgia. So it's the parades that we celebrate about ourselves. It's the videos that we present to the rest of the world so that they will invest in Singapore, come and live in Singapore. But it's also the rest of the world presenting Singapore to itself. So Nas comes and is astonished at how wonderful this place is, and makes a video that he calls with no sense of irony, the nearly almost perfect country. Singapore the almost perfect country which gets many Singaporeans upset. Which is very very interesting.
16:52 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So you have these stories now of Singapore. The challenges it has had to face, the successes it has achieved. But the success is fragile. And all the while whether it's explicit or implicit, is the role of the state. The strong state and the principles that undergird its practice. So I've written a lot about the state and corruption, the state and meritocracy.
17:24 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And I'm starting now to think a bit more about the state and pragmatism and that's what I'd like to get us to think about more systematically today. So what does pragmatism really mean? It can mean a whole bunch of things for those of us who are philosophers, who are familiar with pragmatism will know that it is an extremely contested concept. But when you look at specifically how this term has been used in Singapore as I've done looking at speeches, and press releases, and parliamentary justifications for policy, they more or less fall into these categories.
18:00 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	The most basic of which I think is this idea that to be pragmatic is to not be tied or wedded to any large dogmas, ideologies or moral frameworks. That one is free of having to be capitalists, or having to be socialist, or having to be Christian, or having to be secular in the sense of an ideological position. So an easy way of thinking about this I suppose, is to imagine a journey. And one would be most pragmatic if in this journey one was open, one were open to any destination, whatever the route might be that best takes you to that destination. And the conditions of travel which one would be open to according to whatever actually was the case when one embarked on that travel. So a very pragmatic mindset would involve just being really open to that journey, and not knowing where we really want to go. But kind of feeling our way with each step and making judgements with each step about where we might want to go. You might think of that in the case of a nation, as being about a journey a nation takes, where the goals might be not so well determined. Still fairly open. The assumptions about being a nation and the space in which that nation occupies and the methods of achieving the nation's goals, are still open to discussion,

	deliberation, consideration. For the most part though in Singapore, pragmatism doesn't mean that the assumptions are still open-ended. We still make very clear assumptions about what it is to be Singapore and we say for instance that we are essentially vulnerable. There's no two ways about that. People are essentially individualistic, they are selfish, they're capable of very dangerous things and in order to contain the dangers that come from selfish individuals and sometimes hostile geopolitical environment we need a strong state to corral people together and to move them in suitable directions. And that strong state is not just made up of strong people but made up of talented individuals or very particular skills. So those assumptions are not really open for discussion. So when we say Singapore is pragmatic, it's not with a view to questioning these particular assumptions. They are sacred cows. Whether we care to admit it or not. Over time, we've also come to embrace certain goals that are not really available for questioning or reconsideration. Our goals have, in many ways come down to economic growth and though that may be not the only national goal for Singapore, there are other competing goals. Economic growth certainly is the preeminent, predominant, goal that cannot be compromised. So when we think about pragmatism in Singapore especially today, assumptions are fixed. The goals are more or less fixed and perhaps we might say it's a question of figuring what the techniques might be. How do you achieve economic growth? And there's a variety of ways that you might do this. Our decisions are not based on ideology. That's what we might say. But if we thought about it more carefully, we realise that we've made this journey many times and the more often you make a journey, the more you're convinced you are of how to get to particular destinations. And if we like the destination, we want to continue arriving at the same destination. So you might say, that Singapore has become very accustomed to taking a journey based on certain understandings of what this journey entails and based on the expectation that we will always arrive at economic growth. And also based on the idea that there are very particular ways by which we will arrive at those goals. Success formulas. So things that have worked in the past worked very well and because they worked very well in the past, we kind of are less motivated to think differently. How about an alternative path? How about taking a path less travelled? We don't want to do that. So, what I'm saying I guess is that while pragmatism can still be admired for the way that it liberates us ideological dogmatic strictures about how to get to a place, over time it starts to degenerate and we end up with a thoughtless pragmatism, a pragmatism of habit. We simply keep doing the same things because that's how we've always done it and it always seems to have produced the kinds of outcomes that we value and we don't dare, I mean at one level maybe we're too lazy, to think differently and at another level maybe we don't dare to think differently.
23:34 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	What I would like to think about more in the coming years is how could we rethink or reclaim pragmatism, so that it's not a thoughtless here and now practice. But it's still an open-minded process, which requires us to use our intelligence, to use our judgment. A thoughtful pragmatism. A pragmatism which is practiced because we know how to deal with many maps because we know how to deal with many instruments that help us to see far and wide. Into

	the distance, into the future. We know how to deal with multiple compasses, moral, ethical political, aesthetic compasses, and what to do when we are faced with profoundly perplexing situations. What to do when we see multiple signs along the road, some of which are conflicting? How do we make sense of that and the capacity to weigh and balance out different perspectives? I think these capacities are very easily lost when we become vulgar in our pragmatism, when we resort to habitual thinking and habitual acting.
24:47 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So that's one aspect of pragmatism, the non-dogmatic aspect that can very quickly degenerate into a dogma of its own. So I'll very quickly go through the others and show you how, what starts off as very worthy, can easily degrade into something which you would not recognize as pragmatic. So, one aspect of pragmatism in Singapore is this impatience with theorisation and philosophy and so on and so forth because the People's Action Party. So it's about acting, it's about doing. But, you know that sort of can contribute to or maybe comes from an attitude of dismissiveness towards people like philosophers or academics or artists who think it is important to consider and to reconsider and to think about fine distinctions and how they matter.
25:44 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And to condemn, consign, maybe imprison, bad choice of words perhaps, imprison them in ivory towers as useless people at best amusing. So you end up with a kind of a macho culture that is intolerant of critical thinking, critical theory, certainly. Now, a third way that you can think about pragmatism is to think in terms of best practices right. So the thinking in Singapore has for the longest time been, we've got problems but other places have also got problems and other people have solved their problems in their particular ways. So rather than reinvent the wheel, we should go and learn from other people and sort of adapt what they have done in their contexts intelligently in our contexts.
26:36 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And basically leapfrog over all the problems as we solve our problems. So there's nothing wrong with that. I think there's something very efficient and perhaps even very effective and impactful about doing that. The problem though comes when it starts to contribute to an attitude of impatience for quick results. We start to want to see results now. Right. Think of it this way, officers who are appraised every year need to show something every year right. Are they likely to put aside their energy and time to invest in something that may only yield very important results in five years' time, in ten years' time? Maybe if they're really generous. But for the most part, in a situation of hyper competitiveness, people aren't going to do that because somebody else is going to get the credit for what they invested in today. So you're going to have these very short cycles of very quick results and impatience. Leaders are going to work their people hard. Regardless of what that does to their dignity. Regardless what it does to their well-being, it doesn't matter if they sleep the shortest hours in the world. Or if they work the longest hours in the world or if we learn that there are high rates of depression in the society or if we learn that suicide is something not to take too lightly, it doesn't matter because we want results and we want it now. That could be one of the perversions I think, that comes out from this impatience. Also, impatience sometimes points to this way in which we tend not to be as interested in developing local capacity because it

	takes time. It takes patience. It takes nuance. We would rather buy ready-made success, is the instant tree idea. If we were planting a garden, better to import fully grown trees and plant them into that garden and you know you have your garden ready rather than grow seedlings over time. So, if you kind of put all this together and brought it to a certain extreme, what you end up having is a Singapore that's hollowed out. It's a Singapore that's only concerned about results even if it means killing off the people within the place, even if it means simply inviting sojourners, people who will come and go just as easily, but they bring certain instant results. This is not the same sort of argument that xenophobe, people that are xenophobic make, but it's an argument about what do you do to grow the resources and the people that you actually have here. And that's something that requires patience which pragmatism in its worst manifestation lacks.
29:40 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Now another way in which we in Singapore think about pragmatic is actually to think about it as a realist. And here, it's about saying some things are just unchangeable. We cannot change those things therefore don't try. Instead work around them. Don't bang your head against the wall because you know your head will break, the wall won't. Work around it. So, some of the things we often say include the way human nature is a particular thing. That we are all self-interested, we are selfish, we're greedy at heart and we're incapable of generosity. If those things were true then of course, you would come to the conclusion that any kind of state welfare, comprehensive state welfare, will not work because people will abuse welfare, and others who have to pay taxes will be unhappy to do so because nobody is generous that way. Going even further if we believe that humankind is such that there is no place for generosity, then when somebody is generous, when somebody acts altruistically, or acts with compassion and empathy, we immediately become suspicious of that person. He must have an agenda. The tragedy in all of this is yes, there are some people, may be many people who are greedy and there are many people who are anything but generous. But are also plenty of people who aren't these things. But the tragedy is that when we operate in the assumption that that's how human beings are, it becomes self-fulfilling. We become the hell that we create. So that's human nature. It's also true of such things as race for instance. Where we insist that race is an eternal thing. We cannot get over race in our nation building exercise. It is biological, is not culturally manipulable. And so don't even try because people are more attached to their race than they are to the national identity. And that kind of tells us, that kind of explains really the sort of claims that are often made about how Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister for instance. And again the tragedy is, even if that were true to some degree, it becomes true in all cases because we operate as if it were true. So we make it true.
32:20 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And that this realist perspective stops us from being transformative. Stops us from evolving, becoming better things. It's a real tragedy because Singapore got to where we are today because we were transformative. When people say, you look at our propaganda, we even say that. When people say we couldn't

	make it, we made it. But now it's saying the opposite. We're saying don't change something that you can't change. There's a strong tension there.
32:50 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Okay, and then the concern with tangible things, cost-benefit analysis is about calculating costs and benefits and things that you can count. But what about things that don't have immediate numerical value or economic value such things as social capital, trust, community. How about things that have heritage value, that have cultural value, artistic value or spiritual value? These things are difficult to build into a cost-benefit analysis. When they don't appear in our calculations, we very readily destroy them if there is a trade-off between those values and economic values. So the city changes very rapidly with very little care for things that have non-economic value. That's the worse instance. And one I guess simpler way of saying it is we just become more materialistic. We focus on money and we measure all things according to money. And we think that all things work as markets work. And if all things reduce to these ways of thinking, it's just pure vulgarization, the world that we live in is vulgarized, it's vulgar existence and surely we could hope to live in something better than that.
34:18 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Also, we often think of pragmatism in the very managerial sense. For instance, the focus on results often means that we try to measure these results. And there's nothing wrong with that because we want to be accountable. If we're really serious about results, we want to able to say here are the signs that we've achieved those results. Hence the birth of KPIs, key performance indicators. Now the problem is when we become so obsessed with key performance indicators, the KPIs become fetishes and we lose sight of why they were important in the first place. Worse still, we start to consider KPIs above all else. And when our primary purpose is to serve the benefit of humanity, there's a very real sense in which we don't only reduce our perspectives to some numerical achievement, we also reduce the human being to these numbers and this is really what dehumanization is about. And that I think is what evil is about. Evil is when we are incapable of thinking and acting as humans with humans, about humans.
35:41 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Okay, finally economic growth. I want to say also that especially since the 90s, the focus has really been on growth and the ways in which growth can be achieved in a highly capitalized, globalized environment. So pragmatism actually becomes another way of saying market-driven policies that deliver economic growth for global cities. But we don't say that because it still has a negative resonance to it. So we say pragmatism. And if that were true then pragmatism becomes a fig leaf that disguises what is embarrassing to us, which is a kind of blind obedience to capitalists, exploitation, elitism, preserving the status quo, considerations of power and then the earlier inherited anxieties, risk aversion and conservative thinking that undergirds that. So in this case, ironically pragmatism is the new ideology in Singapore.

36:54 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Now to talk about how pragmatism plays out in these three aspects. So let's begin with multiracialism. There many things one can say of course about multiracialism, and Singapore is sophisticated about the way we think about culture. That is absolutely true but there are aspects of it that when we isolate, these aspects raise questions. For instance, the way that we have reduced a cultural richness and variety to a very simple four-part model of harmony, which has been the way we think about society for decades.
37:40 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Including the most recent, and it's very purposeful, it is very constructive and you might say it's important because it helps to stabilize something that is very dynamic. It helps us to, kind of understand something that is very complex by simplifying it. And there's some value to that, but there's a problem though when we simplify society too much.
38:07 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And we limit our understanding of that society too much to be simple models that we produce. And about 10 years ago, I produced a book on cinema and television in Singapore. And in some of these chapters, I wrote about how you found racial depictions. Very stereotypical depictions of the different racial groups, people in the films, art films as well as popular films as well as the TV sitcoms and dramas. And most interesting of course with stereotypes, is that they at one level reflect the hierarchy of power in society, the dynamics that come out of this hierarchy of power. But not only do they reflect it, they also go back to reinforce it. So there's something that in the worst cases, is very insidious about very innocent things. Like what you watch on television is insidious because it can reinforce some of the ways that we regard one another and normalize them. And what's tragic about that is we are good people. But we behave sometimes unknowingly in ways that actually harm and hurt others and we don't intend that. But having too simple a model of society can encourage these kinds of stereotypical presentations.
39:42 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And it goes beyond that of course. The way we do our policy. The way we talk about leadership. What are we ready for, can a non-Chinese president win on her own volition. The way we talk about these thing reinforces some of the prejudices that we have about our multiracialism.
40:08 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And of course, most recently Brown Face creates a situation where minority feel victimized and hurt and offended by this and then fascinatingly, many in the majority felt offended and hurt by the minority feeling offended and hurt. And that's interesting. But it's also an opportunity for us to ask questions that we haven't been asking enough of because we kept thinking about our society as being just made up of Chinese, Malays, Indians and others in the right proportion.

40:43 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Okay, so that's multiracialism. Let's talk about meritocracy. I've always felt that meritocracy in its ideal formulation and in the earliest of Singapore's independence was not a bad thing because we did exist in conditions of vulnerability. There was a real sense of scarcity including scarcity of talent, leadership talents. So what do you do when you don't have enough of things? You make sure that you make the best use of what you do have. A meritocracy in its ideal formulation can do that. Because if you reward people for working hard, for having the kinds of qualities that you admire and you think will make for good leaders. And if you observe that they have delivered results, and you reward them, it will not only incentivise the right people to do the right things in your society, it will also kind of indicate what is important in our society for people to work towards. Encourages people to do better.
42:00 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So there's a certain kind of efficiency, effectiveness, you might think of it in capitalist terms that serves the purposes of a society with scarce resources. But the beauty of meritocracy is that it balances those considerations with opportunity. That also important in meritocracy is making opportunities available to everyone. So relatively equal opportunities. And at one level this is about maximising the pool of talent that you have. If more people can compete in your social game, then you have access to more talent. At one level it's just that. But perhaps in a more important level, it's about giving people the opportunity to participate to play the game and to win if they did well. And if people who did well even from humble backgrounds can do well in Singapore, and people who don't do well because they didn't try hard enough or even if they succeeded in the beginning and have to move. If that's the kind of society we live in, then probably that's kind of indication that it's a fair society. And people will feel, can feel that they are being dealt with fairly by the system. That therefore can be the basis of a cohesive society. It can even be the basis of resilience. But for all of these to happen, I think we do need to have enough social mobility. Those who try hard, those who have good qualities that we value, must be able to go up to the top and those who are the top must move aside for those coming up if they don't continue to do well. I think that may have just been a fairly accurate description of Singapore in the earlier years. I fear it's probably not a very good description of Singapore in more recent years. Where inequality, material inequality in particular, has made it much harder for people at the bottom to rise to the top, much greater distance to the starting point and many obstacles to be crossed before you even get there. So with this kind of inequality that we're seeing in Singapore, the prospect of social mobility is going to be harder and harder. What you're going to end up seeing is more and more people at the bottom who are detached from the system, and the belief in the system, or the faith in the system. And then people at the top who become more and more confirmed in their beliefs about their superiority, focused on rewarding themselves, on being codified in such a way that it defines what the values of Singapore are.

44:48 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And you know once you have this, you got the recipe for populism of the worst kind. Not the good kind of populism. Finally, I want to say something about humanity. And you know when we get more vulgar and thoughtless in our pragmatism, we really stay at this left end of the screen. This is where we are, concerns about economy, material benefit, concerns about being looked after, concerns about safety, not wanting to be active but to be passive recipients. There's an infantilization that evolves as we become more transactional in our culture. Transactional in a sense that it's just about an exchange. I get something, I give you something so that I may get something in return. Leadership also can be configured that way. I vote in order that I may get material benefit, safety and so on.
45:52 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Whereas if you start to be more transformational, move away from the vulgar pragmatism. You start to pay attention to such things as being heroic in our ambitions, in our expectations of ourselves and our community and our society. Wanting to take bold steps. We start to see ourselves not as a collection of selfish individuals, but as people who are profoundly interdependent on one another. And in that interdependency, some kind of humility, some kind of empathy for one another. And out of conditions of perplexity, we can in that bold and empathetic way, come up with narratives that can inspire more of us than less of us. And I think that forms the basis of a transformational culture, transformational leadership. Which is very easy to lose when we become too obsessed with pragmatism in its vulgar formulation.
47:12 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So yes, pragmatism is good. It's brought us to success in many respects in our nation-building efforts but the thoughtless form of pragmatism creates these kinds of decay, which will then come back and affect our prospect going into the future. Let me now end by saying what this could mean for leadership in government and politics. And this is of course taking these ideas to the extreme. This is what could happen.
47:44 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So if we become increasingly vulgar in the practice of pragmatism, our government will start to just continue to focus on just doing rather than thinking, talking or discussing. You will continue to feel that if something is working reasonably well let's not change it very much. So more of the same unless it's really broke. And of course, we never perceive things until it's too late. We never perceive that something needs to be repaired until it's too late. And then to think in all of this that alternative views are not constructive, but in fact obstructionists to the agenda of the State. So it's a kind of ego, a State ego that says if you think differently you are obstructing our purpose, our agenda.
48:37 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	And to then demand consensus not by careful cultivation and building of consensus, and agreement to debate and discussion and good faith, but by enforcing it in a number of ways for those whose ideas are too difficult, too different, too insistent. And you criminalize, you exile, you demonize. For those ideas that are different but not so dangerous, you don't squash them, but you

	put them up for display superficially as a mark of magnanimity, as a mark of renaissance society. Academic freedom for example is just the right kind of space for showing, for demonstrating alternative thought. Safe space. But for the more pliable you co-opt. And you bring those who have changed their minds, those whose minds can be changed back into the system, put them in this fast action, we must get results quickly, make this place more and more hyper-competitive, punish people for failure. And I mean part of the punishment of course has to do with very high salary. So if you make a mistake you're going to lose a very good job, you're going to lose a very high salary. So people aren't going to want to make mistakes thinking about career. Most of the time.
50:05 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Which means that in order not to make mistakes, you want to retain the status quo. Be part of that mindset that supports and maintains the status quo. And any sort of change is incremental at best. There you are, you have groupthink and with groupthink, how are we going to deal with these three creatures?
50:27 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	What are they? And here I borrow from Peter Ho's work. Peter Ho was at one time the head of Singapore's civil service. And he said that there's probably three animals that we have to pay attention to in Singapore. We have to pay attention to the sacred cow from the past, those things that have worked very well. But even if we need to slaughter them today because they don't work so well today, or they might actually be dangerous today, we won't do it because it's sacred. So we have to pay attention to the sacred cows. We have to pay attention to the second thing, which is the black elephant. Peter Ho says that the black elephant is like the elephant in the room. Big, foreboding but nobody sees it, just feels it. The black elephant however is different in the sense that we all see it. We know it's there but nobody wants to talk about it. Nobody wants to acknowledge the existence. Nobody wants to do anything about it. So we can't even deal with black elephants in the room with our groupthink, how on earth are we going to deal with the black swans that are difficult to anticipate, sometimes very difficult to expect, but will happen more and more frequently in our future. So let me end there. Thank you.
52:00 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So I think there's time for questions. If you have any or views that you'd like to share. I'd be more than happy to give you a platform. Yes, please.
52:22 (Audience)	Hi, my name is James. I just have a quick question. A lot of us have called the government out of touch. Perhaps lacking in leadership or too high in the ivory towers. But in today's talk, you have framed it within the context of pragmatism. And it seems like it's a very safe way to say that this is what we are doing because we need to be practical. Over the years pragmatism has been the trump card, but now that the world has been changing and people are perhaps more dissatisfied, my question is this, how believable is pragmatism today as things get more difficult?

53:03 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	That's a very very good question. I mean how much of a resonance does it continue to enjoy? If it ever enjoyed anything. It could well be that we only call what we saw in the 60s, 70s, and 80s pragmatism today. I mean they may not have called it that then. But today we've codified it. Partly because in the 80s and 90s, Singapore was admired by many parts of the world. And organizations like the World Bank actually wanted to know what is the secret of Singapore's success. So we started to codify the Singapore story as a model for others to emulate. I think this is when such things as integrity, meritocracy, pragmatism, they start to enter into the language for understanding who we are. There's a top-down kind of sense in which the formulation of pragmatism has happened, and it may not have affected people in their ordinary lives in any deep sort of way. But we also know that in our ordinary speech, we tend to actually admit that we are pragmatic people. When we talk about… a few decades ago, we used to say that Singapore's aspirations were limited to the five "C"s – career, condo, cars, credit cards. What's the other C? Some other exalted thing. Maybe we were making fun of ourselves, but maybe we were just saying it as it was. We are kind of of immigrant stock, we are materialistic, we came here to seek our fortunes, high minded things have no real place in Singapore. We can't even afford high minded things. So there's a sense in which in ordinary life I think, pragmatism has a certain kind of resonance. That we make practical judgments about our life choices. We make practical judgments about the careers that we choose. We are realistic about our reach, and very often we don't reach beyond our grasp, which is the whole sort of sense in which Singapore lacks ambition. Singapore lacks ambition. So, there is a very popular meaning of pragmatism I think, on the ground in everyday life. The question about whether, it continues to serve, to inspire Singaporeans as the right way to do leadership, as the right way to do policy, as a right way to organize our government. I think at that level, Singaporeans will still accept that pragmatism is correct when it's contrasted against ideological position. So they might look at the US for instance and see okay government is stuck there because they have a very strong sense of left and right and neither will yield. So there's deadlock, there's gridlock there and Singaporeans you know kind of without thinking too much about it will say, that's not what we want to be. So it's better to just be practical in our decisions and so on and so forth. However, pragmatism in the sense of being cynical, in the sense of being, this is who we are, we are racist, we are selfish, we are not generous. If you give people will take and take too much. That sort of thing I think may be changing. So we don't necessarily appreciate being told that we are these things. We don't like it for instance, to be told that Singapore as a nation, is still a long way off. We are still tribal and still not ready for nationhood. You know it's what was apathy at one time or kind of infantilized state, I think that has changed a little bit. I think we've grown up a bit more. We are more exposed to the world. We have a generation of wonderful young people, we sometimes in a fit of disparagement call them millennials and strawberry generation but these are people who are not, they don't have the baggage of the past. They are quite liberated from that and they have aspirations, they have convictions, they are more attuned, I think, to some of the ideological, idealistic language that maybe

	our generation because we were told not to be ideological, not to be idealistic, we lack the critical language but this new generation I think has more of a sense of that critical language but not to be hindered by that critical language. They also have the zest and the energy to go do something about it and I think to me rather than worry about whether people like the government or don't like the government, I would love to see that this is the group on which we pin our future as a country, as a young group they may end up in political leadership, they may not. It doesn't matter but this is the kind of bigger minded, compassionate, empathetic, energetic, strata of society that we really need to move ahead. Please, yeah, he did raise his hands first.
58:30 (Audience)	Thank you. Thank you. My name is Subaya. I have a couple of questions. Firstly it's a fantastic analysis you've made of our system, it's very lucid and nuanced. So firstly I'm wondering how much of an audience or capacity to influence, I guess the policy makers you've had over the years I mean you've got a very well thought out critique of the State. I'm just curious how much influence you've been able to have, that's one question. And the other question, I think that Singapore, I think over the last 50 years, we've spent a lot of time and energy and been very successful in building the hardware, but we've invested almost nothing in building the software which I think maybe from 2015 you know we start to increasingly focus on the soft intangibles like history, culture and so on. But given you know what you were saying about the hollowing out in certain words that you mentioned like sojourners, I think we are going back to actually what we were. Three quarters of our history we were just so sojourners and with the hollowing out of locals and then a sojourners replacing, whether we are increasingly having a very brittle state possibly, yes very brittle state. We have a huge hardware, which with a very small operating system, which may not be able to weather the next technical, you know the next upgrade so to speak.
1:00:13 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	No I mean that's a beautiful way of putting it. And I agree with, I think where you're coming from. I'll start with the question about influence. I think one very quickly learns in Singapore that, if you had anything close to influence you better deny it. It's not a government that appreciates being told things. It's a government that listens. I think so. And you know we know of course from stories that often told to us by people who worked very closely with Lee Kuan Yew and his generation that as tough as they might have been, they always appreciated listening to alternative points of view. And of course they would make up their own minds right. And they can sometimes be brutal about ideas that they didn't agree with but they wanted to hear what these ideas were. I think that's a nice starting point. I would hope and I believe to some degree, the current establishment is also open to listening to other points of view, which they may or may not agree with. But there is a political aspect in all of this, that explains the toughness with which opponents of the state have been dealt with, even for saying what have sometimes been very very innocent things, you can't believe that anything like that could be a threat to the State or the system, as strong as the state and the system have been.

	And then you realize of course that, part of the legitimacy of the system relies profoundly on the paternalistic understanding, that the state is the source of all good ideas. The government must be seen as the source of all good ideas and as having the capacity to act upon them, for the good of Singaporeans and that becomes a very strong ideological basis for why people continue, why the 70 percent, why people still continue to vote for the government. And that's something that I think, cannot be eroded from the government's point of view. Mustn't be allowed to be eroded. So even good ideas, I am told by people who present their good ideas, are often immediately presented with no. We can't do that and the explanations are very often the same ones, you know that we can't afford to do this. If we did this, we would just you know, kind of the slippery slope and so very usual, sometimes very hyperbolic answers that are given but then if it's a good idea somehow or other it seeps into the system and then it gets repackaged and re-appropriated and then suddenly before you know it, is the basis of some new policy. So I think many people in civil society for example perhaps even academics, understand that in Singapore face, and how face relates to political legitimacy, are things that we cannot ignore. And it requires a lot of humility. You cannot for example say, I and my great ideas were responsible for this policy change and I was able to change the mind of a minister and a minister would certainly be not in a position to say, oh that was a great idea and I never thought of that. So it is not the kind of place where something like this happens. Okay, so let's keep it at that. Software. Yes, I think at one time, software was held in a very disparaging way. Because soft. So there is a kind of post-colonial masculinity, post-colonial hardness. In Singapore, you had to be muscular and you had to you know, go for it right. Go for the growth, the defence, all the manly pursuits of a state that has just emerged out of, you know, kind of infantilized colonialism. So there's that sense of hardness and so Lee Kuan Yew's language right. The kind of shame that the nationalist bourgeoisie and the leaders of nationalist movement felt when they came back from the Metropole and looked at their communities that were so easy, easily subjugated by the colonial and then how glorious the colonial masters were and then the resentment. How dare they treat me as… all these psychologies create this determination to be hard once you're independent. So feelings, emotions, intangibles, all these things were despised as feminine, feminized, debased, the language that Lee Kuan Yew used, even up to the late stage of his life. "Hard truths" indicates just how much the feminine is disparaged as a principle in Singapore. And then you start to wonder, okay, so when we start to invest more in care, in culture, in the arts and communication, in all the software things like soul, questions of soul. When we start to invest in those things, what are we actually doing? Is there any sense in which we did that? We've been doing that authentically because those things are important and we found ourselves to be out of balance. Or, are we doing that as yet another technology for growth and political stability? And the reason I ask this question in this way is because when you think back to the 1980s, when we talked a great deal about religious values, religious studies for example, Confucian ethics. We were worried that industrialisation was making Singaporeans into robots as they discussed in parliament in the 70s. So what do we do to make Singaporeans feel more for

	their country, for their leadership, for their community? Well we can't depend on national identity because it's too new. But we can perhaps turn to religions and deep civilizations. So there was this turn to making it compulsory to do a religious subject in school and paying a lot of attention also to civic and moral education, all these kinds of things. So you might ask were we genuinely wanting to be Confucian, were we genuinely wanting to be Christian or Buddhist or Taoist or whatever it is, chances are no, because the pragmatic mind treats morality and religion as yet another cultural resource or technology for producing growth. Confucianism is useful because one of the tenets, at least in vulgar forms of Confucianism is obedience to hierarchy, a respect for the scholar gentleman, a sense of self-control. All these things are very conducive to an authoritarian system. So then we think about our investments today, in the softer parts of our national existence. I think it would be helpful to consider in the first instance how these things are technologies and cultural resources for producing more political legitimacy, more acceptance of the status quo and for priming us to be even better worker, consumer citizens in a neo liberal global economy. I wish I had a better answer than that. Thank you.
1:08:14 (Audience)	My question is whether we have the right atmosphere to pursue these questions because I feel that when you mentioned the word governance and politics, I think these two have become together and especially when, you know this is a bicentennial year and in 200 years, governments of Singapore, we always imagine, well there's the PAP, but actually you know for 200 years, we have very different types of governments and if we imagine that governments of the past face very different, they ask themselves these questions, very perceptively, right. And the reason that they could then come to some kind of compromise is because the executive and the legislative are separate. And so… whatever it is, whether we decided we wanted to become part of Malaysia or in the beginning of the century, we decided that perhaps as the Straits Settlements, we wanted to have a Malayan future. And then in the 1860s we decided well we did not want to, even though supporting India was very good. It made us very rich but then now we want to have home rule. So these were very revolutionary steps they made but they made it in the light that there were separate power factions that competed against each other. And I wonder whether because we have a fusion between the executive and the legislature, and unfortunately I often see that pragmatism is actually a very good thing to think about. Makes us very reflective, makes us very introspective and I think that's something that we must encourage. We should fund, we should continue to fund these things but at the same time, in the legislature it becomes an opportunism, rather than pragmatism so, in the past if you notice there is a pattern, which is that if we debate these questions, if there are separate channels of power we can therefore have, a wing of government that will say no, I actually disagree with you. You know, we invest in a legislature where say perhaps the president might turn to the prime minister and say no, recall parliament because this is not how it works. I'm not saying that it's very radical, maybe I am very radical but I think that… But I feel that perhaps, if we can be inspired by how our ancestors dealt with these very difficult questions in the bicentennial year.

1:10:13 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So that's a really good question and a difficult and complex one right. Because if we think about the principle, basic principle that you're talking about which is checks, division of power right, and sort of the benefits of dividing power into different bodies that can moderate the tendencies of other bodies so that we get something more moderate in terms of a decision, for instance. But to know also that that principle has not been the same in every liberal democracy. For instance, if we look at the British system that we have in fact inherited as the Westminster system. So our system kind of looks like that. We know that the British system was actually designed to concentrate power in the hands of the executive right. So although the language says that Parliament is the sovereign will of the people and so on so forth. Nevertheless, the executive, the cabinet is drawn from Parliament and the Prime Minister who sits in parliament is also the head of the cabinet. The cabinet is where power really resides. But it works in the UK because they've got at least a two-party system.
1:012:14 (Audience)	The Westminster system works very well in the UK but in the colonial…
1:12:29 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Well I mean some people will not agree with that today, given Brexit and all of that. But there is that sense in which you know that it had its place. And then you see the US system coming out of that, is designed radically different from the UK system, which is to really separate… the president, the houses of the legislature and the judiciary and all of that and even the kind of the state and the federal, the state and all these levels, they are all divided because they're so terrified of tyranny, top-down power. So they're designed that way and it seems to have worked for a long time. Today the Trump experience is questioning the robustness of that system. But some people still believe that the system will overcome whatever's going on in the US today. Right. So there's that. But we've inherited that British system and we took it in a very particular direction, so that we no longer had the competitiveness of a two-party system. So we took an already executive heavy system and then we had a party that was heroic in its post-colonial achievements, monopolizing the votes and then in that position of power, I mean more than two-thirds majority means you can change constitution. Not so difficult to change the constitution, kind of adjusting the rules in ways that are very legal and can be justified even in terms of liberal ideals, but on the other hand makes it harder for the opposition, so secures and consolidates its power as what we today call a single party dominance system.
1:14:15 (Audience)	The thing is we didn't because in the colony, we've even had in Singapore where the colonial governor was actually replaced because there was an alternative to go back to London to replace a bad governor with somebody who could, you see. So what, what I'm just saying that if you have these things but I don't know whether in Singapore, we are ready for such?

1:14:41 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	So my view. My view is you can change the formal outlines of the system. You can change the institutions and all of that. But I have a feeling that because we are a small town, we are more like a city than a country you know, and we know that cities around the world tend to be less competitive and democratic and because we are a small town and the politics are quite entrenched here, no matter how you change the institutions, chances are, you still have very strong concentrations of power that are not going to be in effect very different from how it currently is. I mean, we put in place a presidency that is separately electable that whose powers extend to vetoing decisions about the corruption investigations, the use of resources, key appointments and so on and so forth, we put those things in place. What has changed? Right? So I think in the sense, we're small, a small town, power has been entrenched, concentrated and our mentality, this is where pragmatism comes in right. Is that many other places like the UK, you might have a Thatcher in power for many many years, 17 years or whatever it was but, and she might still be doing, been doing well. But the people said it's a bit too long. Singaporeans don't think that way right because we don't know what to exchange this current government with and we have never seen that happen. So in a lot of Singaporeans' minds, it's like, okay I think I don't like what I'm seeing so I'm going to vote but what if the opposition coalition comes into power, what happens the morning after? And that's a very frightening thought for Singaporean voters who even think that far ahead. So there's something in the pragmatism of not wanting to make changes, not being sure about what would happen if we were to make that change, the risk aversion, the never seen an alternative before, that you know just cements the durability of this dominant party system. And the dominant party standing over there I think is signalling to me that I should perhaps stop. Yeah. Thank you very much. I really enjoyed interacting with you. Thank you.
1:17:09 (Moderator: Vidya)	We can take one more question. Students? Yeah. I see a lot of students.
1:14:15 (Audience)	Hi Prof. So I just wanted to ask. So you listed one of the assumptions of pragmatism was strong state elitism. I was wondering if it was also sort of mutually reinforcing, in the sense that like what you said just now, sometimes the governing elites use pragmatism. So I'll justify by referencing a survivalist discourse and all that. They use the ideology of pragmatism to sort of prop up and consolidate elite role in that sense, I was wondering what are your thoughts?
1:18:02 (Speaker: Prof Kenneth)	Yes I think that's true. I think pragmatism is an ideology. It's ideal, okay if it's is not an ideology, it's suddenly ideological in that, it's a fig leaf for many power struggles or power considerations. And if you are in a position of power, you can define yourself as ideologically neutral because you have the power to do so right. You are the middle ground. Everyone else is ideological. Everyone else is extremist but you are moderate. So, actually the problem with thinking

	about moderation and extremism, the problem about thinking about pragmatism versus being ideological and dogmatic and all of that is sometimes is simply a function of who gets to call themselves pragmatic. And in a place like Singapore where the state is powerful and has been powerful for a very long time and has been in control of the public discourse, the state has the power, has that power to define itself as moderate, sensible, practical, pragmatic, non-ideological, non-dogmatic, all these good qualities that people like the sound of. So I think what you're saying is absolutely right, I agree with it. If you think about it at one level, there is no such thing as being neutral, ideologically neutral, even being pragmatic contains a consistent set of ideas that can be mobilised for action. So, in that sense then, calling oneself pragmatic in the sense of being neutral is a thoroughly hypocritical and deceptive exercise. Have I said too much?

About the speaker

Professor Kenneth Paul Tan, PhD (Cambridge), works at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. His books include *Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Governing Global-City Singapore: Legacies And Futures After Lee Kuan Yew* (Routledge, 2017), *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (Brill, 2008), and *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics* (NUS Press, 2007). He is a member of the National Arts Council (Singapore)'s Arts Advisory Panel and the National Museum of Singapore's Advisory Board. He chairs the Board of Directors of theatre company The Necessary Stage (Singapore). He was also the founding chair of the Asian Film Archive's Board of Directors.